

StarOffice 8

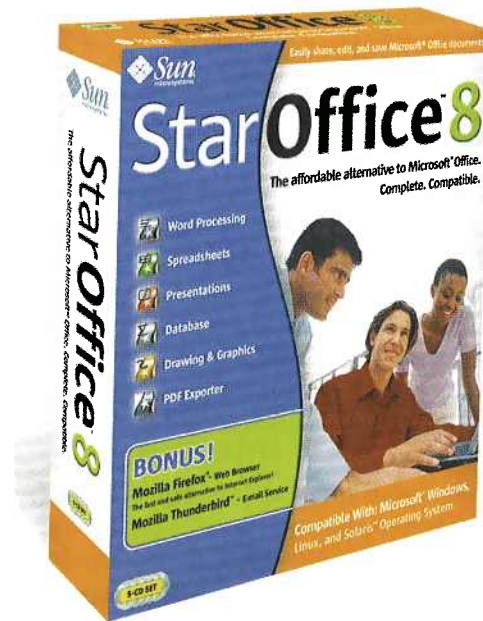
Microsoft Office is the office toolset of choice for the majority of users worldwide. However, there is a movement among users, corporations, states such as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and international government agencies such as the European Commission, to endorse or switch to open source products, including office suites like OpenOffice and StarOffice 8.

You may wonder why—given that your organization has invested a lot of time, energy, and bookshelf space learning how to use the MS Office suite—you should consider changing. There are three simple reasons. First, *you have no choice but to eventually change*. As StarOffice has already done, Microsoft Office is making radical changes to its office suite in 2007, including the way its files are packaged. Second, you may experience significantly lower total costs of ownership with StarOffice, whose licensing and list prices are far less than Office. Finally, StarOffice's superior use of XML may provide additional value to your office documents.

MEET THE STAR

Here's what I've learned about StarOffice 8, including some guidelines to help you decide if you or your organization should make the switch. I'll emphasize the nuts and bolts of what's inside StarOffice and my findings. For a more strategic view of the benefits—nay, the compelling reasons for—adopting an open source office product, see my companion INFORMATION INSIDER column in this issue. And if you want even more insight into my findings and the reasons I am now using StarOffice 8, consult my blog: <http://contentcurmudgeon.blogspot.com/>. I plan to publish an analysis of Microsoft Office 2007 later this year.

What is in the StarOffice suite? More than you might expect. For openers, it runs under Solaris, Linux, and MS Windows. (Oddly, although OpenOffice runs on the Mac, StarOffice is not available to Mac users.) StarOffice is available in 11 languages, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.



COMPANY

Sun Microsystems

PURPOSE:

StarOffice 8 is a full-featured, XML-based multi-platform office productivity suite compatible with Microsoft Office.

STARTING PRICE:

Standard edition lists for \$99.95, available for download at \$69.95. The enterprise edition's cost depends on volume, starting at \$90 and dropping to \$35/seat for volumes of 5,000–10,000 users.

REVIEWER'S VIEW:

Since its user interfaces closely resemble classic Microsoft Office products, using StarOffice 8 is highly intuitive for most users. StarOffice's price makes it a very tempting alternative to MS Office, and StarOffice's strategic benefits of open source and rich use of XML make it an even more compelling choice.

BUSINESS PROFILE

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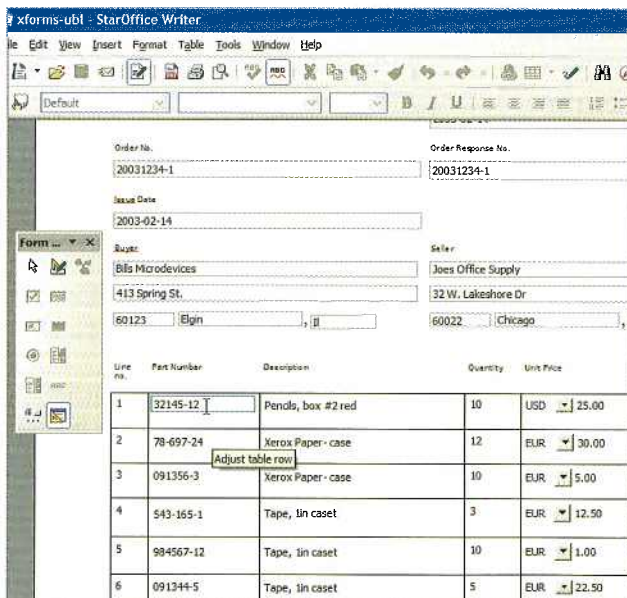
Sun Microsystems, Inc., provides network computing products and services, with an emphasis on interoperability and open standards. Sun was founded in 1982 and is headquartered in Santa Clara, California. In 1999, Sun acquired the German software company StarDivision and its StarOffice suite, whose current version is now StarOffice 8, based on OpenDocument from OpenOffice.org.

Here are the StarOffice 8 programs and highlights:

- *StarOffice Writer: Word processor—excellent table model permits built-in support for DocBook*
- *StarOffice Calc: Spreadsheet*
- *StarOffice Impress: Slide presentation system*
- *StarOffice Draw: Drawing application*
- *StarOffice Base: Database management tool*
- *StarOffice Math: Equation editor*

StarOffice exports directly to Acrobat PDF, Microsoft Office formats, and supports the W3C standard XForms. StarOffice imports MS Office formats including password-protected files. It also supports WordML and Spreadsheet ML.

The main differences between StarOffice and OpenOffice are professional support and ease-of-use features that are now the norm: conversion utilities, commercial spellchecker and thesaurus, additional fonts, templates, sample documents, wizards, and clip art graphics. Registered StarOffice software users are entitled to three free support incidents during the first 60 days from the date of purchase.



KEY FEATURES AT A GLANCE

STAROFFICE IS BUILT ON OPENOFFICE

OpenOffice is an international, multi-lingual, open source suite of office tools, based on OpenDocument, an OASIS standard.

EXCELLENT XML SUPPORT

OpenOffice and StarOffice are the only office suites providing standards-based XML support for forms, graphics, and documents.

COMPATIBILITY WITH MICROSOFT OFFICE

StarOffice can import and export MS Word, PowerPoint, and Excel files, and it supplies migration tools when needed.

STYLES SUPPORT IN WRITER, CALC, IMPRESS

StarOffice applies styles for central management of text, spreadsheet, and presentation files.

DOCUMENT EXPORTS

StarOffice Writer exports to Acrobat PDF, DocBook, and many other formats.

STAROFFICE 8 AT WORK

StarOffice 8 was released in late September 2005; since then, there have been two updates. I tested StarOffice 8 update 2 on typically configured Windows 2000 Professional and XP machines. I wrote this review using both MS Word and Writer interchangeably. The most surprising thing about StarOffice is that its programs look and feel like the Microsoft Office products I already know. I even had to double-check to be sure that it was Calc, not Excel, I was using. This means that it may actually take less time—and less computer power—to learn and use StarOffice than the new interfaces expected in MS Office 2007.

StarOffice uses a multiple-file, compressed format, like a Zip file containing text, graphics, and other information. This keeps the size of StarOffice files small, and allows the separation of text, graphics, and other components that XML naturally prefers.

During my tests, I experienced none of the annoying problems I still experience with Word from time to time, such as the program “not responding” or mysterious formatting changes I have to undo. And no matter which StarOffice application I used, it ran as fast as its corresponding Office application. One

You can create a form within Writer, then adjust its look and feel.

thing I especially liked about Writer is its rich table model. You can merge cells horizontally as well as vertically, not simply create the appearance of merging them. This derives from StarOffice's richer XML underpinnings, making it powerful enough even for technical writers who often need to create complex tables. Export to DocBook is further evidence of this advantage. I was, however, disappointed that Writer lacks a reading-level analyzer such as Word provides.

The three main products that most people would use are Writer, Calc, and Impress. All three (not just the word processor, as in MS Office) use styles. Thus, if you choose to change the look of one kind of element in your presentation, you can change the corresponding style and update all the slides immediately. StarOffice also natively supports MathML for mathematical formulas, SVG for vector graphics, and XForms for forms. These three W3C XML standards are key to manipulating, preserving, and reusing investments in office content. For example, you can create an XForm directly within Writer, where you can manage form fields and their look and feel.

What happens to investments made learning and creating legacy MS Office documents? How do you communicate with others who choose to continue using MS Office? I imported and exported moderately complex Word, Excel, and PowerPoint documents to StarOffice. Although some features, like Excel pivot tables, will require some manual rework, most conversions were flawless. Unless you are a power user of Office software, you'll be happy with the automatic conversions. If you are a power user, the Enterprise edition's migration assessment and conversion tools facilitate a migration to StarOffice.

ENTERPRISE DECISION CRITERIA

Deciding at the enterprise level to switch to StarOffice 8 requires a careful analysis of your content, infrastructure, and your total cost of ownership. Here are some issues to consider and their possible influence on your decision:

What impact would using StarOffice have on your enterprise applications such as document management? First, some organizations are moving away from so-called "thick client" integrations, such as making document check-in/check-out a

menu pick within a word processor. Thus, such menu integration with applications like MS Office is becoming less important. What about support for the new StarOffice file format itself? I spoke with a representative from EMC Documentum who said that the upcoming 5.4



Components in the Writer compressed "odt" file.

YOUR ENTERPRISE CHARACTERISTICS	YOU MAY DECIDE
Heavy investment in integration with other Microsoft products	Stick with MS Office
Heavy investment in MS Office macros but not integration with other Microsoft products	Consider StarOffice 8 Enterprise edition conversion facilities
Sensitive to office application licensing and training costs	Strongly consider switching to StarOffice 8
Run earlier versions of Windows than XP	Strongly consider switching to StarOffice 8
Considering or already decided to adopt other open source tools. Against vendor lock-in	Strongly consider switching to StarOffice 8
Attracted to standards-based XML support. Want to future-proof your content and XML options	Strongly consider switching to StarOffice 8

release would support both StarOffice and Office 2007. Since most content management systems have a broad view that documents really are files of any type, they should be able to manage StarOffice files as easily as any others.

Do you need to be certain that some of your documents can be read, managed, and repurposed for the foreseeable future? At its core, StarOffice is OpenOffice, based on OpenDocument, an OASIS standard, and freely downloadable. More than 85 million copies of OpenDocument and StarOffice combined have been downloaded. Thus StarOffice's use of XML is rich in its core applications and in adherence to W3C standards such as SVG, XForms, and MathML. On May 2, OpenDocument was ratified as an international file format standard by the International Office for Standardization and the International Electrotechnical Commission. This standards approach provides a level of stability and future-proofing unavailable elsewhere.

If you're curious but not ready to switch, you can always download a free copy of OpenOffice. Once you give it a try, you may well choose to purchase StarOffice 8 for its additional benefits later. ■

ROBERT BOERI (BBOERI@IEEE.ORG) IS A SENIOR ENTERPRISE CONTENT SYSTEMS ANALYST FOR A D.C.-AREA FIRM. **COMMENTS?** EMAIL LETTERS TO THE EDITOR TO ECLETTERS@INFOTODAY.COM.