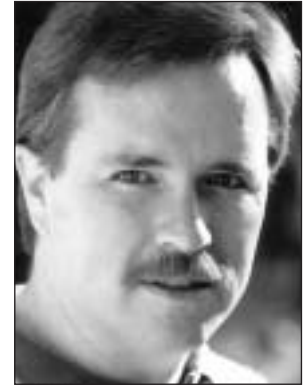


Timothy Perrin



Is Microsoft Office Still Right for our Offices?

Microsoft has been leaking some details of the next release of their Office suite, Office 11, due for release in the middle of 2003. Around Halloween 2002, Microsoft sent out the beta version, a pre-release copy that goes to gung-ho types willing to report bugs in return for being the first on the block to get to play with the latest and greatest.

The main “improvements” will be in greater reliance on XML and more Web services. XML is the “extensible markup language,” a way of adding information to “documents” (very widely defined) that contained structured information.

Is that technobabble? Yep. It is. And therein lies the problem.

Microsoft has taken Office right *out* of offices like yours and mine. They’re gunning for large corporations; small business owners are more invisible than Preston Manning these days.

Now, with Office 11, Microsoft is taking the product more deeply into the corporate jungle. Everyone is atwitter with buzz phrases like “linking to

corporate databases” and “reporting, analyzing, importing, and exporting information.”

They’re gunning for large corporations; small business owners are more invisible than Preston Manning these days.

The problem is that those of us without full-time computer geeks at our beck and call are not going to be able to use any of this stuff anyway. We just want a way to keep track of our clients, handle our email, draft documents, and keep the books. I mean, I would not know what to do with XML if it walked up and shook my hand.

The other problem with Office 11 is that Microsoft is moving toward an annual licensing fee system. As it is now, once you buy a piece of software, you hold a

perpetual licence to use it. But all that is going to change if the folks in Redmond have their way. They want you to have to pony up *every year* just to keep using software for which you’ve already paid.

They were sending up trial balloons on this subject for most of 2002. Just when they will actually try to implement it is anyone’s guess, but you can be sure that they will, sooner or later.

In the meantime, the price of Office upgrades keeps climbing. A few years ago, I remember they cost \$99. Now they are \$299 or more.

To keep costs down, more and more computer manufacturers are no longer bundling MS Office or even the stripped-down MS Works with their machines. That’s turned out to be good news for Ottawa-based Corel software. Corel’s WordPerfect 10 and spreadsheet Quattro Pro 10 are getting the call, instead. The latest companies to make the switch are Hewlett-Packard, the world’s largest computer manufacturer, and Dell Computers.

Speaking of Dell, by the time you read this, the company should have released its new handheld. The unit runs Microsoft's Pocket PC 2002 operating system and costs about \$300. (They were aiming for US\$199.) ViewSonic, the maker of some of the best flat-screen displays, has also announced a Pocket PC, the V35, near that price. The cheapest handheld using the Pocket PC OS I could find as I was writing this was Toshiba's e310 at \$499.

There *are* handhelds running the Palm operating system for as little as \$169 and for most people, they would be more than adequate. I used a Palm Pilot when they first came out and later owned a Palm Pilot III. They're great little devices and do the job 90 percent of the time. If you don't need colour or some of the other specialized features offered by the Pocket PCs, save your money.

If you do need some of the features found only in the Pocket PC-based handhelds, you might want to take a look

at the Dell or ViewSonic units. I hope to have reviews of them in 2003.

*Meanwhile,
what I'm curious
about is how Dell is
going to go
about manufacturing
their model.*

The ViewSonic Pocket PC is already being praised for its large and bright screen which is no surprise, given the company's reputation for flat-screen monitors.

Meanwhile, what I'm curious about is how Dell is going to go about manufacturing their model. Dell is famous for its highly competitive pricing. They are able to beat almost everyone else on price because the company doesn't build a computer until it has an

order in hand. It collects payment when it ships the finished unit, then still has a few days to pay for the parts. In fact, it probably still has a few days to pay for the parts *and* get an early payment discount. Meanwhile, it has a huge cash-float earning interest. Admittedly not very much interest these days but interest, nonetheless.

Because Dell sells direct, rather than through retailers, they average only four days between the time they receive parts and the time they ship those parts out the door as part of a computer. If their suppliers are offering a 1 percent discount for accounts paid within 15 days, they've still got 11 days to hang on to the money, earn interest on it, and still earn the discount.

Conventional computer manufacturers, however, have to warehouse complete machines, then have them sit in retailer showrooms for weeks before they actually sell them. As well, they must add one or two levels of mark-up to the price.

See why Dell is doing so well? But are they going to be able to follow this model with handhelds? Probably not. The scuttlebutt is they're contracting with a Taiwanese company to make the units, which will arrive fully assembled.

But who cares if they drive the prices down?

Microsoft has backed down on copy protection on its new Media Center PC version of Windows XP. A few computers using the operating system began shipping before Christmas, most notably an expensive but beautiful unit from Hewlett-Packard.

Among other features, a computer running the multimedia operating system has a built-in TV tuner and video recorder that acts like your VCR. You can set it to record TV shows on your hard drive to watch later. You can also freeze-frame or stop the action on live TV, then resume later. As originally

announced, however, the recorder in Media Center Windows XP would only play this content back on the same computer on which it was recorded. So, for example, you could not record last night's episode of *The West Wing*, burn it onto a DVD, and watch it on your laptop while you were flying to Toronto, even though that use is completely legal.

Microsoft backed away from that position in early October and is leaving it up to the copyright owner to decide whether a particular TV program will be "encrypted to the hard drive." In other words, if it's OK with the producer, you'll be able to burn a copy to watch on your laptop. If not, you'll be out of luck.

From Microsoft's point of view, of course, this is smart thinking because now, when someone can't watch a program, he or she won't complain to Redmond, WA, but to the entertainment company instead.

In case you think this won't affect you because you're not buying a Media Center PC, the same technology is being featured in version 9 of Windows Media Player. Microsoft is offering version 9 as a free downloadable upgrade. What they *don't* tell you, at least not prominently, is that version 9 of Media Player incorporates the same copy-controlling technology as the Media Center PC. ▲

Timothy Perrin, a former lawyer, is a technology writer for a variety of magazines. He teaches writing in the Professional Writing program at Okanagan University College in Kelowna; online for the Community College of Southern Nevada; and through his own school, WritingSchool.com. www.TimothyPerrin.com