The OpenOffice web design module may be based on the word processor, but it's surprisingly versatile and will even colour-code your HTML.

rulers, frames will only snap to them on resizing if you have the Shift key held down. In itself, this wouldn't be a problem if Shift wasn't the modifier for proportional scaling. As things stand, you could find yourself with wildly oversized text boxes purely for the sake of neatness.

Although there's a dedicated web editor bundled with the suite, the Presentations module is well suited to outputting HTML, with a range of web-focused features, including image map creation. It also includes a variety of display options that should help in gauging the effectiveness of your presentation when output to different media. The greyscale mode, for example, will give some idea how your handouts will look on a laser printer.

Unfortunately it all feels somewhat modular. There's a very definite jump from the slide design workspace to that for writing your presenter notes, and again when switching to the Outline view.

Presentations copes well with PowerPoint imports, recognising our skewed graphic and rendering our Word Art in similar-sized and identically coloured text, which although not perfect is certainly very good. Fade transitions between each slide were unfortunately lost, but are easily replaced, and not as important as a successful import of the slide contents.

SPREADSHEET

The last major application is the Spreadsheet. This looks and works very much like Excel, and it uses almost identical formulas, unlike Quattro Pro (part of WordPerfect Office) and Lotus 1-2-3, both of which stray from the norm. It also puts almost everything in the same place on menus, so will be familiar to switchers.

Quattro does win back some points in the way it handles formula tracking, whereby each cell referenced in a sum will be highlighted in a different colour so that you can see which part of the sum uses it. OpenOffice Spreadsheet, however, makes only one distinction: value or total, with numbers displayed in blue, and formula results rendered green.

Of the two main contenders for Excel's crown, OpenOffice Spreadsheet's charting tools are easier to use. We found plotting two sets of

data against one another far simpler here than in Quattro Pro, which preferred to display them side by side, rather than using one as the scale for the other. Sadly the results, when sent to a new page in the Spreadsheet book, look ugly when compared to Excel's efforts: they're dumped onto a regular spreadsheet page, complete with gridlines rather than resized to fit the aspect ratio of the application window and dropped on a blank page.

Simple conditional formatting is excellent, put together through a well thought-out dialog that can be dumped if you'd rather work out your own code. It also properly imported a file with conditional formatting in place – more than can be said for Lotus 1-2-3. However, when defining your own conditional formatting you must first define your style in the Stylist, and then apply that style name to the matching cell; you can't define styles on-the-fly. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, as it means you'll be using a common set of house styles throughout your work, but some may prefer the freeform approach of Excel.

Spreadsheet had no problem importing our Excel chart, matching the colours and styles of the original, but didn't expand the Y-axis beyond the highest point of our curve. As such, the peak was lost where it met the top border of the chart.

If there's one killer feature it's Goal seek, also in Excel, which can work your formats backwards and show you how to achieve a specific result, rather than simply work out the result of adding two variables you already know. For example, you know how much money you want to borrow from the bank, the interest rate it charges and what the repayments will cost. That doesn't max out your salary, though, so you're more interested in knowing how much you could borrow before you reach your limit, rather than increasing the loan amount by small increments until the repayments cell hits your limit. It takes care of all the trial and error for you, bringing up the answer you're after and, if you choose, replacing the original loan amount with the one that represents your total borrowing capacity.

CONCLUSION

OpenOffice has its own set of suite-wide XML-based file formats, which should pretty much guarantee compatibility across multiple platforms, and transfer smoothly to the Web. You can, of course, do what we did and switch the defaults to Word and Excel, but that's rather missing the point.

There's so much cross-over between the various modules on offer in OpenOffice that it's an excellent choice for the first-time user. Word and Excel are simple enough once you've got to grips with them, but they have such distinct features that skills learnt in one can't be

Sun StarOffice 7

While we stand by our conclusion that OpenOffice is the best choice for all users, not all systems departments will see it that way. While they may be willing to move away from Microsoft Office to Corel WordPerfect, they could be reluctant to stake their careers on software written by 'non-professional' coders.

For this reason, StarOffice, which has the backing of Sun, a company well-respected in the enterprise, may be a more palatable option. It's all but identical to OpenOffice, and includes a database – Adabas D – and the kind of customer support that will help system admins sleep easier at night.

A standard install of StarOffice includes more templates and fonts than OpenOffice, including support for several Asian character sets, although it loses some of the interface languages available in the open-source variant. It uses the same codebase as the OpenOffice project, and so looks and works in an almost identical manner. It shares file formats, menu structures and, for educational institutions, a very similar price point: £0, including VAT.

Any school, college, private or public library, teaching hospital or (selected) non-profit research institute that registers with Sun will be awarded unlimited free licences. With more than 1,000 schools and colleges having taken advantage of the offer already, the next set of graduates could be listing this, rather than Microsoft Office, on their CVs.

immediately transferred to the other. This ability is OpenOffice's trump card. All open documents will even feature in the Window menus of each running module so you can switch from a spreadsheet to a specific presentation without ever touching the Windows taskbar.

As we've pointed out, there are a few shortcomings, but with a dedicated following in the development community it won't be long before they're ironed out. In the meantime, the fact it's a free download is enough for us to brush them to one side and fully endorse OpenOffice over and above Microsoft Office 2003 for both home and corporate use (*see Sun StarOffice 7, above*).

PC PRO RATINGS

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