



## Technology in Trucking

MARK MURRELL

These days, everybody is looking to save money and improve efficiency. One area that people often overlook is the cost of business productivity software. While there are lots of great deals for new computers right now, there's another way to save when upgrading, and maybe even improve your productivity at the same time – Microsoft Office.

Microsoft Office is generally included with new computers, but the cost is still there in the machine price, often topping \$300. If you're buying a couple of new machines for

the office, that \$300 can quickly add up. However, depending on your needs, you may be able to cut it out completely, saving money without sacrificing any functionality.

This month, we're going to take a look at some of the cheap (or free) alternatives to Microsoft Office and see what's out there.

### OpenOffice

Without a doubt, the leading alternative to MS Office is OpenOffice. It's an open source package, which means that it's free and constantly being updated by a network of devel-

## Offices are getting cheaper

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opers around the world. As a result, it's got a full complement of tools, reads and writes MS Office files, and is available in more than 80 languages. Each of the applications in the package has a more focused feature set than their Microsoft counterpart, so those features are often more stable and intuitive – welcome news to anyone who's had to endure the frustration of table management in Word!

Because of its "free and open" approach, OpenOffice is becoming the favourite package of governments and schools, but many businesses are moving towards it as well.

For a dedicated office suite that works both online and off, OpenOffice is a really solid offering.

### Online options

Of course, these days you don't need to go the traditional software route to get an office suite – there are several packages that provide the same functionality in a completely online format. The big advantage to these is that you have all your office functions and files available across multiple machines and locations, and you never have to worry about backing up data or transferring files – it's all handled automatically over the web. For some people, that may be reason enough to go that route.

Here are a couple of online office suites that offer some unique and very powerful features.

### Google Apps

As with most things online, Google is a leading player in online office suites. Google Apps includes a word processor, spreadsheet, calendar and mail, plus a few other tools. It's available for free in a basic configuration, or in a "Premier" edition for \$50/year per person. Extremely bare bones when first launched, Google Apps has continued to develop and is now shaping up to be a powerful alternative to traditional applications.

It also offers, through its integration with Google Groups, some outstanding tools for collaborative development. Instead of drafting a document, then emailing it to someone else for edits, then having them email it back, with Google Apps you can all work on a single online version of the document, with Google keeping track of who's doing what and when. If you've ever had the experience of trying to keep track of multiple versions of a document being passed around for editing, you'll appreciate the value of this feature.

### ThinkFree Office

Similar to Google Apps, ThinkFree provides an online office productivity suite that reads and writes Word, Excel, PowerPoint and other formats. In addition to the standard document editing tools, ThinkFree allows you to easily convert new or existing documents into any number of different formats (e.g. turn a Word document into a PDF). Very handy.

It also allows you to publicly share documents through a custom URL, and see documents shared by others, too. As a result, it has a large library of document templates, contributed by users all over the world. Things like sales proposals, employment contracts, and marketing plans are all well represented, providing a great reference or starting point for creating your own.

Of course, these three are just some of the many different offerings available. Don't get me wrong, Microsoft Office is a tremendously powerful product and I use it all the time. However, if you're looking to save a few bucks when buying a new machine, you could do just fine without it.

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- Diabetes – Fourth Deadliest Disease on the Planet
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