

Office suites

What they are and what they can do

Most PC suppliers either include, or offer as an extra, bundles of software that provide the basic functions that most SMEs will need. These are often referred to as “**office suites**”. The most common product is Microsoft Office, but Lotus SmartSuite and Corel WordPerfect Office are also contenders. Microsoft Works is often offered as a standard with many PCs, or as cheap upgrade, and can perform many of the basic functions needed by an SME, but it is more limited than the other suites mentioned here. Office suites are available for Macs as well as PCs.

Office suites all offer a word processor, a spreadsheet, an e-mail client and a web browser. In addition, some of them offer some of the other applications described below.

Word processors are widely used, but their features are often widely under-used. They allow text to be written and edited on the screen, spelling to be checked (in multiple languages), automatic page and paragraph numbering, predefined styles to be used for different paragraphs (e.g. for section headings), text replacement (e.g. changing January to February) throughout a document and graphics and table to be inserted. However, many users treat them simply as electronic typewriters and ignore the possibilities opened up by their rich set of features, such as creating professional-looking company brochures.

Spreadsheets are mainly used for manipulating numbers, such as keeping track of business expenses. Although they may appear daunting at first, it is quite easy to learn how to use them for basic tasks and experiment with figures to see what the effect of changing, for instance, the cost of raw materials might be on the final cost of a product. They can also be used for financial management, although specialised tools are also available for this. The main spreadsheet packages can also be used to build simple databases.

E-mail clients allow you to send and receive e-mails from your PC. E-mails are an excellent way of sending notes to people anywhere in the world (as long as they have an e-mail address) and they often take only a few minutes to arrive. Files from a PC can also be attached to e-mails, so documents or designs can also be sent across the world at low cost and high speed.

Browsers allow you to connect to the Internet and visit the many thousands of websites around the world that offer information of interest to your business. As well as text and still pictures, browsers allow you to receive audio and video clips and download files from these web sites.

Databases simply store information, such as customer information, in a structured way. Office suites may contain a set of tools that will allow users to build their own databases from scratch and will often include a number of already built databases (e.g. customer orders). It is also possible to buy specialised databases for specific purposes. A well-constructed database makes it very easy to manage information and understand what is happening in your business and with your customers and suppliers.



Typical office suite screens

Graphics software is sometimes included as part of an office suite. One type of graphics software lets you create drawings, such as a company logo or the plan of a room – this is normally known as “drawing” software. The other type is intended to edit images, such as tidying up a photograph or changing the colour of a product in a photograph – this is known as “image editing” software. It is quite common for graphics software to be able to carry out both types of activity to some degree. Graphics software is invaluable for adding illustrations to your company documents and for explaining products or services to clients.

Presentation software is used to create presentations that can be displayed on a PC or can be printed out on to transparent material for use on an overhead projector. Most packages will also convert slides into handouts for the audience and allow you to include speaker’s notes to help the person giving the presentation. When used with a PC (connected to a projector), impressive presentations with animations and sound effects can be easily

Key messages for SMEs

- An office suite is an essential tool for business.
- Office suites are rich in features and can simplify many of your tasks.
- To get the benefit from an office suite, it is vital to take some time to understand what it can do and how you can best use it.

produced. It is also possible to produce a presentation about your company and send it to clients (by e-mail or on a CD) for them to run on their own machine. This can be a good way to get your message across in an interesting fashion, but beware of sending large presentations by e-mail – massive e-mail files are not popular with recipients.

Diary and address book packages come as part of many office suites and are sometimes referred to as calendar managers and contact managers. They work much like the paper-based versions but are much more versatile. For instance, contact managers can be used to address e-mails and to track which e-mails were sent to a particular person and when. If the diary and contact information is stored on a PC to which other people in the company have access (e.g. a server), then it is easy to see where each person is and some packages can set up meetings by looking at the availability of the people in the system.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Office suites contain a wide and versatile set of tools that can be used to let you do many tasks that previously would have to be done by specialists.

The very fact that office suites have so many functions can make them very hungry for resources on a PC and it can take some time to learn what functions are available.

There are several major players (Microsoft, Lotus etc) and their products do not produce completely compatible files. However, most office suites contain filters that make it possible to import files from other manufacturers with only minor limitations.

What to buy

Before buying an office suite of software, read the PC magazines that are available in your country for reviews of what is available. Many of these also have websites that contain archives of earlier reviews. Two useful English language sites are <http://www.pcpro.co.uk> and <http://www.zdnet.com>.

You should also speak to your local PC supplier or look at the web sites of the major software producers – but bear in mind that they will always emphasise the positive aspects of their product. Sites to look at include Microsoft Office at <http://www.microsoft.com/office>, IBM's Lotus SmartSuite at <http://www.lotus.com/home.nsf/welcome/smartsuite> and Corel WordPerfect Office at <http://www.corel.com/>. A cheaper, but more limited, alternative can be found in StarOffice at <http://uk.sun.com/software/staroffice/>

It is best to standardise on one suite within a company and ideally everybody in the company should run the same version of it. You may also find it helpful to choose the same office suite as is used by companies with which you frequently exchange documents electronically. When a new version of an Office Suite has recently been released, it is often better to wait a few months to let other people find any problems with that release before you upgrade to it.

Fully-featured office suites vary in cost from about €200 to about €800, although a basic suite may be included free when you buy a PC. You may be able to buy a package containing a subset of the components available in the full office suite. If you do not need, say, the database or image editing software, you may be able to buy a cheaper package that does not include it. Small businesses should also consider buying 'multiple licences' that allow them to install the same software on all their computers, as this will probably be cheaper than buying a separate copy of the software for each PC.

Questions to ask suppliers

- Can I save money by buying a multiple licence to cover all of the computers in my company?
- Can I have a package containing only the components that I actually need for my business?
- Does the package come with inbuilt help and/or paper reference manuals?
- What training courses are available for helping our employees learn to use it effectively?
- What effort is involved in installing and maintaining the software and can you do this for us?
- Is there a telephone or web-based helpdesk where we can get advice on problems?
- When is the next upgrade of this software expected to be released?