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Microsoft Office 2003—Should I Upgrade?

by Wendy Gauntt

Tell me you haven't heard this before. I'm talking about Microsoft's new ads, suggesting that the recently released Office 2003 will make you the office hero. Oh, yeah, been there, done that.

Skeptical? Wondering what Microsoft's done for you lately? Well, after careful review and personal experience, I'm here to tell you—that Bill Gates and Co. have been working hard, and they've come up with some useful new tools and features. If any of the following information appeals to you, an upgrade may be worthwhile.

What's New

Microsoft Office has added two new programs to its office suite—InfoPath and OneNote. They've also made dramatic changes to Outlook. The familiar favorites, Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, as well as the lesser-known Publisher, Access, Visio, and FrontPage, have all been improved and enhanced since Office XP, but the differences in these programs are less remarkable.

Let's look at the new programs.

InfoPath

InfoPath is a tool that helps businesses better manage their data. It aims to simplify the process of data collection with easy creation of customized forms. Anything you fill out on paper today—expense reports, client project data, sales forecasts, employee assessments, you name it—can be moved into an electronic form with this tool.

Compared to database programs, InfoPath makes basic data collection quite simple; however, if your data needs to be processed, manipulated, compared, or otherwise managed, you will need additional tools. InfoPath is best for data that can be captured as a list. Once a form is created, data entry is more intuitive than with Excel. However, complex data structures,

such as sales information that is linked to customers and products, will require the power of a database.

OneNote

OneNote is an intriguing new application that will appeal to compulsive note-takers, because you can start typing—or writing—anywhere on the page. It has tabs at the top reminiscent of a paper binder, and you can add as many pages within each section as you need.

Unlike a paper binder, it is extremely flexible. Notes can be moved around, turned into todos, sorted, and reorganized with a few mouse clicks. A clever feature is the ability to email OneNote documents as HTML-formatted emails, so that you can share information even with others regardless of whether they own OneNote.

Outlook

Outlook's updates alone may be worth the cost of an upgrade for heavy email users. Research found that the old email preview pane, intended to help you browse emails faster, was very difficult to use because of the short, wide shape and small size—you couldn't really see much of a preview. Microsoft has redesigned the main email view to include a larger, page-shaped preview pane, which really does make email processing easier. It took me a few minutes to adjust to the new look, and it took me a few more minutes to figure out how to sort my email the way I wanted, but at this point I would feel crippled if I had to go back to a previous version.

Another welcome feature: Outlook now has a built-in spam filter. It has significantly reduced the amount of spam I receive, and it is fairly accurate. I check the spam folder occasionally to make sure no "real" email has been eliminated, a risk you face with any spam filter; in the few cases that real mail has slipped in spam, I update Outlook by adding the sender to the preferred sender list so that it won't happen again.

Another useful feature is the ability to mark emails with a color-coded flag. By right-clicking an email message, you assign a color flag. You decide the color code; for example, I use red flags to indicate messages that need to be processed immediately, and blue flags mark documents to read at a later time. You may be surprised to know that this isn't a new feature, but it is now far more convenient than it was in previous versions.

One surprise was the lack of pictures in my emails. As one of Microsoft's new safety controls, Outlook does not download pictures in email unless you tell it to do so. This is another effective spam and virus protection measure. It is easy to override this setting for emails that you know are safe, by adding the sender's name to your preferred sender list. The protection this feature provides is well worth a few extra clicks here and there.

Other Considerations

If your computer is still running Windows 98 (or something older), you will not be able to upgrade without buying a new computer. Office 2003 is only compatible with Windows 2000 and Windows XP. The good news? One of the cheapest ways to purchase Office is to buy it pre-installed on a new computer. The other good news? If you are running an operating system that old, you can spend less than \$1000 to buy a new computer running Windows XP and Office 2003 at a speed 5-20 times faster than the computer you currently own.

If you need five or more copies of Office, check into Microsoft's volume licensing program to keep your costs down.

My Recommendation

If you are attracted to any of Office 2003's new features, if you process a significant amount of email, or if you have a computer more than four years old, the new version of Office is worth a look. You can find more information at <http://office.microsoft.com>.

But if the new features don't apply to you, and you are content with your current version of Office, an upgrade probably isn't worth the time and expense. Besides, while you are making up your mind to upgrade, rest assured Bill and his team are already cooking up the next version, due in 2005. Just wait until you see the new search feature they're creating!

One last suggestion: no matter what version you own, keep it up-to-date with the latest security patches and bug fixes, at <http://office.microsoft.com/productupdates>.

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