● OFFICE SUITE

OpenOffice 2

PC PRO A LIST

PRICE Free   **UPGRADE** Free

SUPPLIER OpenOffice via website   **INTERNET** www.openoffice.org

VERDICT Our pick of the low-cost office suites has had a much-needed overhaul, and now battles Microsoft in terms of features, not just price.

We've always been impressed by OpenOffice. Not because it's better than Microsoft Office – it isn't. Not because it's better looking than Microsoft Office, either. Again, it isn't. What's kept us hooked over the last few years, as it's crept to the point where the two are now all but neck and neck on features, is the extraordinary value for money. It's completely free.

OpenOffice runs on Windows, Linux and Solaris, and comprises the usual raft of office applications, with a word processor (Writer), spreadsheet (Calc) and presentation module (Impress) at the fore, backed up by database and drawing tools. All can import Microsoft-formatted files to an impressive degree, and can be set to export in Microsoft native formats for use in mixed-suite environments.

This latest release has been a while in the making, so we were keen to see how it compared with the previous edition, which won our last office suites group test (*see issue 122, p142*), as well as the commercial StarOffice, designed for larger organisations (*see opposite*).

WRITER

Writer, along with Calc, is inevitably what people will use most. To test compatibility, we loaded up a complex Word 2000 marketing

Calc is much improved, but its charting tools aren't as slick as those of Microsoft Office, especially compared to Office 12 (*see p187*).

document, making full use of Microsoft Word's formatting options, with complex composite images made up from tiled GIFs overlaid by markers, shaded boxes and a wide range of font and paragraph styles. Without exception, Writer picked them all up, perfectly mimicking the Word original and placing them all in line – something we've never seen before. The only difference was the way Writer showed us the edges of image frames, which by default are invisible in Word, and isn't a problem as they won't print.

It didn't do quite so well when we tested more esoteric formatting options in a document of our own creation. A rotated JPEG was straightened, pushing down some of the text that should have appeared beside it, while a vector image had lost its colouring. An embedded chart was properly rendered, though, and our garish sample of WordArt was rendered in the same colours and size in Writer as Word, although the edges of the characters were more jagged in OpenOffice's version.

However, its WordArt equivalent – which it calls Fontwork – is far more accomplished, with a dedicated 3D panel giving you access to a raft of extrusion options, and even control over lighting from any one of eight directions.

What we were most impressed by, though, were the built-in image-editing tools. Certainly, they won't put Photoshop out of work, but when unleashed on a photo they let you set transparency and apply a range of surprisingly sophisticated filters. The former option will be useful if you want to reduce the impact of an image you're setting under text, while the latter lets you sharpen blurred images, blur sharp ones, tweak individual colour channels and even remove noise in badly compressed snaps. And that's before you get into the less tasteful options.

We were pleased to see that OpenOffice has moved the Wordcount option from a subsection of the file menu, where it always looked out of place. Also impressive is the revamped Mail merge, although it still lags behind Microsoft Office for simplicity.
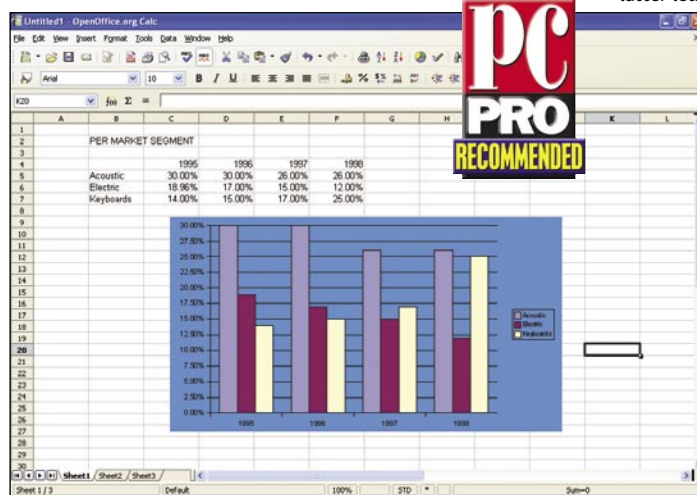
CALC

The spreadsheet has been beefed up, now holding twice as many rows as it once did (now 65,536 to match Excel), but its charting tools could still do better. If you're starting graphs from scratch, there's no cause for complaint, but we found that when importing a graph from Excel the most extreme value on the Y axis wasn't high enough to stop it shearing off the top of the highest peak, spoiling an otherwise excellent effort that saw it retain the smooth curves we had set in Excel; lesser suites opt for simple lines at angles to one another.

Likewise, while it did put our chart on a dedicated page, it wasn't an unlined charting page like the ones in Excel, but an empty-boxed spreadsheet.

Conditional formatting holds greater promise. We set up a simple spreadsheet in Excel that would switch the colour of negative figures to red. Opening it in Calc brought forth no surprises. Whether or not you like the way in which you have to establish new formatting rules when doing this from scratch, though, depends on how you feel about style sheets. Whereas Excel presents you with a simple, unified dialog combining a field into which you enter your condition with a standard font and colour picker to define the styling, Calc expects you to have first set up the style you want to use in the Styles and Formatting palette. This is good because it ensures well-thought-out results that will present well when printed alongside other spreadsheets using the same styles, but at the same time it's inconvenient, as you have to look at more than one palette to define the conditional formatting you want to apply.
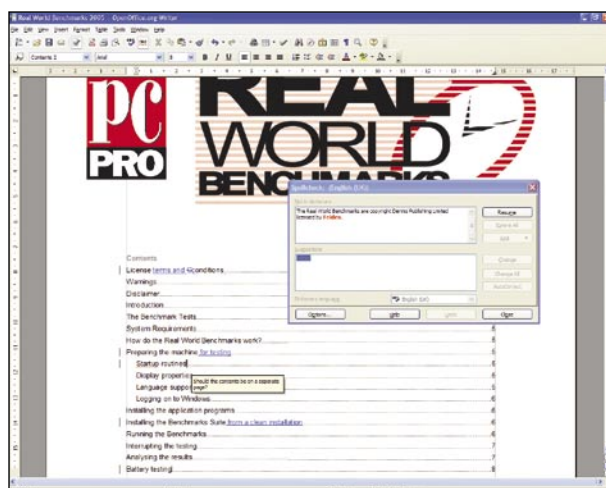
There are many similarities to Microsoft Word in Writer, making it simple to switch between them.
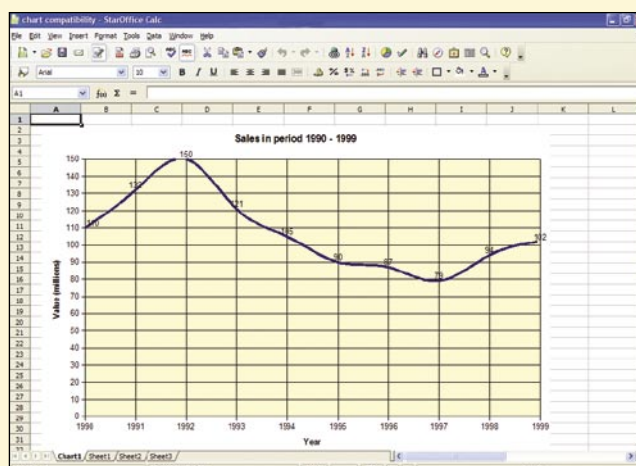
StarOffice 8

StarOffice 8 is built on the same open-source code base as OpenOffice 2 and, with the two offering near-identical features, you might wonder why you should pay for something you could otherwise download for free.

When developing a new version of StarOffice, Sun takes a 'snapshot' of the OpenOffice code, and bolts on additional features that can't be given away. Often these are licensed from third-party manufacturers, such as font foundries, and in the past these added extras included the Adabas database component, which was absent from OpenOffice 1 and 1.1.

Sun therefore positions its product to appeal to organisations and consumers who are after a multiplatform alternative to Microsoft Office, as distinct from OpenOffice, which it sees as a product for independent developers, the open-source community and users of free software.

To this end, StarOffice includes more extensive bought-in spellcheckers and mail-merge features, fonts that are metrically equivalent to those found in

StarOffice is built upon the same code as OpenOffice, but includes a number of extras designed for businesses.

Windows for use on other platforms (particularly useful since Microsoft stopped offering free downloads of its core fonts a few years ago, as these had always been a boon for Linux users), migration tools for documents and macros, and a wider range of document templates and import filters for Asian-language files.

This is on top of the features that go beyond the budgets of the OpenOffice developers, such as CD-based product updates, warranties and round-the-clock support. Fortunately, many of the tech-support features are mirrored by the active OpenOffice user base, to the extent that Sun's formalised offering is an unjustifiable extravagance for most home users. Ad-hoc add-ons such as this aren't just for OpenOffice users, though, as Sun itself incorporates community-developed features into its commercial product, such as the Flash export options in Impress.

The deciding factor for high-end users will be how they intend to apply their existing macros to their latest installation. StarOffice ships with a Macro Migration Wizard that relies on an API layer absent from OpenOffice, in which translated macros may fail to run. This can be fixed through the addition of Sun's special Migration Tools licence for OpenOffice, which costs money and defeats the purpose of going open source.

If your company relies on a sophisticated roll-out backbone, and your clients demand access to SharePoint servers, then it's Microsoft Office all the way. If, on the other hand, you want a lighter, cheaper option that offers 90 per cent of Microsoft's features and adds in an extra 20 per cent of its own, there are many good reasons to buck the industry trend here and now.

NIK RAWLINSON

PC PRO RATINGS

|	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 onwards.

Grouped cells import well, and we actually prefer Calc's implementation to Excel. Where the latter puts the expansion and contraction button for revealing hidden cells in the margin of the last column or row in the group, Calc places it alongside the first. Excel's implementation lines up your expansion point with the first exposed cell outside of your defined group, which is illogical, whereas Calc very clearly indicates the point at which the group stops as being the border between the last cell in the group and the first cell outside of it. This comes into its own where you have positioned two grouped sets beside each other, in which case with Excel you're more inclined to open the wrong one.

We were also highly impressed by the Function Wizard, which is more extensive than that provided by Excel, and once you've picked your function acronym it matches Excel's walkthroughs.

IMPRESS

Impress is OpenOffice's presentation module, and we again found little to fault in terms of PowerPoint compatibility. With a reorganised interface, which was something we criticised in the previous release, it even feels like you're using Microsoft's market leader. We imported a short presentation using far more styles and transitions than you should ever inflict on a captive audience, and Impress swallowed them without a pause for breath. Previous editions had trouble replicating certain PowerPoint transitions, but even the 'box in' and 'checkerboard across' wipes were
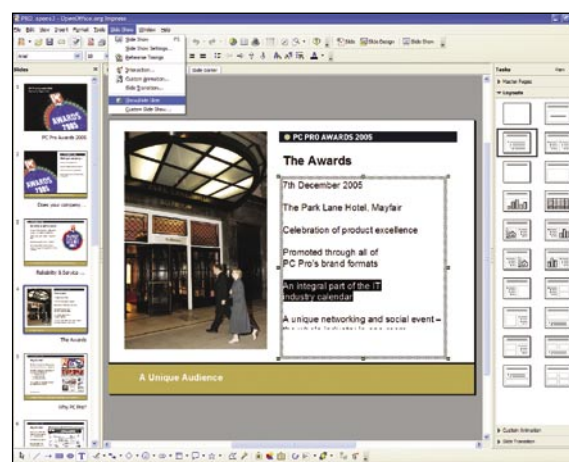
OpenOffice's equivalent to PowerPoint, Impress, looks incredibly similar to Microsoft's offering.

properly imported, and matched the original for speed and orientation. Indeed, the only criticism we could throw its way was the same as for

● **SECOND OPINION** PC PRO APPLICATIONS COLUMNIST SIMON JONES

An alternative to Microsoft?

StarOffice 8 is certainly a more mature product than version 7, and it appears competent in many areas. The database component is a welcome update and should be easy to use for people familiar with Microsoft Access. However, it relies on the Sun Java Runtime Environment, so won't be as fast as a database built on native or managed code. Java is used for many components in StarOffice and Microsoft's Java implementation (the Microsoft Virtual Machine) isn't supported. If you don't install Sun's Java, those features won't work on your machine.

Writer, Calc and Impress have all had a cosmetic revamp as well as getting new and improved features. Impress is more usable and more friendly, especially with the new multipane view as seen in Microsoft PowerPoint. Unfortunately, the range of templates provided is still rather poor.

Calc is capable but the charting isn't as flexible as in Excel. Calc's equivalent of PivotTables are reasonable, but you still can't have live charts of Microsoft's implementation.

The word processor is adequate but overcomplicates some things. The Mail Merge Wizard, for instance, has many tedious steps, some of which are completely irrelevant.

Improved compatibility with Microsoft Office files is a big plus-point but there are still instances of files that won't display the same in StarOffice as they do in Microsoft Office. The new file formats, adopted as a standard by the OASIS organisation, hold promise for the future being completely XML based, but unlike the Microsoft Office XML file formats, they don't allow you to embed your own custom XML schemas.

The new MSI-based installer should make for easier deployment in a corporate environment but there aren't tools available to control the use of StarOffice through Group Policies. There are tools to migrate documents and macros from Microsoft Office to StarOffice, but the StarOffice macro language still lags badly compared to Microsoft Office VBA, and converting existing documents isn't a quick or easy job, even with a tool to help.

StarOffice still doesn't have an email/PIM application equivalent to Outlook and it isn't nearly as friendly as Microsoft Office. The price is good but standard or premium support contracts for corporate users cost more. Microsoft Office 12, due in H2 2006 has a new and improved UI, as well as a host of new features (*see Applications, p187*). StarOffice 8 will have a limited time to impress before Office 12 hits the shops.

Writer: WordArt was slightly better rendered in PowerPoint than it was in Impress.

Custom animations run to an impressive 51 entrance and exit settings. Like those in PowerPoint, these are separated into plain English categories such as basic, exciting or moderate, to help avoid presentation embarrassments. There's also a healthy selection of motion paths, since you're denied PowerPoint's tool for defining a path of your own.

THE VISUALS
Beyond core features, the suite as a whole has been given a lick of paint, with a new interface that finally makes it look like an accomplished set of co-ordinated apps. Granted, it still isn't as pretty as Word and Excel, but neither is it as clumsy as StarOffice 7 or OpenOffice 1.

The menus have had a rethink, and the suite as a whole takes its design cues from the OS, so it finally looks like a 'proper' Windows application.

The suite-wide file format has changed, too, moving towards open standards. It has switched to the OASIS OpenDocument schema, as supported by IBM, Novell and Red Hat, which make up the OASIS consortium. It's open source, which could be enough to ensure widespread adoption, making it more likely that this could become the industry standard in years to come, particularly as the European Union has welcomed it (along with the new XML format in Office 12) as the basis of all cross-platform document use.

Of course, there are quirks. We don't like the way it resolves file-sharing conflicts by opening a file in read-only mode without warning. When it does, it blocks you from making edits, so you won't lose any work, but at the same time it's unable to tell you who is working on the file in question the way Microsoft Office would do, so you can't chase them down and get them to close it.

Likewise, Britain takes a back seat in terms of templates; though there are presets for Korea, China and a range of European countries, we get lumped in with the US, which opts for letter-size paper rather than A4, for example.

There's also no PIM, but with Outlook Express bundled as part of Windows, and Mozilla touting its Sunbird (calendar) and Thunderbird (email) applications, the gap isn't impossible to fill.

Fortunately, the suite's bundled database is adequate compensation. It's fully conversant in MySQL and Access formats and the Form Wizard will now produce cross-platform database applications, saving you the time and expense of hard-coding from scratch.

Overall, we're both surprised and impressed at just how closely OpenOffice is tracking Microsoft here. It has always been a good alternative for anyone with limited funds or an aversion to the market leader, but more often than not you'd have to work hard to justify to an IT department why they should go down this route. In this latest release, with its close-to-seamless recognition of native Microsoft files and integrated PDF creation, the tables have turned, and it's Microsoft
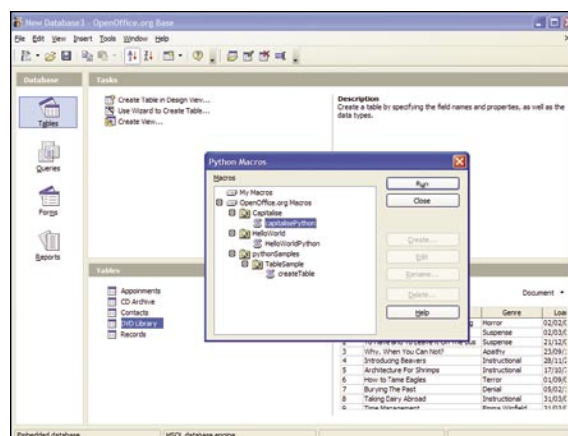
OpenOffice now includes a database app, and it supports MySQL and Access formats too.

Office that should require the more serious justification where budgets are concerned.

For personal use, there are even fewer reasons to choose Microsoft. OpenOffice certainly doesn't lack features compared to the market leader, and most of its ease-of-use issues stem from people's familiarity with Microsoft Office rather than an inherent problem with the program itself. As such, you should certainly try OpenOffice's offering before donating another £100 or more to Microsoft's coffers. After all, it's free.

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EASE OF USE	★★★★☆
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