RECOMMENDATION TO MIGRATE FROM MICROSOFT OFFICE TO OPENOFFICE.ORG

Prepared by
Brandon Blackmoor
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Executive summary

This report proposes a migration from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org.

Reasons to replace Microsoft Office

A business could face damages of up to $2.55 million for unlicensed installations of Microsoft Office; the license for OpenOffice.org is free of charge.

OpenOffice.org has always been available for Windows, Unix, and Macintosh.

OpenOffice.org has fewer vulnerabilities than Microsoft Office, and those vulnerabilities are patched sooner.

Responses to objections to migrating to OpenOffice.org

OpenOffice.org has more than enough features to satisfy the majority of users.

Businesses have a greater chance of retaining access to older documents by migrating to OpenOffice.org.

Migrating from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org will eliminate a costly training burden.

Much of the technical support for OpenOffice.org is provided by the OpenOffice.org community, free of charge; commercial technical support is also available.

OpenOffice.org supports a variety of accessibility technologies, sufficient to support the accessibility requirements of most persons with physical impairment.

Migration to OpenOffice.org reduces legal risk, because it eliminates the significant legal penalties from using unlicensed software.

Recommendation

All Microsoft Office software should be replaced with the current version of OpenOffice.org.

Reasons to replace Microsoft Office

There are numerous reasons to migrate from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org. Primary among these is cost associated with obtaining valid software licenses for Microsoft Office. Of lesser importance are the cross-platform compatibility which OpenOffice.org provides and its improved security over Microsoft Office.

Licensing

According to *PC World*, the Business Software Association (BSA) received thirteen million dollars in software piracy settlements in 2007, most of which came from small businesses (Waring, 2008). Most of these businesses did not intend to pirate software, and were targeted by the BSA because BSA offers large rewards for people who "inform" on their employers. If a business has not been targeted by the BSA, that is fortunate, but this good fortune can't be replied upon. Businesses need to eliminate all unlicensed software or risk an expensive lawsuit.

Even if there were no damages, the cost to provide valid software licenses for Microsoft Office is prohibitive. According to Amazon.com, a license for Microsoft Office 2007 costs $210 ("Amazon.com", 2008). Migration to OpenOffice.org provides a cost-effective way for businesses to ensure that all of their employees are using licensed office productivity software, because the license for OpenOffice.org is free of charge.

This applies not only to current versions of Microsoft Office and OpenOffice.org, but to

upgrades, as well. Migrating to OpenOffice.org now will assure that a business will never have to pay an upgrade fee for office software ever again.

The license for OpenOffice.org provides a secondary benefit aside from the obvious cost savings. Because OpenOffice.org is made available under the GNU Lesser General Public License (LGPL), businesses will not need to track the number of installations of this software, eliminating this onerous and time-consuming task and freeing the IT department for more important duties which directly support core business goals ("GNU LGPL", 2007).

Cross-platform compatibility

One of the major advantages of OpenOffice.org is its cross-platform support. Unlike Microsoft Office, OpenOffice.org has always been available for Windows, Unix, and Macintosh, but the Macintosh port of OpenOffice.org has suffered from performance issues. As of the most recent update, this has ceased to be the case. Native support for Apple OS X is one of the new features of OpenOffice.org 3.0 (Brooks, 2008).

Security

Another major advantage of OpenOffice.org is its security. Microsoft Office is often a target for malware authors, and Microsoft is slow to patch the "seemingly endless string of vulnerabilities" in Microsoft Office (Krebs, 2007). In contrast, OpenOffice.org has fewer vulnerabilities, and those vulnerabilities are patched sooner (Coffee, 2006).

With the limited resources available in today's economy, any security vulnerabilities pose a critical threat to business operations. Migrating from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org reduces the security vulnerability of a business's systems.

Responses to objections to migrating to OpenOffice.org

A number of objections are raised any time someone suggest migrating from Microsoft Office to any other office suite. In the case of the OpenOffice.org, these objections chiefly concern the features of the OpenOffice.org software, its ability to open Microsoft Office file formats, and the training burden which would be incurred by changing office productivity software. Other common objections concern the availability of technical support, accessibility to persons with special needs, and the legal risk which some believe is associated with the adoption of open source software.

All of these objections are based on insufficient or inaccurate information. In some cases, the objections raised actually support the case for migration to OpenOffice.org.

Features

The most frequently cited reason against migrating from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org is the need for users to have access to the features which Microsoft Office provides, such as macros. However, OpenOffice.org has more than enough features to satisfy the majority of users, and "most users don't even know half the features included in the software they buy" (Verducci, 2007).

Additionally, OpenOffice.org 3.0 has support for VBA macros ("VBA – OpenOffice.org wiki", 2008), while support for VBA in the Mac OS X version of Microsoft Office was dropped with the release of Microsoft Office 2008 for Mac ("Office 2008 Without VBA", 2008).

In addition to offering features which Microsoft Office no longer does, OpenOffice.org offers numerous features which are unavailable to users of Microsoft Office, including the ability to

import and export PDF files, “multiple page editing in Writer, an optimization Solver tool amd 1,024 columns in Calc, native table support in Impress, and effective handling of poster-size graphics in Draw” (Boulton, 2008).

File format compatibility

File format compatibility is a major concern when changing office suites. Every business has an archive of critical business documents to which it much retain access. Microsoft changes its proprietary document formats with each release of its office software, rendering the formats of different versions of Microsoft Office incompatible. In the United Kingdom, over a thousand government employees were affected when some users were migrated to Microsoft Office 2007, “leaving politicians and civil servants unable to read some correspondence” (Heath, 2008).

One of the most frequently mentioned advantages of OpenOffice.org is that it can read and write Microsoft Office document formats (Goldsborough, 2008). Some sources report that the conversion between OpenOffice.org and Microsoft Office is imperfect, but these “small errors” are less common when converting between OpenDocument format and older Microsoft Office formats – specifically, those formats from Microsoft Office 2003 and earlier (Brooks, 2008).

Businesses have a greater chance of retaining access to older documents by migrating to OpenOffice.org.

Training

A common objection to the adoption of OpenOffice.org is that it will require additional training resources. With today’s economic difficulties, this is not a trivial concern. However, rather than being an argument against migration to OpenOffice.org, this is actually a reason for migration

from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org. According to an article by CNet Networks, the user interface of OpenOffice.org is based on established conventions with which users are already familiar, and "[u]sers familiar with the interface in Microsoft Office 97 to 2003 should have few, if any, problems using OpenOffice.org" ("Debrief and defend", 2005).

A visual comparison between Microsoft Word 2003 and OpenOffice 3.0 make this clear. Menu items are nearly identical in name and purpose, and the icons for formatting and for access to program features are similar in appearance, function, and location.

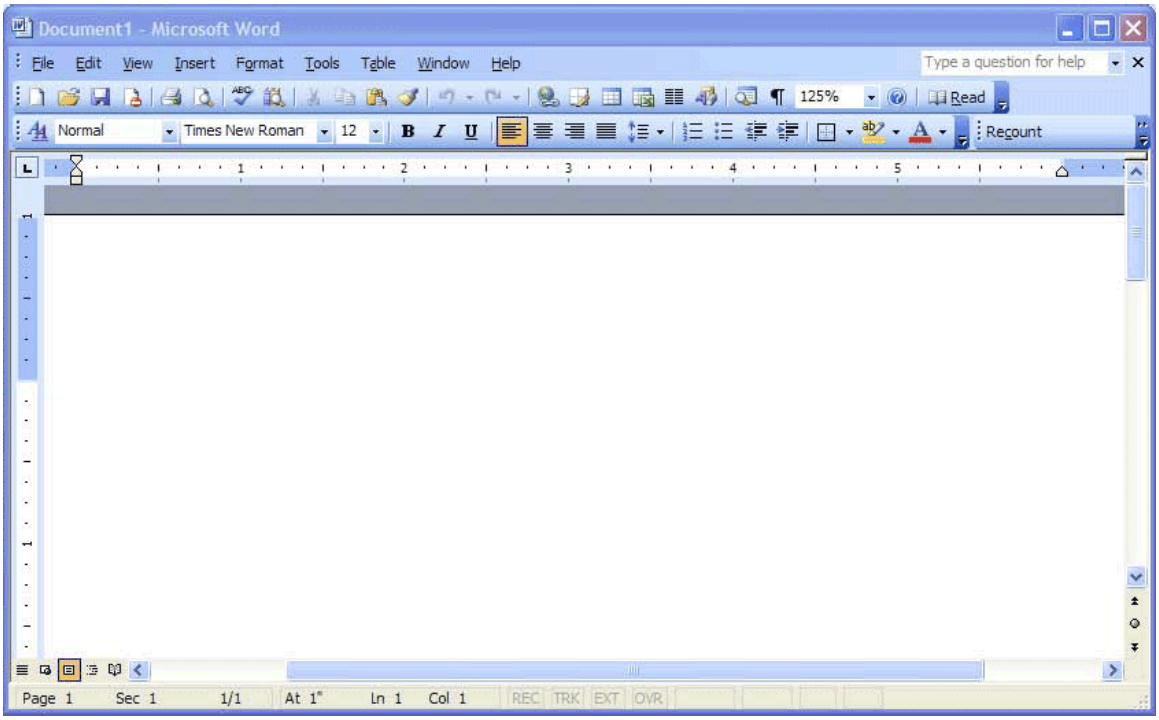

Figure 1. Microsoft Word 2003 user interface.

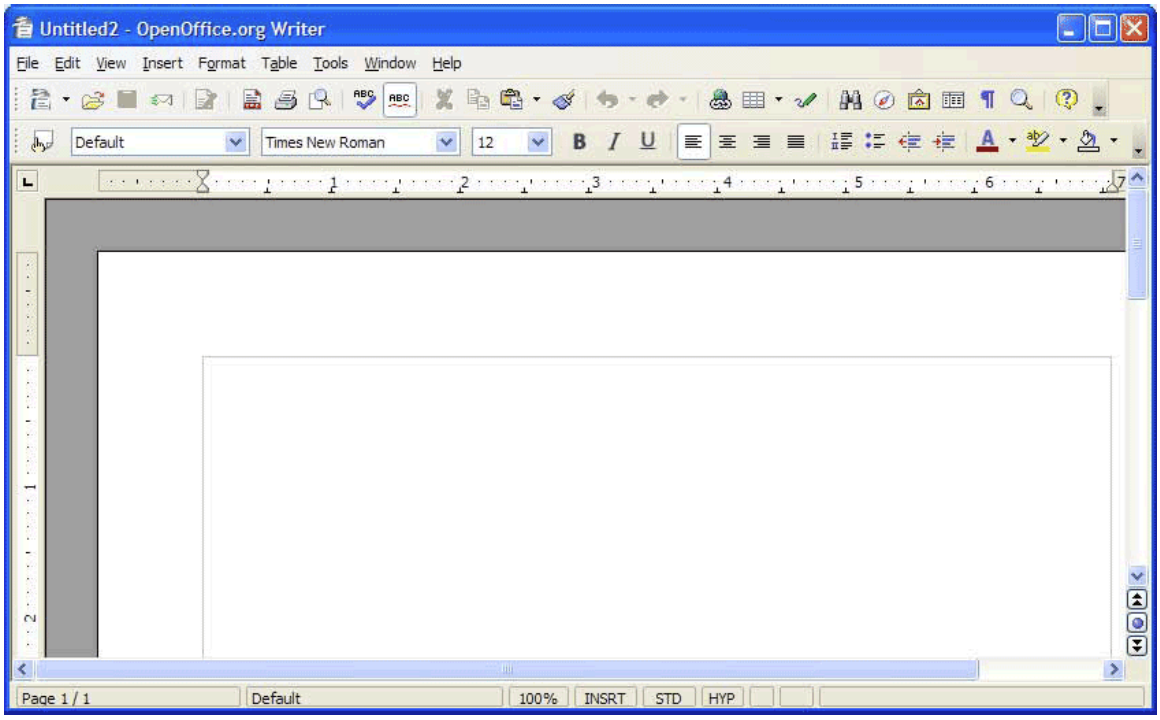

Figure 2. OpenOffice.org 3.0 user interface.

Even such details as “wizards”, which simplify common actions such as mail merge, are very similar in OpenOffice.org and Microsoft Office 2003. While the dialog boxes in the two programs are formatted differently, the information requested from user and the steps through which the user proceeds are virtually identical.

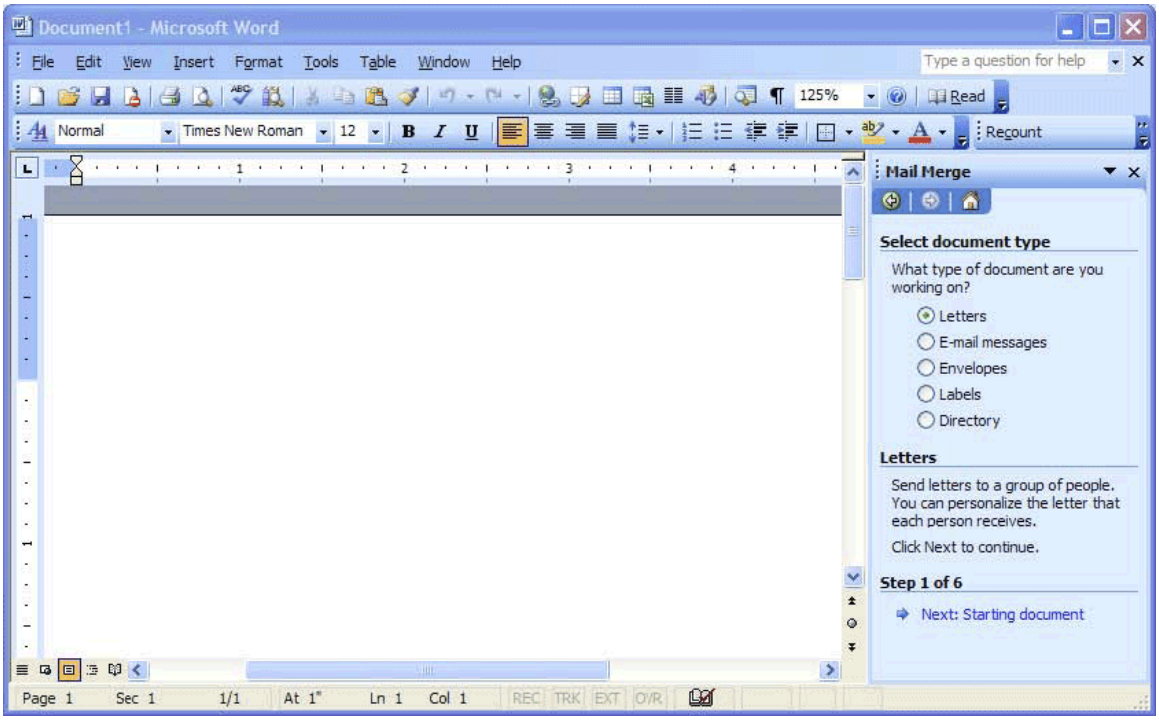

Figure 3. Microsoft Word 2003 mail merge wizard.

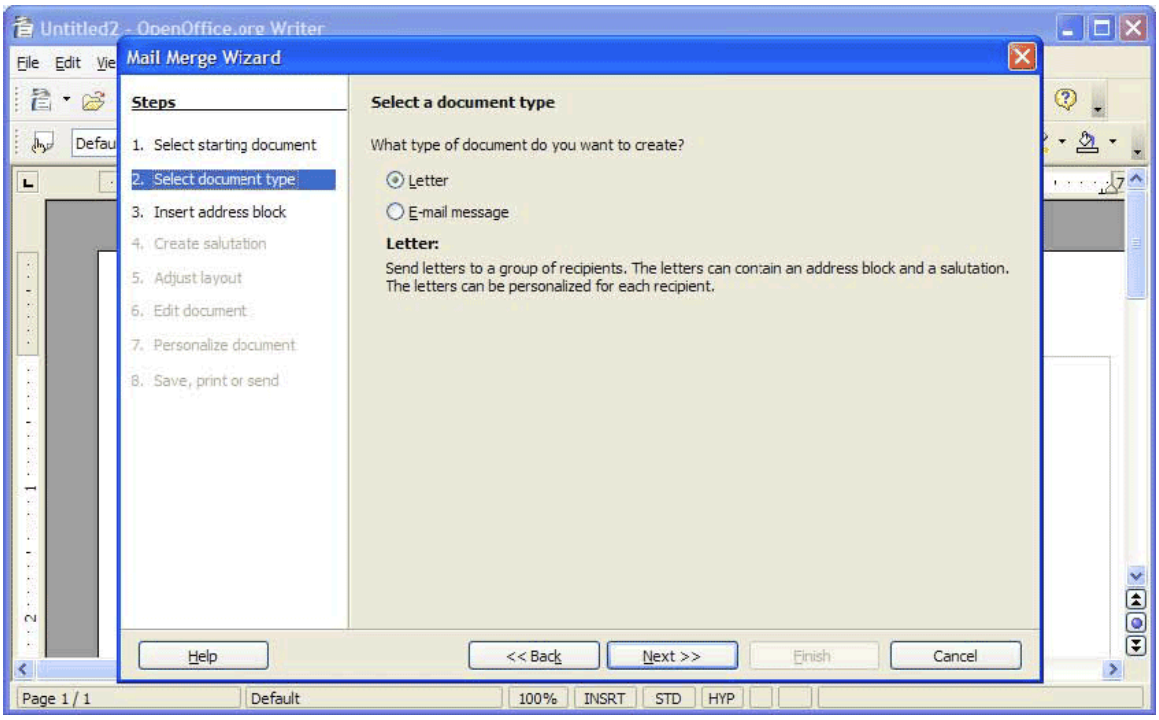

Figure 4. OpenOffice.org 3.0 mail merge wizard.

In contrast, Microsoft Office 2007 has an entirely new user interface which bears little resemblance to previous versions of Microsoft Office or any version of OpenOffice.org. There is no “classic” interface option in Microsoft Office 2007, for users who prefer the user interface with which they are familiar, as there was when Microsoft changed the user interface in Windows XP from that in Windows 2000.

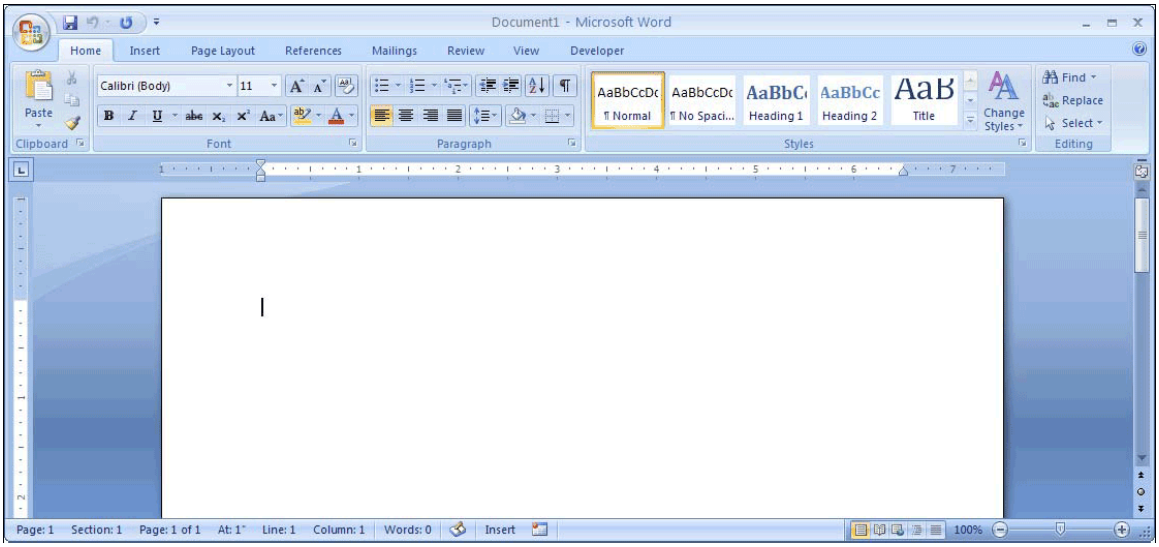

Figure 5. Microsoft Word 2007 user interface.

Learning to use this new interface would place a significant burden on business resources. Migrating from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org will eliminate this costly training burden.

Technical Support

Technical support for software is an important concern, because an employee who is unable to use the software is unable to do her work.

Much of the technical support for OpenOffice.org is provided by the OpenOffice.org community, free of charge, through such venues as the OpenOffice.org wiki, the OpenOffice.org Community Forum, and the Tutorials for OpenOffice.org web site.

However, technical support for OpenOffice.org may be purchased from Sun, Novell, and other consultants ("OpenOffice.org support", 2008). Sun also offers their branded version of OpenOffice.org, StarOffice, with a variety of support options. For example, Sun's "new subscription model includes license and support per user, per year for one or three years" (Boulton, 2008).

Most businesses should not need to pay for technical support, because the support by the OpenOffice.org community is more than sufficient for the great majority of users. However, additional support is available should it be required, neutralizing this objection to adoption of OpenOffice.org.

Accessibility

One possible drawback of migrating to OpenOffice.org concerns accessibility for the vision-impaired. Microsoft Office is compatible with the assistive technologies used by the blind, while OpenOffice.org may not be (Sliwa, 2006). However, the OpenOffice.org Accessibility Project is working toward making the software "usable by people regardless of their disabilities" ("OpenOffice.org accessibility", 2006), and OpenOffice.org currently supports a variety of accessibility technologies, including keyboard navigation, scheming, and assistive technology support ("Accessibility", 2008). This is more than sufficient to support the accessibility requirements of most employees.

Legal risk

A final concern using open source software like OpenOffice.org is that it will expose the user to legal risk due to possible patent and licensing issues. In a 2007 article in Fortune, Microsoft

licensing chief Horacio Gutierrez claims that OpenOffice.org infringes on 45 of Microsoft's patents (Parloff, 2007).

Using OpenOffice.org exposes a business to no more legal risk than using Microsoft Office: office productivity software is composed of highly complex applications with hundreds of thousands of lines of code, and so many dubious patents have been granted in the past twenty years, specifically in the realm of business methodology and software, that it is likely that any office application could be shown to violate some patent, somewhere. In the words of Mark Shuttleworth, founder of Canonical, the company which is behind the popular Ubuntu Linux distribution:

> Allegations of 'infringement of unspecified patents' carry no weight whatsoever. We do not think they have any legal merit, and they are no incentive for us to work with Microsoft on any of the wonderful things we could do together.
>
> A promise by Microsoft not to sue for infringement of unspecified patents has no value at all and is not worth paying for. (2007)

However, even if Gutierrez's assertion is accurate (Microsoft has not revealed which patents are being violated, nor has any legal action been taken against any hypothetical violators), recent court decisions indicate that these software patents may not be valid in any case (Forsyth, 2008).

In fact, migration to OpenOffice.org reduces the legal risk, because it eliminates the significant legal penalties from using unlicensed software. Unlike the dubious patent claims by Gutierrez, which have not been tested in court, the use of unlicensed software has cost companies enormous amounts of money, and continues to do so.

Conclusion

It is imperative that businesses eliminate all unlicensed software. Migrating from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org offers a cost-effective alternative to purchasing additional licenses of Microsoft Office. In addition, migration to OpenOffice.org offers significant benefits, such as cross-platform compatibility, increased security, and more reliable access to archived documents. Migrating to OpenOffice.org also provides a more user-friendly upgrade path than migrating to Microsoft Office 2007, because OpenOffice.org uses a standard, familiar user interface.

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