

Business & Careers

A cleaner, simpler feel in the new look Office



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Hi-Tech

Microsoft packaged new goodies in the latest version of its Office suite of productivity software, but this time you might notice the package more than the goodies.

The programs — Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook et al — are all still there, but they look a lot

less busy than they used to. The cleaner look goes beyond aesthetics to help the package perform well in a computing environment that's vastly different than what it was a decade ago.

Gone are the days of keyboard-and-screen hegemony. To make Office applications work on touch-screen devices Microsoft simplified the look of the software.

To keep the look the same on a variety of devices, Microsoft brought the refreshingly minimalist touch aesthetic to versions of Office meant for traditional computers, too. The features are all still there, though finding them will likely

involve a few false starts at first.

Microsoft has enabled cloud-based sharing for some time, but now it's really pushing SkyDrive, a SharePoint for the masses.

On balance, it delivers. You store files and folders in a personal SkyDrive folder on your computer that is linked to your SkyDrive account. SkyDrive keeps files and folders in sync across your devices.

You can also share files or folders with other people. Sharing lets you do things like transfer files too large for e-mail and establish a co-authoring environment that helps prevent multiple versions of a document from cluttering e-mail inboxes. Your local e-discovery expert will gladly expound on this matter for you.

To synchronize files to SkyDrive, you place them in a SkyDrive folder on your computer. Files can be of any type, not just Office formats. SkyDrive works on Windows-based computers, tablets and phones as well as their counterparts from Apple.

Opening Office documents in SkyDrive from a web browser fires up Office on Demand, which allows you to work with your documents on computers that don't have Office installed. Office on Demand plus SkyDrive helps Microsoft compete against the likes of Google Docs, while flaunting its advantage of handling familiar file types like .docx, .xlsx and .pptx better than its challengers can.

Visiting the SkyDrive web page means that you can also quickly learn about other parts of Microsoft's online ecosystem of services, like Calendar and People. Again, Microsoft is battling Google offerings like the Google Apps ecosystem, which can replace things like Outlook calendars, mail, task lists and contacts.

In most of my day-to-day usage of SkyDrive, changes and new documents and folders appeared online moments after I made the changes on my Mac, but in a few instances documents took a day or two to appear. I got into the habit of checking my SkyDrive folder on the web to make sure documents made it to the cloud.

If, like me, you meticulously keep all your documents in specific folders in your Documents folder, you may not like needing to move them out to the SkyDrive folder (although you can place the SkyDrive folder in your Documents folder, or most anywhere you want to on your computer). The behaviour is similar to Google Drive and other such services, but I'd like to see Microsoft add the ability to "tag" folders to synchronize without having to move them to the SkyDrive folder, much like SugarSync lets you do. Granted, given the powerful search features built into both Windows



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and Mac OS, finding relevant documents should not be difficult regardless of the folder they're in.

Microsoft included some useful new tools in the Office suite. While owners of Adobe's latest Acrobat can already export documents into popular Office formats, Word's PDF Reflow feature opens PDFs and readies their contents (paragraphs, lists, tables) for editing in Word.

For the infographic-challenged among us, Excel can now recommend charts that suit the data you want to present. It also quickly shows that data in different charts and graphs to help you pick the right one.

You connect with people using methods outside of e-mail, so Outlook brings you "social connectors" that show updates from social networks like LinkedIn and Facebook.

You can pick "apps" from the Office Store to add features to certain Office applications. Hertz, for instance, lets you rent cars from within Outlook.

Unsurprisingly, Microsoft's licensing scheme changed again for this release of Office. In addition to the consumer-level home

and university subscriptions, buyers can acquire Office in enterprise, midsize business (10 to 250 users) and small business flavours. All three provide business-grade software and services, and firms can manage their licences online. Microsoft throws in Lync, Exchange and SharePoint Online services depending on the business package.

Interestingly, buyers can now subscribe to Office as a service. Business subscribers receive the full package and the choice of categorizing the software as an operating expense.

Each user can also load Office applications on multiple devices so that, for instance, one can start a document on a work desktop, continue it on a company-authorized laptop and look it over on a company-authorized phone.

As usual, Microsoft hasn't yet released its Mac version of Office, but the five-licence package applies to Office 2011:Mac as well as 365 for Windows.

Microsoft hasn't yet released a version of Office for Apple's iOS or Google's Android operating systems. Although public relations reps are tight-lipped on this, one can guess at the quandary Microsoft faces: protect the nascent Windows RT and Phone operating systems by keeping Office out of competing mobile ecosystems, or release versions of Office for iOS and Android and watch millions of dollars in sales roll in, potentially at the expense of Windows RT tablet and Windows Phone sales.

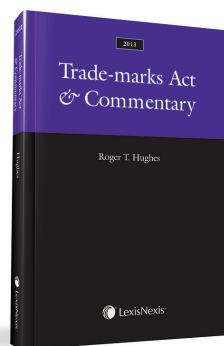
The biggest changes to Office may be a result of competition from Google et al, but the changes are welcome. Microsoft redid Office aiming to appeal to those who touch as well as those who type, wherever they may be, and Office feels much more like a modern productivity tool than its predecessor does.

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