A tour of OpenOffice alternatives
DIFFERENT DRUM

If OpenOffice is too fat and feature-rich for your taste, try one of the office alternatives. We found much to like and much to wish for when we put six office suites to the test.

BY MIRKO ALBRECHT

Linux was once without a full-featured office suite, but now several suites offer word processors, spreadsheets, and presentation tools for the Linux desktop. OpenOffice isn't the only solution – and probably it isn't even the best solution for many users. Some users object to OpenOffice's enormous memory requirements and lengthy start-up time; others simply don't need all of its various features.

Both free and commercial office suites have appeared over the past few years. Some packages grew under the umbrellas of the major GUI projects. In the Open Source area, the alternatives include KDE's KOffice suite, Gnome Office (which is actually a compilation of smaller standalone tools), and smaller alternatives such as Siag Office. The commercial, closed-source camp includes ThinkFree, SoftMaker, and the Applixware office suite by VistaSource, which was the first commercial office suite for Linux. We took a tour through some of these Linux office suites.

Applixware 6.0

Applixware has a fairly tumultuous history. Although it used to be one of the most popular, and significant, software packages on Linux, free distribution of the StarOffice suite helped determine the fate of a business that drew its revenue from commercial Linux office software. Applixware includes a word processor (Words), a spreadsheet application (Spreadsheets), a vector graphics application (Graphics), a presentation program (Presents), and a file manager of its own (Data). In addition to this, the suite includes a macro editor (Macroeditor), a developer environment for smaller programs (Builder), and even an email client (Mail).

VistaSource offers a fully functional 145 MB, 30-day time-bombed trial [1]. Unpack *applixware-6-x86-linux.zip* in your home directory and enter *cd ~/applixware-6-x86-linux* to change to the new directory.

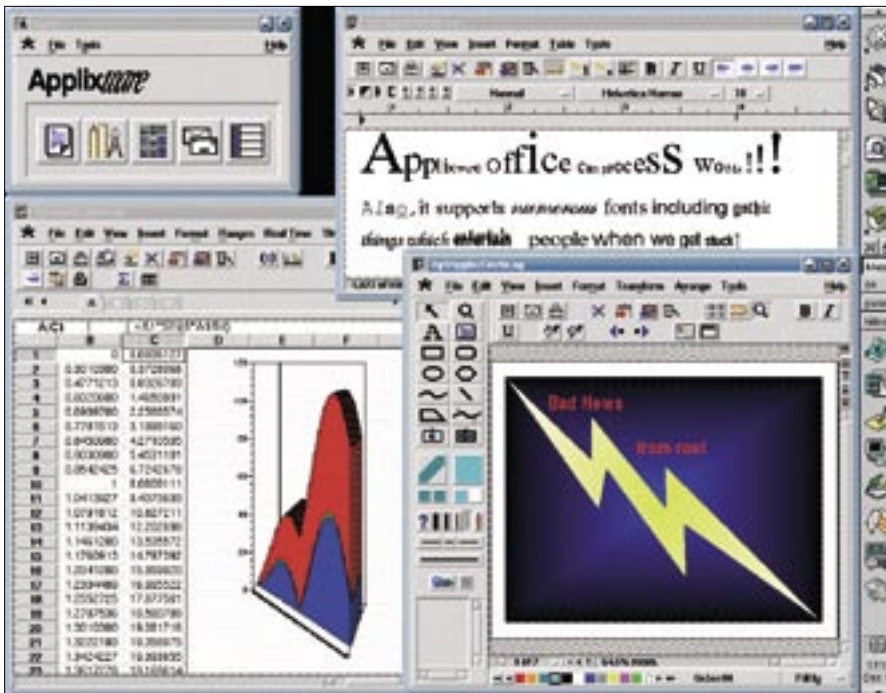If you intend to install the software globally, you will need root privileges.

Figure 1: Applixware, the office suite veteran.

Typing *./install* launches the small, console-based installer, which installs Applixware in */opt/applixware*. The vendor does not attempt to integrate the package with the system environment, leaving the users to manually set up links to the program and to the file extensions all on their own.

To launch the program initially, you need to pop up a command line and enter */opt/applixware/applix*. Doing so takes you to a dashboard with some icons for launching the Words, Spreadsheets, Data, Macroeditor, and the Builder programs.

You might expect to be able to access the other program modules via the *File* menu, but this will not be the case with this program. The asterisk next to *File* takes you to search results in a fairly non-intuitive manner.

Users who are familiar with KDE or Gnome will probably not appreciate the old-fashioned program interface. The fluttery background, which is made up of many dots, is strenuous for the eyes and you will quickly notice that the wheel on your mouse doesn't work in documents or the file manager.

From a usability point of view, the Applixware office suite is firmly rooted in the last millennium; the email program, unfortunately, is non-intuitive and provides only rudimentary functionality.

The suite's speed and set of features

are a different matter, and the program modules are nicely integrated. For example, if you double-click a graphic in the Applixware Words, the vector graphics drawing tool launches automatically. Spreadsheets tables can be easily embedded in other program modules.

The suite comprises a number of modules, including a mail merger, a module for tables of contents, a spellchecker, a thesaurus, and even a macro editor.

Unfortunately, many of the functions do not lend themselves to intuitive use. For example, Words does not auto-detect HTML links; instead, users are expected to call a time-consuming dialog to insert HTML links manually.

Also, Applixware looks a bit overloaded with the large number of dialogs added onto the program at various places.

The presentation program is an exception to this, however, because it has everything a

user needs for an important keynote presentation; the functions are quite easily accessed. In contrast to this, the database module is pretty unaccessible to the occasional users, unless the users happen to know their way around the command set of an Oracle database.

Although Applixware will read and export Microsoft's Word, Excel, and Powerpoint formats, it is unable to handle data from OpenOffice applications.

The Applixware help is a minor highlight. It not only provides tips for the individual applications, but also offers a learning tool to help remove the headaches from those important first steps with the office package.

Applixware: Conclusions

Although Applixware's set of features is fine for home users and many office users, its old-fashioned, non-intuitive user interface rules it out for users with modern distributions and state-of-the-art window managers.

In networks with older hardware, the office suite could still play a useful role, thanks to its execution speed and relatively large functional scope. However, professional users are likely to run up against Applixware's technical restrictions fairly quickly, especially with more complex layouts.

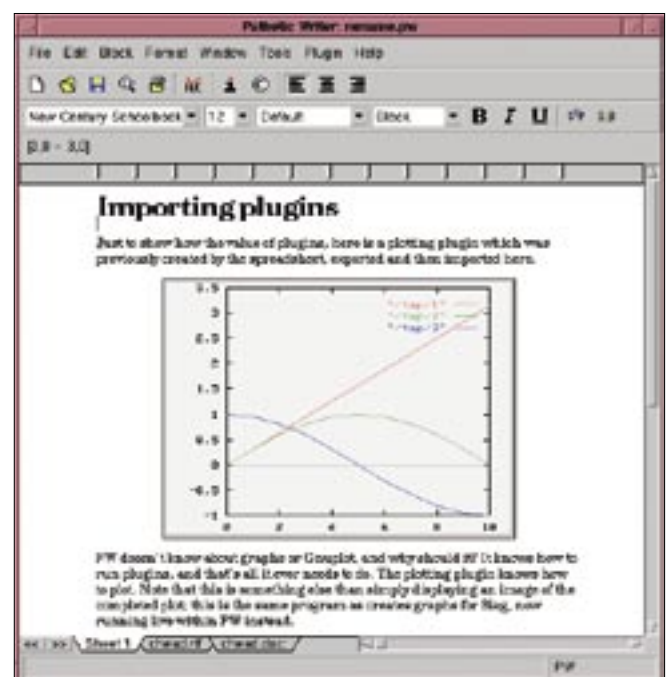In this light, the EUR 70 (US$ 90) asking price for a single license seems inappropriate, and we can expect to see the

Figure 2: Siag Office is hardly worth installing.

demise of the office suite that formerly populated DoD machines.

Siag Office 3.6.0

The only application to make more frugal use of system resources than Applixware is Siag Office, which makes the office package useful in combination with ancient machines with 386-class CPUs.

Besides the *siag-3.6.0.tar.gz* [3] program package itself, the homepage for the suite [2] has the *neXtaw* and *Mowitz* libraries, which you will also need to download. After unpacking the archive by typing *tar xfz Paketname*, become root, and follow the usual steps, *./configure && make && make install*, to install.

To set up the office package itself, you need the *netpbm* or *libnetpbm* package, which every popular distribution will typically install by default. To install Siag Office, again first unpack the archive, and then run the three usual commands. Before doing so, make sure you comment out line 26 in *~/siag-3.6.0/xegon/xegon.h* as follows:

```
/* extern AppData app_data; */
```

Keep in mind that if you don't do this, *make* will stop mid-way.

After completing the build stage, sit back and enjoy the view of a totally disappointing and hopelessly obsolete office package. Besides the Siag (*siag*) spreadsheet, which lends its name to the suite, there is the Pathetic Writer (*pw*) word processor, an animation and presentation tool (*egon*), a Postscript viewer (*gvu*), a file manager (*xfiler*), and a text editor (*xedplus*).

The Egon animation tool simply failed to execute in our test; when we tried to launch Egon, it terminated with a memory error. The remaining office suite components are no motivation for users to spend time bug squashing.

Pathetic Writer has only rudimentary functions for formatting simple texts. Although the suite can launch a calculator and insert the current Xclock tool output at the click of your mouse, the program is completely incapable of inserting a simple table.

Our attempt to open a Microsoft Word document with a lot of clipart failed, with Pathetic Writer showing the filenames rathe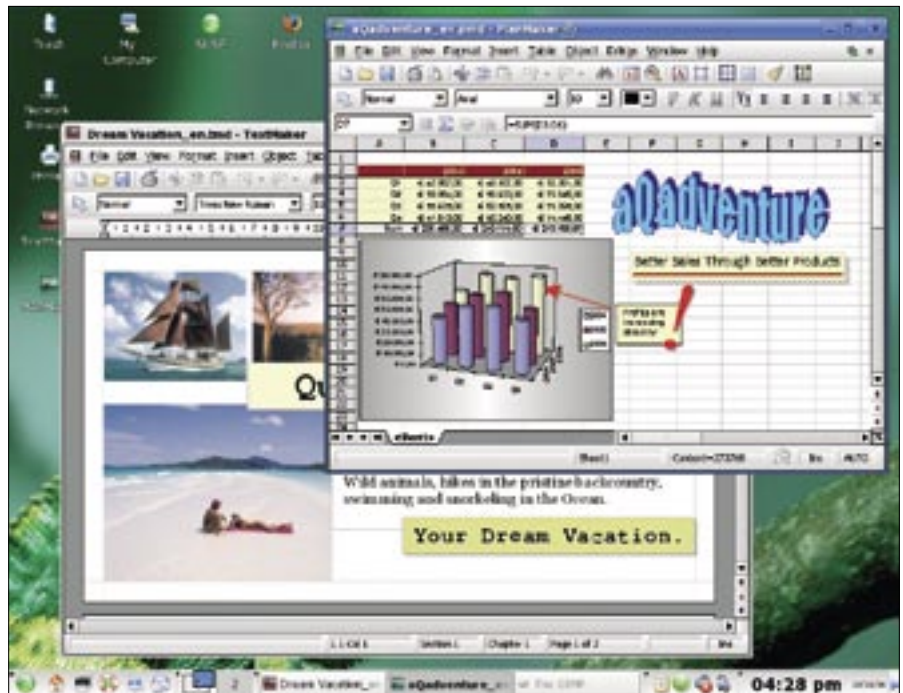r than the image content and storing the clipart images themselves as image files labeled *filename.xx* in the home folder.

Figure 3: SoftMaker Office 2004 offers a word processor and spreadsheet, but it lacks a drawing program and database tool.

The Siag spreadsheet also takes some getting used to. For example, you can't press the Tab key to navigate between cells, and you have to press Enter to complete input in a cell and move to the next cell. Generally speaking, its set of features is insufficient for normal chores.

The Xfiler file manager is ridden with buggy graphics, and mouse actions are restricted to selecting files or folders. Double clicking will not open a file; instead, users are expected to press Enter.

Siag Office: Conclusions

I can't imagine anybody being happy with the Siag Office package. Numerous errors and the complexities of the installation process will soon have you looking for a more usable solution.

SoftMaker Office 2004

The current Linux version of commercial office software by Nuremberg-based SoftMaker (Germany) is not really a full-fledged office package. In contrast to the Windows version, the Linux package, which sells for EUR 70 (US$ 70), lacks the easy-to-use database application, containing only the PlanMaker spreadsheet and the TextMaker word processor. Unfortunately, SoftMaker does not have a graphics program.

If you are interested in trying out Soft-Maker Office, you can download the 30-day trial [4] from the SoftMaker homepage. The two 16 and 17MB archive files contain the stand-alone versions of Text-Maker 2002 and PlanMaker 2002, which together form SoftMaker Office 2004 for Linux. A newer version, SoftMaker Office 2006 for Linux, is currently still under development.

Drop the two .tgz archives with the TextMaker files into your preferred installation directory, for example, */opt*, */usr/local* or your home directory, and unpack the archives. You can now launch TextMaker by changing to the *textmakertrial* directory and typing *./tml*. The PlanMaker spreadsheet is located in *planmakertrial*, where you can launch it by typing *./planmaker*.

Like Applix, SoftMaker does not automatically integrate the two programs with KDE, leaving some manual work for the users. However, the word processor does give users an excellent collection of features. Even a complex thesis – including a structure, formatting, and footnotes – is no problem for the Text-Maker. The functions are intuitively located in menus where users would expect them to be, demonstrating a Redmond-oriented style.

Unfortunately, SoftMaker is incapable of exporting documents to PDF and does

not support collaboration on projects. It does not have a comment function or any other form of highlighting for revised passages. On a more positive note, the word processor does have a *File | Send* menu item for dispatching the current document by email. By default, TextMaker suggests Sendmail as the mail agent. You are able to enter the command line for your preferred mail client in the *service* box.

TextMaker has a database interface for mass mail, but unfortunately, the interface lacks a wizard, leaving users to click and point to add field operators to their documents. You'll find a usable sample database in dBASE format to simplify the process.

The manufacturer promises a fast program, and TextMaker fulfills that promise. The application launches quickly and lets users work fluently, with the exception of the spellchecker – searches for synonyms are particularly slow. This said, the spellchecker runs in the background and underlines errors in red. Besides the spellchecker, TextMaker also has a handy thesaurus. Just like in Applixware, TextMaker has a separate dialog for hyperlinks.

The PlanMaker spreadsheet has more than 320 functions, according to the manufacturer, which is more than enough for typical office chores. The spreadsheet has the comment functions that TextMaker lacks. Menus are nicely arranged in PlanMaker, and although the tool lacks drag and drop support, you can use *Copy* and *Paste* to insert document elements into the other program of the suite.

Both SoftMaker programs loaded Word and Excel documents perfectly in most cases, although longer files with a complex structure may have a slightly different layout. The programs do not support the OpenOffice project formats.

Instead of a manual, SoftMaker comes with a 1.5 MB PDF file, which is fine for typical problems.

SoftMaker: Conclusions

To make an office suite from the Soft-Maker products, SoftMaker would need to develop a presentation tool and a drawing tool. The current drawing tool is restricted to a menu item for drawing lines, rectangles, and ellipses. Use in productive office environments is re-

stricted because office staff will continually need to resort to external applications that SoftMaker Office lacks. Private users without artistic ambitions will discover a fast and clear-cut alternative to OpenOffice in TextMaker and PlanMaker, with all the major functionality (and more) for rock-solid word processing and spreadsheet-based chores.

ThinkFree Office 3.1

As an office suite written entirely in Java, ThinkFree Office (TFO) aims to convince users that a free choice of platform does not necessarily imply loss of flexibility and performance.

A license for the commercial office package costs about EUR 35 (US$ 35). A 30-day trial of the current version 3.1 is available from the website [5]; the download size is about 87 MB. What you get is a self-extracting shell script that you will probably want to launch as root in a console window. Doing so launches a GUI-based installation wizard.

From here on in, the whole suite looks very much like a Microsoft Office clone with a thin coat of Java on top. Even the ThinkFree logo is reminiscent of Win-

dows with respect to color and shape. This said, the installer guides users intuitively and safely through the setup procedure. Although ThinkFree is written in Java, ThinkFree Office integrates well with KDE.

The installer will set up icons on your desktop, or a context menu entry labeled *Open with Thinkfree Write*. It drops an applet icon into the KDE kicker, thus giving users quick access to the three programs – Write (word processor), Calc (spreadsheet), and Show (presentations) – and to the preferences for the program.

You can also configure automatic loading of the TFO quick starter in the preferences dialog. However, the developers slipped up slightly here, putting a link to the quick starter in the KDE autostart folder so that a second copy of the quick starter appears in the panel the next time you launch KDE. Just remove the link from *~/.kde/Autostart*, and, if necessary, check the checkbox in the preferences dialog; then the function should work perfectly.

Users would probably not notice that ThinkFree Office is written in Java, apart from the typical Java-style dialogs in the
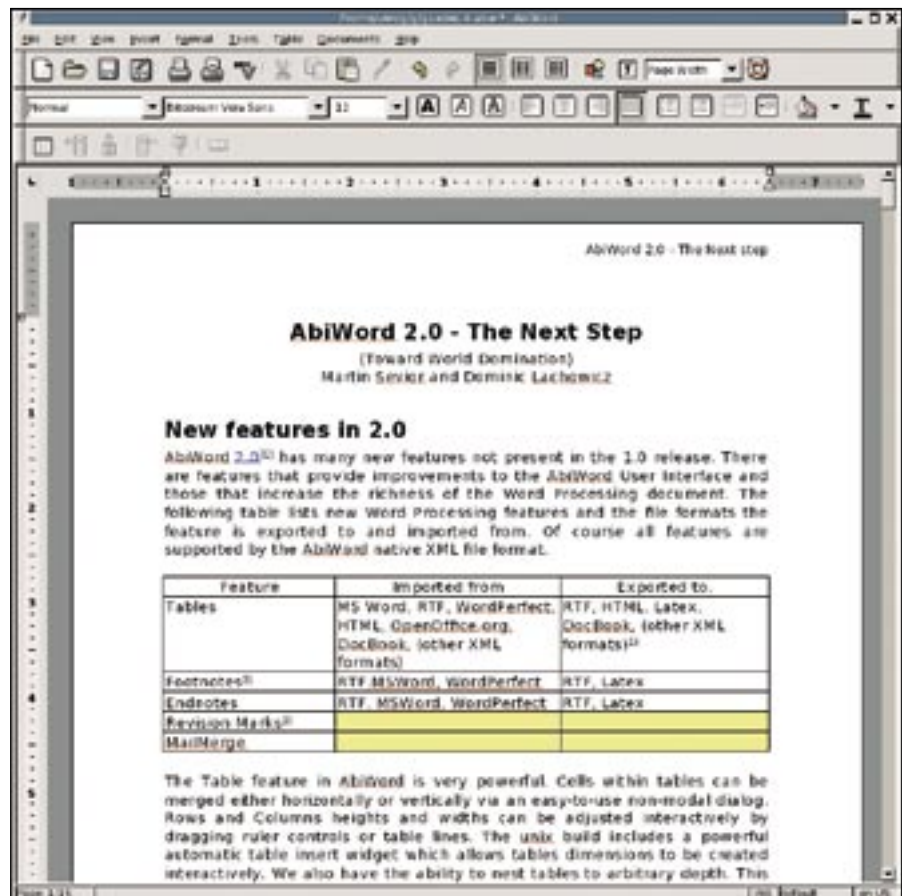

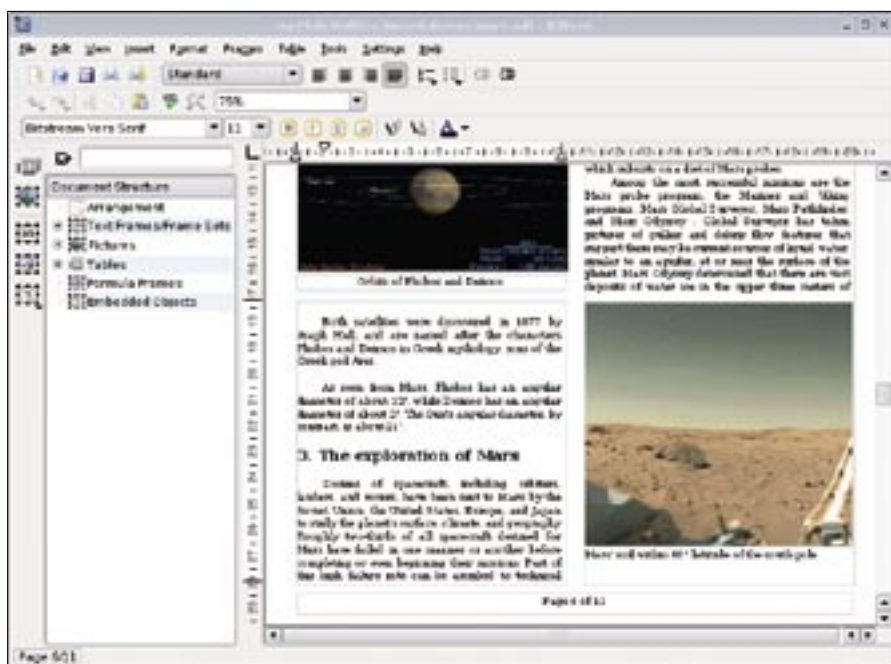**Figure 4: Gnome Office includes the AbiWord word processor.**

Figure 5: KWord is one of the 11 applications included in the KOffice suite.

and wizards to reduce the learning curve for newcomers.

Presentations can be stored in Microsoft Powerpoint format, HTML, PDF, or scalable vector format (SVG). The Write and Calc programs use the Microsoft formats (DOC, XLS), PDF, and SVG. Again, the suite can't load OpenOffice document formats.

ThinkFree Office has HTML-based help, although most features are intuitive enough to make help unnecessary.

ThinkFree: Conclusions

The ThinkFree Office suite creates a good first impression. One of Think-Free's major strengths is its good system integration and platform-independent support. There is even an online version of the office suite [6], which is still beta and requires broadband Internet access.

On closer inspection, TFO's deficits become more apparent, and they make it difficult to recommend the suite as a good alternative to office packages in production environments.

Home users familiar with the Microsoft Word format will discover a well-programmed alternative in the Think-Free software, assuming they are prepared to foot the US$ 35 bill.

Gnome Office

Just like SoftMaker Office, Gnome Office, which includes just the AbiWord word processor and the Gnumeric spreadsheet, is not really a complete office suite. Of course, you could consider the Gimp image manipulation software and the GnuCash finance program to be part of the suite, although they have a different user interface and they are under separate development.

The best way to set up AbiWord and Gnumeric is to use the repositories for your distribution. If you opted to install the Gnome desktop, these two programs

file manager. All three programs are fast enough and launch quickly, thanks to the quick starter. The quick starter does not use anything near the amount of memory that OpenOffice uses. However, you can expect delays of a couple of seconds when opening larger files with 300 pages or more.

The Adobe PDF icon is really refreshing: ThinkFree is the only one of the three commercial office suites capable of converting documents to the portable file format. Besides this, the developers have integrated the package so well with the system environment that it is no problem to dispatch the active document via KMail.

The word processor has sufficient functionality to support most kinds of documents, including specialist publications. Write has an automatic table of contents creation feature, supports footnotes, and has on-the-fly spellchecking that includes auto-correction. However,

the current version does not have mail merge support – in fact, it doesn't even seem to envisage support for field names from external data sources – and there are no signs of collaboration features at the present time.

The Calc spreadsheet comes with a useful diagram creation wizard. Its set of features should be sufficient for daily office chores and more than enough for home use. The various functions for drawing figures (*Drawing* toolbar) compensate for the lack of a dedicated graphics application and are sufficient for home use, at least.

The Show presentation tool also performed well, letting users put presentations together with a couple of simple mouse clicks, and also helping them keep track of the results in an interface that displays both the text content and the finished slides. Users have many slide design and transition options, however, the program does lack templates

Office package	Installation	Manual/Help	Look and Feel	Package scope	Functionality	Speed/Stability	Price (approx.)
Applixware	●●●○○	●●●●●	●●○○○	●●●●●	●●●●○	●●●●●	EUR 70 (US$ 90)
Siag Office	●○○○○	●○○○○	●○○○○	●●○○○	●○○○○	●●●○○	free
SoftMaker Office	●●●○○	●●●●●	●●●○○	●●○○○	●●●●○	●●●●●	EUR 70 (US$ 70)
ThinkFree Office	●●●●○	●●○○○	●●●●○	●●●○○	●●●●○	●●●●○	EUR 35 (US$ 35)
Gnome Office	●●●●●	●●○○○	●●●●○	●●○○○	●●●○○	●●●●○	free
KOffice	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●○	●●●●●	free

Table 1: Overview of Office Alternatives

should be pre-installed. This is also a good way to avoid integration issues: the program icons appear where you would expect them in the menu structure, and the context menu has an option for opening files directly.

AbiWord has everything you would expect from a simple word processor, including features such as automatic table of contents generation, footnotes, headers and footers, and complex formatting. This is more than enough for occasional texts or letters. A collection of templates for letters, faxes, and other documents help users take care of these tasks.

What AbiWord doesn't have are advanced features for a productive office, or a usable mail merge function. Although you can insert mail merge field commands into documents, and select *Tools | Mail merge* to import the data from a CSV file, for example, it is impossible to position the fields precisely. AbiWord does have an option for highlighting modifications, but it lacks any other collaboration features.

The application has an amazing number of import filters. Of all the office programs we tested, AbiWord claims to understand the most formats. A practical test showed this claim is unfounded.

When we attempted to import Open-Office documents, tables just disappeared; we discovered that it was a similar story when we tried to import and export other formats. The link tool below *Tools* for online querying (Wikipedia, Google) of selected passages, and the ability to open images directly in Gimp are useful.

The Gnumeric spreadsheet, though, creates a far better impression. It includes more than 300 integrated formulas, which easily covers most users' needs. You can drag and drop graphs to AbiWord and to OpenOffice. Furthermore, the versatile diagram tool supports a variety of formats.

Gnome Office – Conclusions

The two components, AbiWord and Gnumeric, leave users with mixed impressions. Occasional typers will be happy with AbiWord's feature scope; professional users will want something more substantial.

Gnumeric has more in the line of functionality, but it is fairly isolated as a standalone application. Gnome Office

does not have a presentation tool. The database functions [7] are not accessible to normal users.

KOffice 1.5.2

The KDE office suite, KOffice [8], is licensed under the GPL, like KDE itself, and has reached version 1.5.2. Suse users can visit the OpenSuse project KDE repository for the latest version [9]. KOffice includes 11 components that cover any office application you can imagine:
• KWord (word processor)
• KSpread (spreadsheet)
• KChart (flowcharts)
• Kivio (diagrams and flowcharts)
• KPresenter (presentation program)
• Kexi (database)
• KPlato (planning tool)
• Krita (image manipulation software)
• Karbon (vector graphics)
• Kugar (report designer)
• KFormular (form editor)
This makes KOffice by far the most substantial office suite of all our candidates; it even includes a workspace known as the KOffice Workspace.

The word processor, the spreadsheet, and the presentation program are core components of the suite and fine for most users. KOffice's mass mailer harnesses the power of an intuitive interface to KAddressbook. Other functions, like web link following and email, or the ability to load third-party formats in KDE programs, considerably improve the office package's user friendliness.

This said, each of the programs offers too little individual functionality to survive in an office environment. For example, users are expected to extend default templates themselves, to modify the font size in footnotes, for example. The ability to read, process, and export PDF documents could turn out to be the killer feature. Support for simple documents works fine, but KOffice fails with more complex documents, just like it fails to handle Microsoft Office formats.

Private users might be confused by the sheer numbers of applications under the KOffice umbrella. It is obvious where this fairly young office suite is heading: KOffice aims to become the most comprehensive office package for Linux in the future. To do so, it will need either a KOffice module, or at least an integrated KDE application for daily office chores. KOffice 2.0 will take the development

team one step closer to achieving this goal, but this ambitious project is still a long way to the finishing line.

Conclusions

Of all the office alternatives we tested, no single suite is really capable of completely satisfying the requirements of a professional office environment. In fact, there seems to be no perfect alternative to OpenOffice.

Applixware comes closest with respect to its set of features and functionality. However, there has been a clear lack of development and enhancement work over the past few years, which has put what used to be a major office suite quite firmly on a slow track. Siag Office does not warrant further consideration, being unusable for the most part.

The commercial packages by Soft-Maker and ThinkFree are an alternative for home users; both packages offer sufficient features and better performance than OpenOffice.

The only application worthy of note in Gnome Office is the Gnumeric spreadsheet; AbiWord has the smallest feature scope, with the exception of Pathetic Writer by Siag. This said, AbiWord is usable for basic word-processing tasks.

For home users, KOffice is probably the best alternative to the giant Open-Office project because of its perfect KDE integration, functionality, use of system resources, and a roadmap that promises focused development in the future. ■

INFO

[1] Applixware download: *http://www.vistasource.com/vs2/en/downloads.php*

[2] Siag Office: *http://siag.nu/*

[3] Siag Office download: *ftp://siag.nu/pub/siag/*

[4] SoftMaker Office: *http://www.softmaker.com/english/of_en.htm*

[5] ThinkFree Office download: *http://product.thinkfree.com/download/dl_linux.jsp*

[6] ThinkFree Office online:*http://www.thinkfree.com/common/signin.tfo*

[7] Gnome Office: *http://www.gnome.org/gnome-office/*

[8] KOffice: *http://www.koffice.org*

[9] KOffice RPMs for Suse: *http://repos.opensuse.org/KDE:/KDE3/*