

OpenOffice 1.1.2

PC PRO
A LIST

PC PRO
LABS
WINNER

PRICE Free

SUPPLIER www.openoffice.org

VERDICT The best all-round office suite is also the cheapest. With excellent Microsoft compatibility, a consistent interface and a good network of ad-hoc support, this is the king of the business tools.

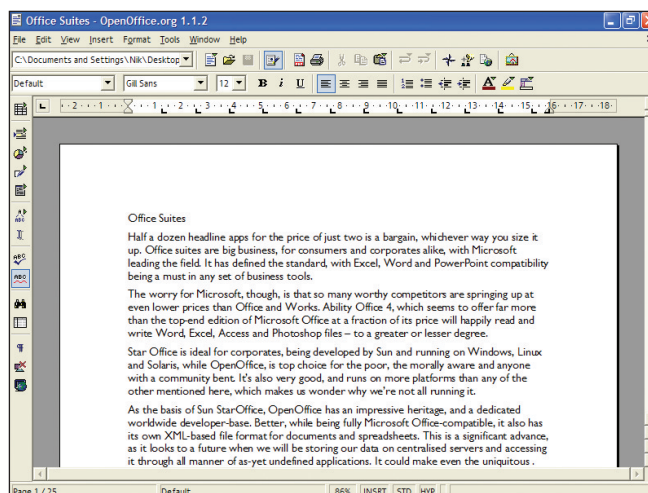
OpenOffice is a little different to all the other suites on offer here. For starters, it's free: you can download it from www.openoffice.org, and we've saved you the trouble by including it on this month's cover disc. The lack of cost is due to the open-source movement, a community of developers willing to work as a team, for free, to improve existing code. And the best thing about OpenOffice is that it had some excellent code to work with in the first place: Sun's StarOffice.

This doesn't mean that it's 'cobbled together by amateurs'. In fact, this is a very forward-looking piece of software. While being fully Microsoft Office-compatible, it also has its own XML-based file format for documents and spreadsheets. This is a significant advance, as it looks to a future when we'll be storing our data on centralised servers and accessing it through all manner of as-yet undefined applications.

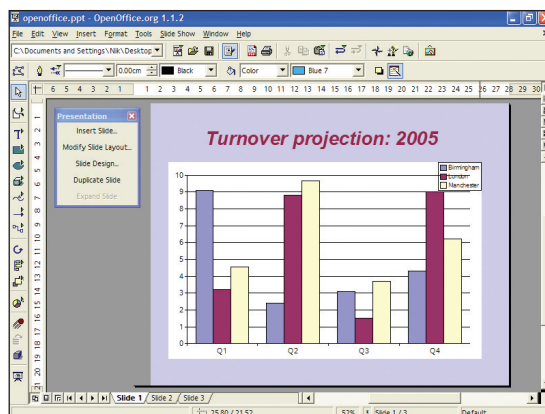
The one area where it does look amateur is its appearance. Very much the ugly duckling of office suites, OpenOffice (and StarOffice) looks like it was put together five years ago. There's a reason for this: it runs on Windows, Linux, Solaris and the Mac, so adopts a common theme across all editions. However, as the toolbars of each module look the same, when you've got used to one application you'll know how everything else works, too.

Before you get too picky about the look and feel, though, remember one thing: it's free. Installation takes less than two minutes and drops the OpenOffice Quickstarter into your System Tray. This gives you right-click access to new text documents, spreadsheets, presentations and drawings.

Unlike Microsoft Office, the suite lets you export your documents as an Acrobat PDF and, as with the other suites on test, it has a few quirks all of its own. It's a fan of floating panels – much like Photoshop or old editions of Dreamweaver. In each application, these include the Stylist and the Navigator. While the first controls the look of onscreen elements, such as fonts and pages, the latter is a real time-saver, letting you quickly access specific parts of your document on the basis of content. With just two



It may not look as good as the competition, but OpenOffice provided some of the best compatibility with Microsoft Office files and, best of all, is free.



The Presentation interface could do with an overhaul to better integrate slide design, transitions and speaker notes.

clicks you should be able to locate a specific table within a financial report, or a particular section in a technical manual. If you work with long documents, it's a must.

WORD PROCESSOR

Non-typists will welcome the word processor's type-ahead feature. This examines what you've entered so far and then does its best to guess the rest of the word you're typing. It usually gets it right, but if you're writing a list, with a carriage return at the end of each line you could find it adding words you didn't want. 'You', for example, will be translated into 'you'll', at which point you'll probably switch it off.

Microsoft converts will need to spend some time learning a new menu layout. Word count, for example, is hidden away inside the statistics tab of the document properties, which itself is buried in the File menu. We much prefer it to be

kept on the Tools menu or, even better, on the toolbar. We'd also like the option to count words in a section of our document, not just the whole thing, although the early development builds of the OpenOffice 2 (currently at 1.9.m51 and not recommended for general use) have put it into the Tools menu. This build also sees the move to a more attractive set of Microsoft-style toolbars.

There isn't much in the way of wizards in the current release. Instead, you have a small selection of templates that includes faxes, business cards and expense claim forms. Of more interest to creative users will be the Gallery, which includes a wide range of images for use in documents, and sounds for dropping into web pages and presentations. It also includes the expected range of autocorrect and auto text features to knock your work into shape and insert commonly used text strings whenever you type an abbreviation. It politely pops up a light bulb in the corner of the screen each time it does this, which isn't as effective as the smart icons used by Microsoft Office, but does at least let you do a quick Undo before you've typed on and committed yourself to a lengthy backtrack.

Compatibility with Microsoft Word is excellent, with OpenOffice coming closer than any other application to a perfect rendering of our test document. Page margins were correctly interpreted, framed sidebar text remained locked in place and a table-based, annotated screen grab was only slightly overwritten by the keyed captions to each side. Although it straightened our rotated image, it did manage to import the Word Art, which was a surprise.

PRESENTATIONS

When it comes to Presentations, the range of templates on offer is underwhelming and probably best avoided. However, stepping through the New Presentation Wizard is an effective way to organise your thoughts, and set common parameters such as transitions and speeds before you start. It can be set to automatically advance each slide at a specific interval, and presentations can be exported as Flash files. Combine these features with an embedded commentary and you have the perfect tool for creating online presentations without writing a single line of code. It could also save you a lot of money on buying Macromedia Breeze (see issue 117, p75), which starts at more than £20,000 and, among other things, offers a very similar feature.

Font handling within Presentations is excellent, with superbly anti-aliased results. We were a little disappointed, though, to see that although you can drag out as many guidelines as you want from the horizontal and vertical

Next month Don't miss our OpenOffice master class, when we put the program's advanced features to real-world use.