

The Office debate

October saw the release of Microsoft's latest Office package, but is it worth upgrading if you already have Office XP? *PC Advisor* forum editor and IT consultant Peter Thomas finds out

Autumn isn't only the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. It also tends to be the time when Microsoft releases major software upgrades and 2003 was no exception. October saw the launch of Office 2003 - the new name for the Microsoft Office 'family', as it was called. Since then hardly a week has gone by without a client asking me the inevitable question: "Should I fork out the best part of £390 for the Professional version or should I stick with Office XP?"

The answer to this depends on who you are and how you use Office. As far as I'm concerned, Office 2003 isn't a must-have upgrade for the average home user. The bulk of its new features - the integration of XML throughout, rights-management tools and tie-ins with the Share Point Server - will mostly be of interest to the corporate network administrator.

Show them the money

Many of these new features are indicative of Microsoft's drive to make Office part of a system that links applications to servers and online content to support collaborative effort, workflow, easier access to information and - surprise, surprise - ongoing revenue streams for Microsoft and its selected partners.

Microsoft's moguls must have nightmares trying to think up new ways to get us to part with our hard-earned cash. Devising systems that rely on other Microsoft products to function properly is a neat way of tapping directly in to our wallets.

So is this software crammed with new functionality or is this just Office XP with a lick of paint? Outlook's junk email filter is perhaps the most important new feature, although in my tests it didn't nab every piece of junk mail that came its way. Third-party products from Norton

and McAfee did a much better job, stopping about 95 percent, while Outlook 2003 spotted only 85 percent. Not a bad effort but could do better, as my maths teacher used to say.

Word 2003 offers a new view called Reading Mode that duplicates the look of a printed page and, unlike Print Preview, lets you edit text. There's also a pretty nifty 'Compare side by side' feature that shows two documents next to one another with synchronised scrolling so you can quickly see changes between the two.

The big disappointments are Excel and Access, which seem to have been passed over as far as major improvements are concerned.

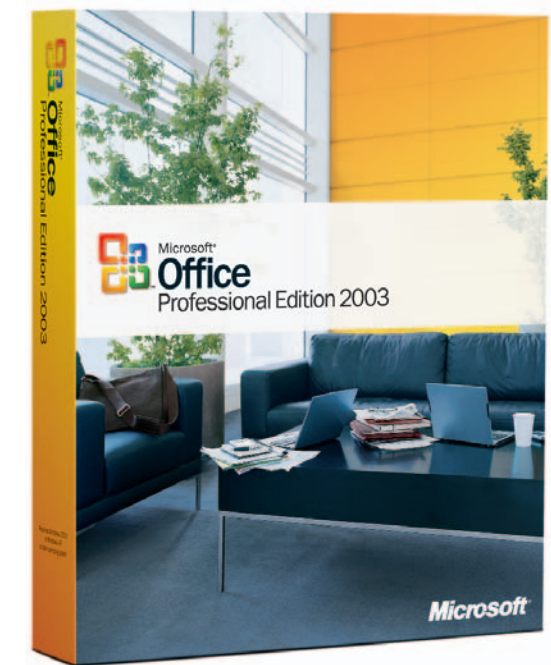
According to the Microsoft publicity machine, Office 2003 isn't just a group of somewhat integrated applications. It's part of a business platform that increasingly depends on tight integration among desktop applications, servers and online content. In exchange for that integration and the future purchasing implications it entails, Office 2003 looks ready to deliver some good old 21st-century functionality.

What happens next?

Because installing Office 2003 requires a new server and because I think hard-headed network administrators will take some convincing, I'm not sure how many users will get the chance to use the system - at least in the short term. If you like good things and you didn't upgrade to Office XP then I recommend you go with Office 2003.

On the other hand, if you're a home user and already own Office XP it's hard to recommend spending a large amount of cash on the main upgrade simply for the new gizmos in Word and Outlook.

Office is a hugely capable suite - it's been that way for some time -



and there's little room for improvement when it comes to document handling. But I feel that we're at a watershed. Office has gone about as far as it can go in terms of bells and whistles. After all, there are only so many ways of typing a letter so where to from here? Surely there's a market for a leaner, simpler version aimed specifically at home users.

I asked Microsoft about the next version. Would it contain anything radically new or would it be a case of 'same book, slightly different cover'? I got no further than the press office whose official response was "It's too early to speculate on future versions, as we are focused on delivering Office 2003 and the Office System line of products this year. These will help information workers be smarter and faster and give customers tools to increase their [documents'] impact."

So we'll have to wait and see. But with the new operating system codenamed Longhorn looming on the horizon I doubt that we'll wait too long. Longhorn will major on digital rights and security and I expect to see the next version of Office following soon after its launch in 2005. Or should that be 2006? ☒