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The Great Showdown: MS Office vs. OpenOffice

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[Microsoft](#) (Nasdaq: MSFT)  has the best products money can buy -- at least, that's what they would have you believe.

However, remove money from the equation so MS buyers can't brag on the size of investment, and [OpenOffice](#) fans can't gloat about a freebie, who would win in an OpenOffice vs MS Office 2007 face-off?

"Ah, a great religious question!" exclaimed Paul C. Williams, senior software engineer at LexisNexis Examen. "Honestly, either is equivalent for most any purpose."

We shall see, grasshoppers, we shall see.

In This Corner

In one corner, we have the OpenOffice productivity suite with word processing, spreadsheet, presentation, drawing, database and other modules. It uses the Open Document Format (ODF) as its native file format and fully supports other common file formats such as Microsoft Office's Office Open XML (OOXML).

The software runs on all major platforms, including Windows, Vista, Linux, Solaris and Mac OS X and is available in more than 100 languages. OpenOffice may be used free of

charge for any purpose, private or commercial. It's licensed under the GNU Lesser General Public License (LGPL).

Since the project's creation by [Sun Microsystems](#) (Nasdaq: JAVA) in 2000, nearly 100 million have downloaded the product; thousands contribute to it, including [IBM](#) (NYSE: IBM), which joined the OpenOffice.org community to collaborate on development just last month.

In the other corner, we have MS Office 2007 productivity suite with its much heralded Office Fluent user interface, Quick Styles and Document Themes, New SmartArt diagrams and new charting engine, Building Blocks, its add-in that allows a direct save to portable document format (PDF) or XML paper specification (XPS) format, direct link to blog sites, the Office SharePoint Server 2007, a new XML integration capability, Document Inspector, a tri-pane review panel, and the new OOXML Formats, which reduce file size and improve recovery for damaged files. Oh yeah, and one last thing: a whopping price tag of US\$500 for the professional edition, \$150 for home/student edition, or \$450 for the small-business edition.

Freestyle Flaying

One of the most important points in delivering a knockout in this particular boxing match is how each product fits into the real world where workers really work.


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On the other side of the globe, assessments are also running high in OpenOffice's favor. "I'm using MS Office when I must at work, but I strongly prefer OpenOffice and using it almost always," Borys Mađrawski, system architect at Sygnity (formerly ComputerLand) in Poland told LinuxInsider.

Some of the reasons Madrawski cited for preferring OpenOffice include:

1. Supports the open standard file format, ODF
2. It's reliable
3. Can easily edit large documents
4. Has a simpler and more intuitive menu than 2003 (though not so much against 2007)

Its drawbacks are that it may fail to provide full compatibility with MS Office documents that include templates, macros or forms, and it is harder to write macros and integrate with object linking and embedding (OLE) attachments or other Microsoft applications suites, he added.

Back in the U.S, it's a mixed reception. "I use Office 2007 and absolutely love it," Daniel B. Delgado, business  analyst at the University of Florida, told LinuxInsider. "I must admit at first the upgrade was really annoying until I've found out how fast I can speed through creation and editing."

Some of the reasons Delgado cites behind his preference for Office 2007 include:

1. It's intuitive -- it only shows me menu items for objects that the menu items can affect
2. Its use of large, obvious icons makes it easy to quickly change multiple fonts and formats for various typesetting reasons
3. The ability to create PDFs out of any document
4. The way the styles and fonts work instantly to show you what your selection will look like
5. The much broader library of colors and styles beyond even Office 2003 -- great in presentations
6. The ctrl and alt key functionality (hold down ctrl or alt and it loads up all the keys that could be the right option)
7. Very easy style creation and usage
8. Cleaner and easier wizards for when you need them

"Overall, it's a vast improvement over Office 2003. OpenOffice, I would argue, trumps 2003, but the functionality and usability in Office 2007 is quite amazing," said Delgado.

"OpenOffice is a bit inconvenient for some tasks -- mostly because the PowerPoint integration is still sub-optimal, and the OSX port is too unstable and immature," agreed Williams. "Calc/Excel & Write/Word compatibility is quite good. I have little experience with Base, other than some toy projects I couldn't finish because the scripting API (application programming interface) is so poorly documented, but nobody who would use OO would seriously consider a desktop database when MySQL is available."

Blow-by-Blow to the Count

This reviewer awards points to each of the products for wins in the following categories:

OpenOffice:

Wins in that it has no activation requirement, which eliminates the install, upgrade and "Gee, I lost my disk and/or registration number and/or mind" in the restore process.

It's open source with numerous contributors, which frees me from the oversights and mistakes of a limited number of programmers and developers. Plus, it alleviates my mind a bit on the whole "Big Brother" thing, at least while the current U.S. administration is in office.

OpenOffice's spreadsheet seems to have better error management and it's easier to use than Excel.

I can paste my news stories directly into online publications with no problems. With MS Office, I have to paste everything to Notepad, then paste it on the admin site and then do formatting. If I don't, the MS internal programming erases all countries from my text and headlines (is that a Big Brother reporting thing, I wonder? Or, does MS just not want me to report on nations?) and I lose some formatting details to utter gibberish.

I love the price and I love that I don't have to keep buying products in order to read my own files.

MS Office 2007:

PowerPoint wins hands-down, especially if you have to share it with other users. OpenOffice's equivalent is blown out of the water.

I find MS Office 2007 is a collection of mostly minor improvements that speed formatting, but OK, I like that. I'm always on deadline and in a hurry, so I like that I don't have to go through two or three steps, as I did with Office 2003, just to change the font style. I am unimpressed with the default fonts on OpenOffice, and changing the defaults is a bit of a pain.

The Take-Away

If you are still confused as to who won this match -- well, join the crowd. There will always be fans of each who will always be convinced one way or the other. However, if you are merely trying to decide which product to use, here's some advice from John Feminella, chief software architect at Distilled Brilliance:


He said there are many considerations here, but they can be distilled down to a few key points. In general, you should choose OpenOffice if:

- Your documents do not need to be edited by third parties outside the business
- You do not generally receive complicated or very large Office documents from third parties that need to be read
- You really just need something to make various kinds of documents, and not extended functionality that is rarely used
- You have a limited budget
- Your computer hardware is limited in power or aging

On the other hand, you should choose Office 2007 if:

- Your business uses the scheduling and calendaring features of Exchange and Outlook, particularly if these are done with third parties outside the business

- Your business shares documents with others for editing and review
- Your administrative or document team relies on the use of specialized macros to get the job done
- You need to perform complex layout or content-arrangement tasks

There you have it; let's call it a draw. 

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