Introducing Microsoft Office XP

The successor to Office 2000 includes hundreds of new features for users and support staff alike. But installation is unlikely to be straightforward.

By Robert Schifreen

Someone at Microsoft clearly doesn't read marketing textbooks. Such books always advise you to capitalise on your brand names, and to build them up. Yet just a couple of years after launching the "2000" brand for Windows and Office, its two most popular products, Microsoft is writing off the investment and embarking on a new brand image. The successor to Office 2000 is known as Office XP, and features many hundreds of improvements, both big and small, to help users and support staff.

One of the most startling pieces of information which came forth from Microsoft during my interview with the product manager for Office XP was regarding some research done after the launch of Office 2000. In the US, Microsoft operates a wish list on its Web site so that users can suggest new features they'd like to see added to Office. Of the one million hits to the site, some 78% of requests were for features actually already in the product. Microsoft has taken this to heart. In addition to adding yet more features to Office, the company also says that it has concentrated on improving access to features which already exist but which users are clearly unable to find.

In addition, many features in Office XP have been rewritten in response to user demand. For example, circulating a Word document for review among a group of workers is Web-based in Office 2000, but is email-based in XP. This change of heart is apparently because of overwhelming user demand, though Microsoft refuses to acknowledge that this means they got it wrong last time. Times and people change, says the company. The way that reviewers' comments are displayed in documents has been improved, too, so that they take up less space on the printed page. One feature noticeable by its absence is a warning box to alert users that the document they are sending to someone contains reviewers' comments. Such a facility would be useful to ensure that comments are not sent to people who should not be able to see them.

Task Panes

The primary new feature in OXP to address the "78%" problem is something called Task Panes. Effectively, these are additional menus that appear on the right hand side of the screen and provide links to whatever Office thinks you might want. They're also customisable if you wish. For example, if you select Open from the File menu, a Task Pane opens (assuming you haven't turned off the feature) which lets you re-open a recent file, create a new document or template etc. The entries in the Task Panes are much more numerous than you'd find on the standard menu, which is good. However, maybe Microsoft should have expanded and clarified the existing menu system rather than adding yet another.

Smart Tags

The other big new usability feature is something called Smart Tags. For example, if you type a Word document that happens to include the name of someone in your Outlook address book, the name will be underlined with a wavy purple line, in a similar way to how the grammar and spelling checkers use red and green. Click on the name, and up pops a menu from which you can send the person email, check his or her calendar, send the current document for review, book a meeting, and so on. The system comes with a built-in amount of Smart Tag functionality, though companies can also write their own as part of an office automation facility. In

addition to recognising names from Outlook, Office will also recognize other common names, as well as dates, addresses, stock symbols, etc. Clicking on any of these will bring up a Smart Tag menu with appropriate options. For example, type MSFT into a document and it will be recognised as Microsoft's stock symbol. Click on it, and you can look up the current price online.

Another new feature is the refreshable Web query. Paste some information from a Web table into a Word or Excel file, for example, and click the Recalc button, and it will go to the correct Web page and get the latest version of that data. Ideal for checking your stock portfolio with Nasdaq, or perusing the intranet to find out what's new on the canteen menu.

Revolution?

In some ways, Office XP is a revolutionary step, yet in other ways it can be seen more as a gentle evolution. On the revolution side of the equation, Microsoft is billing Office XP as the start of the .NET revolution. No one is claiming that this product is Office.NET, but it's a fair bet that this product, both on the surface and underneath, is much closer to Office.NET than Office 2000 ever was. On the evolution side, Office XP now features a rudimentary form of copy protection in the form of a registration scheme which ties the CD to the particular PC upon which it is installed. More details of this later. Also, Office XP takes away some of the work of the tired and stressed support person by helping users find solutions to problems online, or recovering information lost in a system crash. Again, more later.

Look And Feel

Office XP looks and feels very much like Office 2000. Anyone who's used 2000 will be sufficiently at home with XP that they will be able to use their most common features immediately with little or no retraining. As for the file formats, these are mostly identical between 2000 and XP, so users will be able to share files easily. Access has a new file format that allows more efficient access to large database files, but this is optional - you can choose whether or not to convert your MDB files. Another notable first is that PowerPoint now has the ability to save a file with a password to protect it from being accessed by unauthorised users. This of course will lead to problems opening password-enabled PowerPoint XP files under PowerPoint 2000.

On the subject of passwords, there is a new optional high-strength encryption facility in Office XP, based on CryptoAPI, which will make it much harder to break. Currently the password protection added to files by Office 2000 can be cracked in

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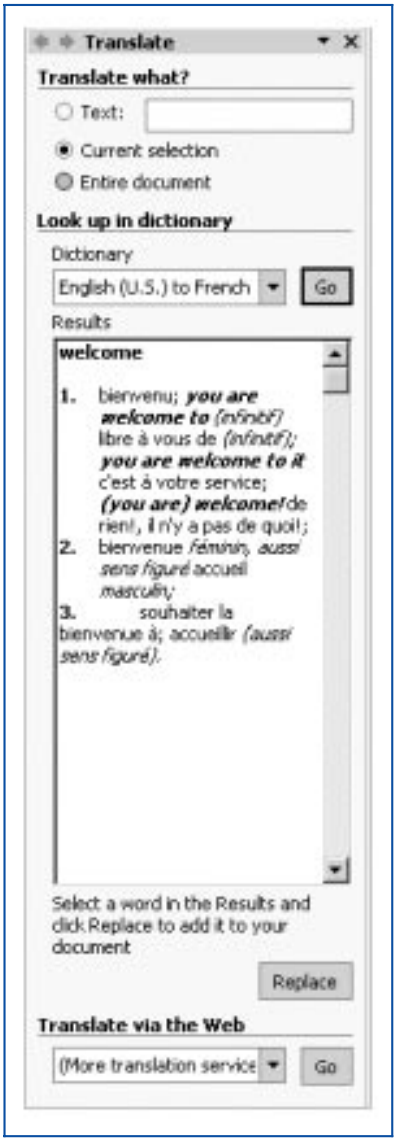
Creating a SharePoint Team Services site.

less than a second, and there are numerous programs available to do this. This weakness is not really Microsoft's fault but is down to the US government forbidding the use of strong encryption in products developed in the US. The rules changed last year.

Translation

One very welcome feature in OXP is language translation. If a user receives an email or a letter in another language, clicking on a menu option will provide a translation. Microsoft makes no claims that the results will be anywhere near perfect - the feature is simply intended to allow the recipient to work out the rough meaning of the message. If you want a top-quality service, you can click on a button within Office to send the foreign text to a human at a real translation agency, who will then email back the results. However, this part of the service obviously costs extra, and at the time of writing it is not clear which agencies, or how many, will have signed up to offer the service. To use the translation feature you need to have the optional language packs installed for both source and destination language. In the US, the English product also ships with French and Spanish language packs, but it's not yet been made clear whether this will be the same worldwide. Europe, for example, would probably prefer German to Spanish. Language packs from previous versions of Office will not work with Office XP, so you'll need to upgrade any that you currently have.



Translation in a Task Pane.

Data Recovery

Microsoft has put a lot of work into helping users and support staff recover data from machines that crash. Users who forget to save their work every 15 minutes should now prove less of a burden to overworked support staff whenever there's a workstation crash or power outage. While Office XP runs, another process also runs in the background which monitors the health of the Office apps. If an Office app or the OS crashes, Office XP writes the current version of any open data files to the hard disk and then prompts the user to reboot or restart. Upon restarting, the user can browse the last saved version of the document and the one that was recovered before the crash, and choose which to continue working with.

In the event of a crash, various technical details (the sort of thing you'd typically see on a Blue Screen) are gathered into a report file. A dialog box asks the user whether he'd like to send this to Microsoft or his system administrator (precisely where it gets sent is configurable by the sysadmin). There's also an option to view the report file first, presumably because Microsoft doesn't want to be accused again of gathering personal or confidential data for research purposes. The error reports sent to Microsoft are used for two purposes. Firstly, they help the developers of Office locate and fix bugs. Secondly, the reports can, if you choose, get passed to an automated system which attempts to use the Microsoft Knowledge Base to track down the cause of the problem. If a solution is found, the company's system administrator (or the user, but you'd be mad to configure it that way) will automatically be emailed with advice on what to do. This service is free of charge.

Microsoft has, it says, been concerned that this service would be seen by support staff as an attempt to put them out of a job; however, it claims that feedback has actually been positive, as support staff feel it frees them from mundane support tasks and allows them to concentrate on more strategic issues. It remains to be seen whether this attitude prevails now that OXP is being used by a wider circle than simply the beta testers.

SharePoint

New in FrontPage 2002 (for reasons that I don't pretend to understand, the individual Office XP apps are known as 2002 rather than XP) is something called the SharePoint Team Services. SharePoint Team Services lets you build HTML-based noticeboards and collaboration systems for use by teams on short-term projects - typically, says Microsoft, projects of less than 6 months' duration (which is presumably shorthand for saying that the thing will quickly become unmanageable). You can publish document libraries, create questionnaires and surveys, set up discussion boards, circulate documents for review, and do many of the other things that you'd typically use an intranet for.

Microsoft is quick to warn people that this product is no substitute for a real intranet. However, it does make it very easy to put together an information site for a product or project, and there's no reason why you can't publish the thing to a proper hosted domain rather than an internal server, so expect to see many such public sites appear shortly. Note that the server needs to support the SharePoint extensions to use this feature, and these are available only for Windows 2000 SP2 and above.

Viruses

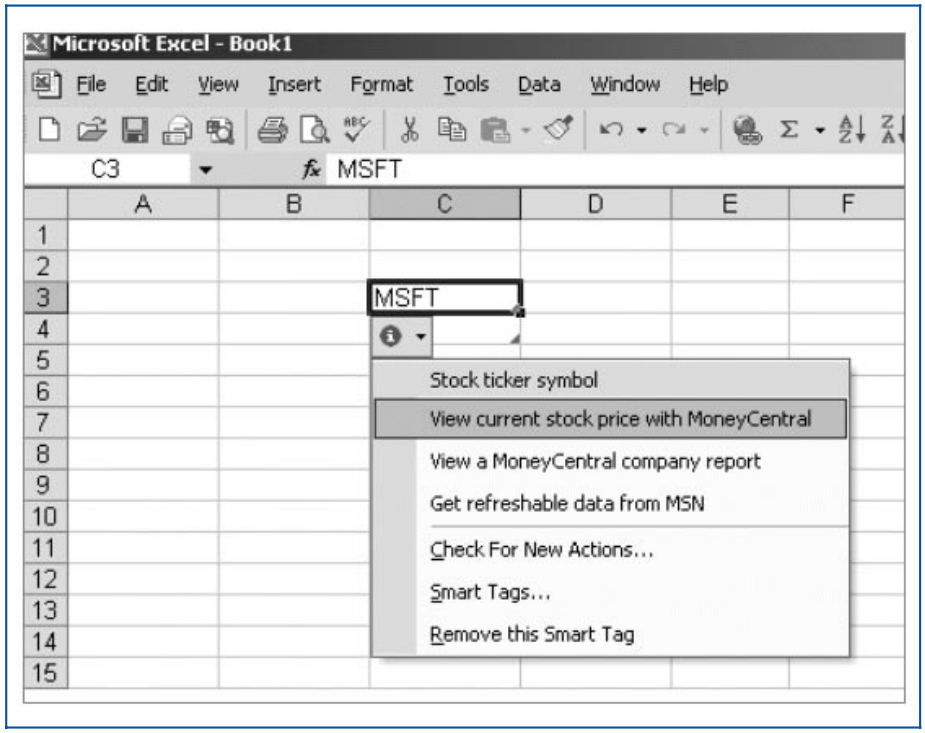
Office XP incorporates similar levels of protection as found in the recent security patches for Outlook 2000, with regard to preventing macro viruses from spreading. However, these features have been enhanced, and the default settings strengthened to further improve the feature. Administrators will now find it easier to prohibit the sending or receiving of attachments, and sending someone a data file with a Web link in it will normally result in the link being stripped out and replaced with a warning message.

Usability

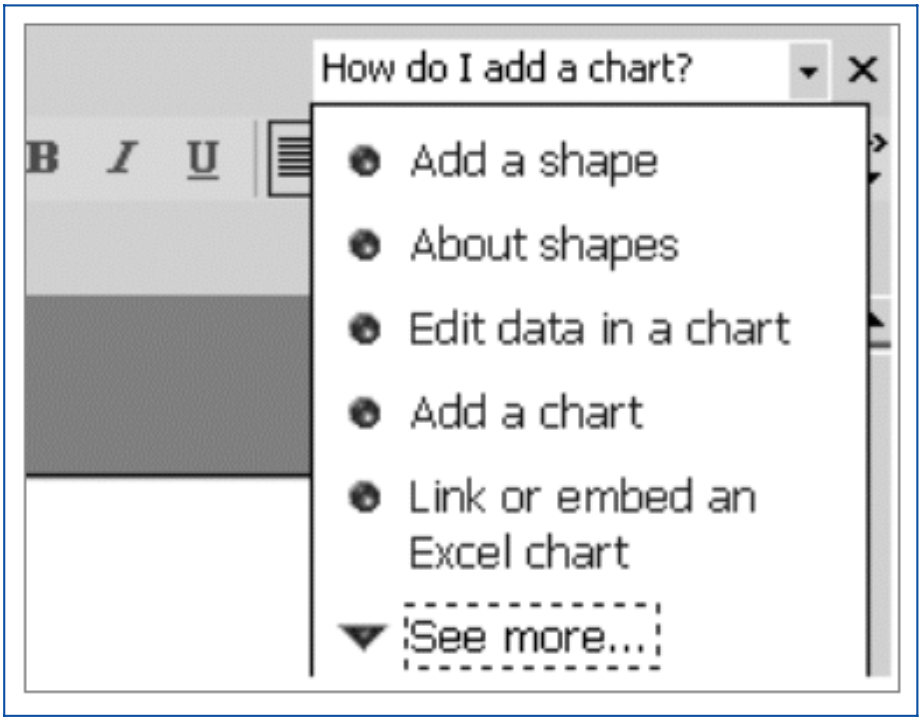
For the first time, you can select non-contiguous chunks of text within Word. Select a block; now hold down Ctrl and select some more text from somewhere else, and the first block remains selected. Also, the number of clipboards in Office XP has been raised from 12 in Office 2000 to 24. Pasting from one of the various clipboards is now more graphical, as sections of each can appear in a Task Pane. Also improved in Word is the way that auto-numbering works. This is now said to be more intuitive, and "to produce fewer undesired results". It is also now much easier to turn off the autocorrect feature, which should result in fewer complaints from users who keep finding that PC becomes Pc.

When you paste text into Word, you can choose to automatically apply the current document's formatting to the pasted text, to save having to edit it to match. This feature works surprisingly well in practice, especially when combined with a facility that will display in a Task Pane all the formatting options associated with a piece of selected text. This is useful for tracking down rogue formatting problems. Word now has an optional word-count toolbar that keeps track of the number of words, characters and paragraphs in the current document - this will appeal to journalists and students especially.

Improved help in a Task Pane.



Live Web queries in Excel.



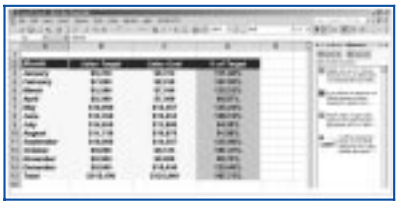
Excel help in a Task Pane.

One major problem users have had with Excel is that adding a row to a worksheet doesn't always update the formulae correctly. It's not uncommon to find annual expenses spreadsheets that only add up the months to November because December's row has not been included in the SUM formulae. Excel 2002 fixes this problem by warning users of such situations. Excel also includes other similar features to help users detect and fix errors in spreadsheets, such as the new formula auditing toolbar. There's also a watch window in which you can specify a list of cells from anywhere in a workbook that you wish to keep an eye on. Other welcome features include the way that all Outlook reminders are now listed in a single window, so if you return from a holiday you won't have a screen full of cascading windows to close. Plus, the Table of Contents generator can now automatically recognise headings without the need for users to apply styles, and a new watermark facility also makes its debut.

Product Activation

Much has been written about Product Activation. This is a rudimentary (my words) copy protection scheme which Microsoft is implementing for the first time in Office XP and Windows XP. It is designed to help prevent casual copying and lending of Office CDs. When you buy Office XP, the CD will contain a serial number as with Office 2000. Once you have installed the product it will run only 50 times, after which it will fall back into a reduced functionality mode in which you can view and print files but can't edit or create any. To prevent this happening, you have to activate the product, which you can do at any time after installation.

You do it by Internet or telephone (which takes around 10 seconds or 5 minutes, according to Microsoft). The activation system results in Microsoft being sent your CD serial number, plus a serial number based on information about the PC - for example, the last four digits of the processor's serial number. No personal data about the user is sent, says Microsoft, except that you are asked to state your country of origin. If this particular CD has not been registered before, details of the CD serial number and the PC serial number will be added to Microsoft's activation database and you will be issued with a matching activation key. Type in this key, and your Office XP installation is now permanently registered. It will not need renewing every year, despite what some press reports have claimed.



A Task Pane shows various clipboard entries.

If you ever need to re-install Office XP on the same PC, you can do it as many times as you like without needing to reactivate, as the PC serial number will not change.

However, if you need to move the Office installation to a new PC, or you upgrade the hard disk or motherboard or any other key component, the PC serial number will change and thus the re-install will fail. In this case, you need to reactivate the product by phone. Assuming the person on the other end of the line believes your story, and you haven't called dozens of times before, you will be issued with a new activation key. If the activation people think you're a pirate, they'll refuse your key. Microsoft has not, at the time of writing, released details of how this will work in practice, and whether an appeals procedure will be implemented for honest and trustworthy people who like upgrading their PCs every week.

If you are on a corporate Select licensing scheme, or similar, you will not have to activate each user's copy of the product. Instead, you use a different procedure that only needs to be performed once.

It remains to be seen what effect the product activation feature will have. It is far from 100% secure - pirate copies of Office XP were circulating on the Internet long before it was officially launched, and there are rumours about the existence of programs to defeat the activation system. Whether the amount of money that Microsoft saves in avoiding piracy exceeds the amount of goodwill that it loses by implying that it doesn't trust its customers will only become clear in time. However, if Microsoft's own figures are true, and 80% of installed copies of Office worldwide are pirated, then it's easy to understand why the company considers the need for such a feature.

For those that do not want to buy Office outright, Microsoft will also be launching a subscription service. Here, Office will be sold for a lower price, though the activation key will expire after a year. After this period, the software must be re-activted (at a price) or it will fall back into a mode where it will view and print existing files but not allow editing or creation.

Conclusion

I traditionally end reviews of new products by advising that, if you don't particularly need any of the new features, it's not worth upgrading. Although this is still the case with Office XP, the decision is not quite that simple. Sure, the language translation and the Task Panes are handy, as are the literally hundreds of other improvements that have been made and which I've not had space to cover fully. Some are serious, such as Outlook's ability to pull mail from Hotmail as well as any other POP3 server. And Office also has speech recognition for the first time, both for accessing menus and for dictating text. But some new features are less essential, such as the way you can animate objects in PowerPoint presentations and have them fly around the screen in any way you wish.

There are also other implications that you need to consider before rolling out Office XP. Are you geared up to manage the product activation procedures? Will you be planning to implement the new SharePoint collaboration features or will these remain unused and thus count as a waste of money? Being able to publish your Outlook calendar to a Web or intranet page, so people can see when you're free and busy, is probably not likely to appeal to any but the most techno-savvy companies. And yet another point to consider is that Office XP requires Windows 98 or above. It will not run on Windows 95.

From what I have seen of Office XP, it's a very impressive product, and Microsoft is certainly justified in claiming that it's better than 2000. But then, who would bother releasing a product that wasn't an improvement on the previous version? The hard task will be avoiding the hype and making up your own mind, based on your own company's circumstances and needs.

"78% of requests were for features actually already in the product. Microsoft has taken this to heart."

PCSA

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