

Open Office: Ready for Prime Time, and it Does Windows Too!

By Dale Perkins

One of the exiting developments in the IT industry today is the maturation of Linux and the Open Source Community. It is now producing enterprise ready software and providing enterprise level support.

As you have heard, “Linux is real – it is ready for prime time!” But that is only part of the story. Most of what people are using is not Linux. Strictly speaking Linux is a basic operating system. The real key is all of the additional packages that are normally installed with it. When you install Linux you install hundreds of packages. Only one of these represents the base Linux operating system. This is normally called the Linux kernel. Many of the other packages provide system level functions like file systems, GUI interfaces, communications support, file sharing, and Internet browsing. Others like Open Office are more obviously add on packages.

But what is the Open Source community and how does it work? Simply put, it is a community of users and developers who are sharing their work, sharing their source code, and working cooperatively to produce more and better software faster. All under a general licensing

agreement that allows everyone to contribute and everyone to benefit. This means no charges, no initial charges, no hidden charges.

Within the Open Source community there are many groups each working on their own project. One these is the Open Office group. They have produced an office suite that provides most of the function of Microsoft Office. And it is capable of reading and creating documents, spreadsheets, and presentations in the standard Microsoft formats. It also produces output in standard PDF format and flash format.

So what is the big deal?

This software runs in virtually any environment, every flavor of Linux, every type of processor, and yes, on both Windows and MAC. It is also available in most national languages.

This software is available free of charge, all you have to do is download it and use it.

The Open Office organization only requests that you register as a user, make use of the software, and exercise the support resources they provide. As a member of the community you are able

to request support, make suggestions and requests. If you like you can become an active member of the group providing assistance to others or assisting in the development of the product.



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If you are a Windows user, Open Office will use 130 MB of disk space. For Linux users it needs a little more space, about 170 MB.

I have no intention of discussing whether Open Office is superior to Microsoft Office, or in doing a function by function comparison. The point is that it is an excellent suite of tools with an even better price.

So where does Open Office come from?

Open Office originated at Sun Micro Systems. They created Star Office and made it available to the Open Source Community. Open Office was based on Star Office Version 5.2, which consisted of 7.5 million lines of code and represented over 15 years of development. The Open Office Project has taken that base and is enhancing it and providing community based support for the members that want to use it.

So what does Open Office consist of?

WRITER is a great tool for creating documents like this article. (Yes, I am using it as my standard office suite and to write this article.) You can also use it to create reports, newsletters, and brochures. You can easily include images and charts in



Figure 1. WRITER

your documents and create everything from business letters to complete books. It also allows you to publish your documents as content for the Web.

CALC is the spreadsheet you always wanted. For the beginner it is simple and easy to use. Yet, it has the features needed for the most advanced users.

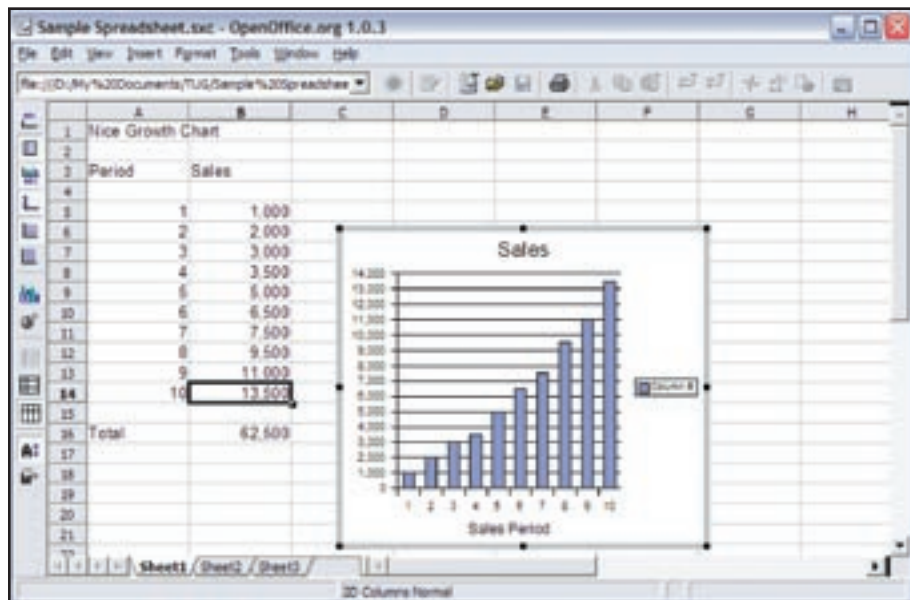


Figure 2. CALC

This includes the ability access data from virtually all standard databases. Other ease of use features include the ability to create natural language formulas, an intelligent sum function and an Autopilot to guide you through many of the advanced features of CALC.

IMPRESS is a powerful tool for creating effective multimedia presentations. You can use special effects, animation, and drawing tools.

DRAW is a tool for creating anything from simple diagrams to 3D illustrations with special effects.

The Database User Tools give you access to any database in simple spreadsheet format. They support dBASE or any other ODBC or JDBC compliant database.

All of these tools come in one complete package with a single install process. They all have a common look and feel and use consistent building blocks and tools.

So, for example, if you make a change in spell checking in one application, that change will be applied to all of the applications. Similarly, the tools for creating graphs and drawings are common across all applications. This makes it very easy to access objects that were created in another application.


The tools will read and write files created in the Microsoft Office formats. But they will also store information in standard XML formats, which not only saves space but makes it very easy to transfer data to other applications.

So how do I get it?

The best place to find out about Open Office is at their web site www.openoffice.org. This is a starting place to find out more about the product, how to get support, and how to download it. From this page you can select the download site for your environment.

And what about support ?

Like most products, Open Office comes with extensive on-line help. But when this is not enough you have a number of alternatives for support. The starting point is usually the Open Office home page www.openoffice.org which will point you to the frequently asked questions, the open office documentation web site www.ooodocs.org, the open office extras website www.ooextras.org, and the bug tracking facility IssueZilla.

In summary, Open Office is a great product you can use for yourself or for your business. 

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Figure 3. Open Office Website