

Open source strikes at M\$ Office

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Microsoft Office faces stiffer competition from the open-source world following major releases of Office competitors for the Mac OS X, Unix and Linux platforms this week.

Open-source developers hope to give the software giant a run for its money in the enterprise by delivering productivity suites that cost less, work with Office formats as well as open-standards formats, and include commercial support options. The software appearing on the scene this week meets some or all of these conditions.

On the Mac platform, is the first stable release of NeoOffice/J, a native OS X implementation of the OpenOffice.org productivity suite, which is in turn based on Sun's StarOffice. OpenOffice is available for the Mac, but it requires users to install the X11 graphical software, doesn't use an Aqua interface, doesn't have native printing support and doesn't use a standard installer.

NeoOffice/J fixes these problems and is covered by the open-source GNU General Public Licence (GPL), allowing users to make changes and distribute their own variants. NeoOffice is compatible with most Microsoft Office formats, according to developers, but doesn't have an enterprise support option.

Also this week, South Korea-based Haansoft said it will ship a Mac OS X version of ThinkFree Office 3.0 shortly after the Windows version appears in July. Haansoft claims to have improved support Microsoft document formats with version 3.0. The company offers technical support (albeit by Web or e-mail) and ThinkFree is likely to cost far less than Microsoft Office - current versions sell for about £49.99.

Further options will be opened up to Mac users once the platform shifts to Intel processors, with CodeWeavers' announcement this week that it will support Intel-based Macs. CodeWeavers makes CrossOver Office, an implementation of WINE that allows Unix and Linux operating systems to run Windows applications such as Microsoft Office; the software may allow Macs to run the Windows version of OpenOffice, for example.

Mac OS X is based on BSD Unix, but its use of IBM's PowerPC processors has made it difficult for developers to transfer Unix and Linux applications to the platform.

The NeoOffice/J and ThinkFree releases are designed to improve compatibility with Microsoft's own document formats, but the release of KOffice 1.4 on Tuesday is a sign of things to come, with its support for the OASIS standard

OpenDocument 1.0. Developers say KOffice is the first to fully implement OpenDocument, which was adopted by Oasis in late May.

OpenDocument will also be supported with OpenOffice 2.0, and it is likely that support in NeoOffice/J and other applications will not be far behind. OpenDocument is an XML-based format intended to present a standards-based challenge to Microsoft's dominant, proprietary Office formats. It supports text, spreadsheet and presentation documents; Novell, Sun, IBM and others have pledged to support it in their productivity software.

KOffice 1.4, released for Linux and Unix, will continue to use the native KOffice format while OpenDocument goes through testing. The next KOffice release will use OpenDocument as its native format, developers said.

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