

What on Earth is... OpenOffice.org?

Follow our guidance and learn how to set your office productivity free with some of the world's finest open source software...

» **Having "Open" and "Office" in the same name presumably means this software either pirates *Microsoft Office*, or it's a totally new system. Which is it?**

OpenOffice.org is a Free office suite that's very similar to *Microsoft Office*, but was developed independently. Just like *MS Office* has *Word*, *Excel* and *PowerPoint*, *OpenOffice.org* has *Writer*, *Calc* and *Impress* – they do much the same things as their Microsoft equivalents, but usually do them in slightly different ways.

» **Wow, that's amazing! So how come people pay hundreds of pounds for *Microsoft Office*?**

There are lots of reasons, but two are most important: time and lock-in. The *OpenOffice.org* project formally launched in 2000, so *Microsoft Office* had a very long lead on it. In fact, by that time the *Lotus SmartSuite*/*Microsoft Office* wars were long over, leaving Microsoft a near-monopoly of office suites around the world. That's a pretty hard market for *OpenOffice.org* to break into! The other

» **How can the developers who work on *OpenOffice.org* afford to do it if they just give their work away?**

OpenOffice.org is developed by a large team of people. Some of them get paid by their companies to work on the software, whereas others just do it for fun and to enjoy the kudos in helping to contribute something to the community.

» **Ah, yes, but how do *those* companies pay for it? Advertising?**

No, not advertising. Most of the companies that support *OpenOffice.org* by funding employees make money by repackaging the software for their own needs. The largest sponsor of *OpenOffice.org* – in fact, the company that released the source code in the first place – is Sun Microsystems, who bought the company who made the office suite simply because it was cheaper to do that than to buy thousands and thousands of *Microsoft Office* licences! Sun also resells its own version of *OpenOffice.org*, known as *StarOffice*. Other companies, such as Novell and Red Hat, redistribute modified versions of *OpenOffice.org* with their versions of Linux, so it's in their interest to make the software as good as possible.

“Whether you use Windows, Mac OS X or Linux, OpenOffice.org revolutionises your computer use, both for work and play!”

» **Why do you keep putting .org on the end, as if it's a web address?**

Well, it *is* a web address! The homepage for *OpenOffice.org* is www.openoffice.org, but that's not the only reason the name is used. The term “OpenOffice” is already trademarked, so to avoid confusion (and potential lawsuits), we refer to the Free office software suite as *OpenOffice.org*.

» **You also keep using a capital F in free – what gives?**

OpenOffice.org is “open” in that the computer programming code to make it work is available for everyone to download, read, modify and sell. This is known as Free Software, using capital F and S to distinguish it from “freeware” – software that is free to download, but for which the programming code isn't available to other parties.

» **Wait... I can sell *OpenOffice.org* and I won't get sued?**

Precisely! The *OpenOffice.org* developers give you permission to do whatever you want with their code under one proviso: if you make modifications to it, you must give those modifications back to the community under the same open licence. As long as you stick to that one point, you can download the software, use it on as many computers as you like, sell it commercially, or do just about whatever you want with it.

problem – lock-in – is directly related to Microsoft's market share. You see, the file formats used by *Word*, *Excel* and other Microsoft products are owned by Microsoft – only it knows exactly how they work, so only Microsoft can create 100 per cent-compatible software. If a competing office suite is to take the place of *Microsoft Office*, it needs to support the *Office* file formats so that people can work with their own documents and others people send to them. This idea that you're stuck using Microsoft products because that's how it wants it to be is known as “lock-in”.

» **So, essentially you're saying that *OpenOffice.org* isn't compatible with *Microsoft Office*? That sucks!**

No, no, NO! *OpenOffice.org* is indeed compatible with *Microsoft Office*. But it took a lot of work from the developers to get it that way – Microsoft changed its file formats with every version of *Office* that got released, which meant that *OpenOffice.org* almost had to track a moving target! But it's there now: *OpenOffice.org* CAN load *Word 2003*, *Excel 2003* and *PowerPoint 2003* files without problem. Moreover, *OpenOffice.org* ships with its own file formats that are open and documented for everyone to use, so that even if the unthinkable happens and *OpenOffice.org* turns bad in the future, you can just switch to a different office suite and carry on using your files.

» **Ah, so *OpenOffice.org* runs on Linux? That's nice – *Microsoft Office* always seems to want the latest versions of Windows.**

Yes, you're right – *Office 2007* works only if you have Windows XP or higher. All those people with Windows 98, ME, NT and 2000 have to upgrade before they can use the newer office suite. *OpenOffice.org* works on all versions of Windows, as well as Linux and Mac OS X. It even runs on non-Intel-based machines, such as older Apple Macs that use PowerPC! A side-effect of this cross-platform nature is that *OpenOffice.org* works the same way no matter what platform



you're on, so that once you've learnt it in one place you can apply those skills elsewhere. More importantly, you can give the documents you create to any other user with *OpenOffice.org* and they will look and work just the same on their computer as they did on yours.

» I've used *Microsoft Office* for ages. Do I have to start learning from scratch with *OpenOffice.org*?

Not at all! In fact I think you'll find *OpenOffice.org* looks and works so similarly to *Microsoft Office* that you'll be able to get started fairly quickly. To help you get started, this special edition magazine has been written to cover a wide range of topics so that you can get up to speed with *OpenOffice.org* as quickly as possible. We've covered all the major programs here, and each one has a getting started guide to help make those first steps easy, as well as more advanced tutorials to push your skills further. If you get stuck along the way, try referring to the *Glossary* on p126 to look up key words and phrases.

» So, does *OpenOffice.org* have equivalent programs for all of *Microsoft Office*?

No – the most noticeable absence is the lack of an email program to replace *Outlook*. But every major

operating systems come with its own email client: *Outlook Express* for Windows, *Mail.app* for OS X, and *Evolution/Thunderbird* for Linux. Even with those, since a lot of people use web-based email for their messaging needs, many users are unlikely to really miss *Outlook*.

» If I encounter a problem not discussed here, how can I get help?

OpenOffice.org has a built-in help system that can look up topics for you. But if you're really struggling you should try posting your questions to the forum of *Linux Format*, it's maintained by the team who put together this guide – go to www.linuxformat.co.uk and click on 'Forums'.

» So... What now?

Now you just jump in! We've ordered this

guide to follow your learning, so we start off with how to install *OpenOffice.org*, then move onto how to use the individual components. At the end there are a number of projects for you to try your hand at once you've followed our simple introductions to each area, which bring together two or more of the *OpenOffice.org* programs at once to let you see how they work better when they work together. Once you've mastered the basics of each application, we would encourage you to read the *Hints and Tips* section on p100, because it provides a range of helpful advice to help you get more from *OpenOffice.org*. Whether you use Windows, Mac OS X or Linux, you're in for a treat; we've tried to include something for everyone here, so dip your toe in and see what works for you! **LXF**



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