

Extending OpenOffice.org

BEYOND THE DESKTOP



Microsoft has been quite successful with pushing its SharePoint technology as a means for supporting document collaboration and version control. Until now, no direct competitors have come up with a viable alternative to SharePoint, but O3Spaces is about to change that.

BY DMITRI POPOV

Although the O3Spaces Workplace collaboration software doesn't attempt to emulate SharePoint feature-by-feature, it does provide a viable alternative [1]. Two features of O3Spaces make it especially useful for mixed environments. First, O3Spaces Workplace does support the Microsoft Office suite, which is a boon for companies and workgroups that use MS Office and OpenOffice. Second, O3Spaces Workplace's competitive pricing makes it an attractive alternative, even for shops running only Microsoft Office. The O3Spaces company has even pledged to release an open-source edition of their document collaboration solution by the end of 2007.

Installation Options

O3Spaces Workplace installs in three ways. The easiest way is to download a VMware virtual machine trial from O3Spaces' website. The image includes

a slimmed-down version of Ubuntu with the pre-configured version of the O3Spaces Workplace software. This solution is perfect if you want to try O3Spaces without fiddling with installation and configuration – provided you have hardware that is powerful enough to run the virtual machine. The full ver-

sion of O3Spaces Workplace comes as a Workspace Deployment Kit containing a set of scripts and server packages that you can use to install O3Spaces on your own server. O3Spaces Workplace is written in Java, and it's based on the Tomcat/PostgreSQL stack, so you have to install these components on your server to

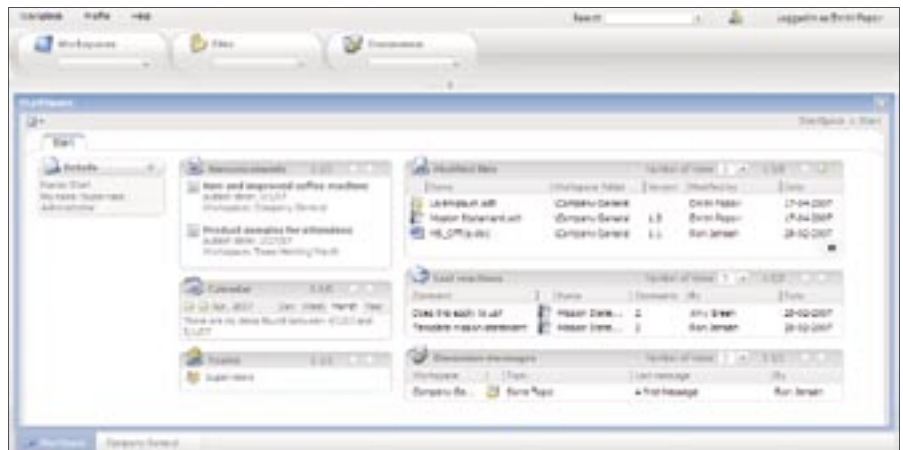


Figure 1: The Start screen of Workplace Spaces.

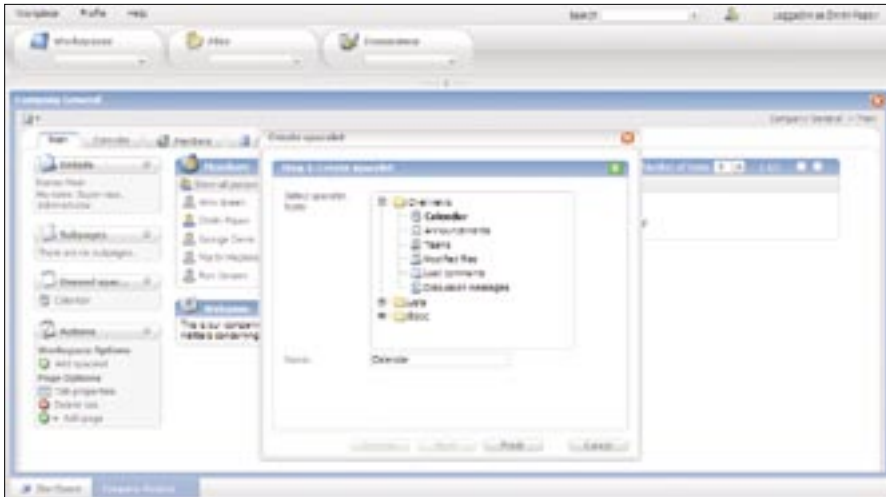


Figure 2: Adding a new spacelet to a workspace is a matter of a few clicks.

deploy O3Spaces. You can instead opt for a Linux distribution that includes O3Spaces. For example, Mandriva and O3Spaces have made a deal to distribute the software with Mandriva's Corporate Server 4 and Mandriva Linux Powerpack + 2007 Spring. Finally, O3Spaces is available as an easy-to-use installer package for the Windows platform.

The Anatomy of O3Spaces

The O3Spaces solution consists of three components: Workplace Spaces, Workplace Studio, and Workplace Assistant. The Workplace Spaces component acts as a web-based interface to the application. The key concept of Workplace Spaces is a workspace, which is a working area and a document repository created for a particular task or project. Each workspace consists of a number of containers called spacelets. A spacelet can contain a list of recent files, a calendar, an announcement list, etc. For example, when you log in to Workplace Spaces, you are presented with the *StartSpace*

containing spacelets that provide a list of recently modified documents, upcoming appointments, a list of discussion threads, and so on.

To make workspaces more manageable, Workplace Spaces has a few nifty features. First, you can jump quickly to a particular workspace by selecting it from the Workspaces drop-down list in the *Navigation* bar at the top of the window. The *Files* and *Discussions* drop-down lists let you jump to a desired file repository or discussion forum, respectively. Each workspace opens in a separate tab, and you can quickly jump to any opened workplace by clicking on its tab. This feature can come in handy when you have multiple workspaces opened at the same time. Each workspace can contain a number of tabs, which allows you to group and manage different spacelets.

It is easy to customize the workspaces, and there are many customization options. You can move spacelets around the workspace by dragging them with the mouse, you can create new spacelets, and you can group them by adding new tabs and pages. For example, say you want to add a new tab and place a calendar spacelet under it. In the upper-left corner of the workspace, click the *Menu* icon and choose *Edit workspace*. This puts the workspace into the editing mode, and you should see a few additional modules, including *Subpages*, *Unused spacelets*, and *Actions*. In the *Actions* module, click on the *Add page* item, select the *New Tab* option, enter "Calendar" into the *Tab name* field, and press *OK*. This adds a new Calendar tab. Next, click on the *Add spacelet* link, select *Calendar* in the *Create spacelet* dialog window, and press *Finish*. Then click on the *Calendar* tab, right-click on the *Calendar* item in the *Unused spacelets* module, and select the *Place on page* item. This adds the calendar spacelet under the Calendar tab.

The most important aspect of Workplace Spaces is its document-management capabilities, which has all the necessary features you need to manage files and work with documents. On the file-management front, Workplace Spaces allows you to upload documents easily, move them around, and organize them in folders. The context menus allow you to cut and paste files as in a conventional file manager, and you can also lock and download the selected file.

O3Spaces Editions

The O3Spaces solution comes in three editions: Professional, On Demand, and Open. The Professional Edition is a version that can be installed and deployed on a local server and is licensed on a subscription basis. The On Demand edition is a hosted version of the solution, and the Open edition is the open source version of the O3Spaces software (it's expected to become available sometime in 2007). A detailed overview of the differences between these editions is available at the company's website [2].

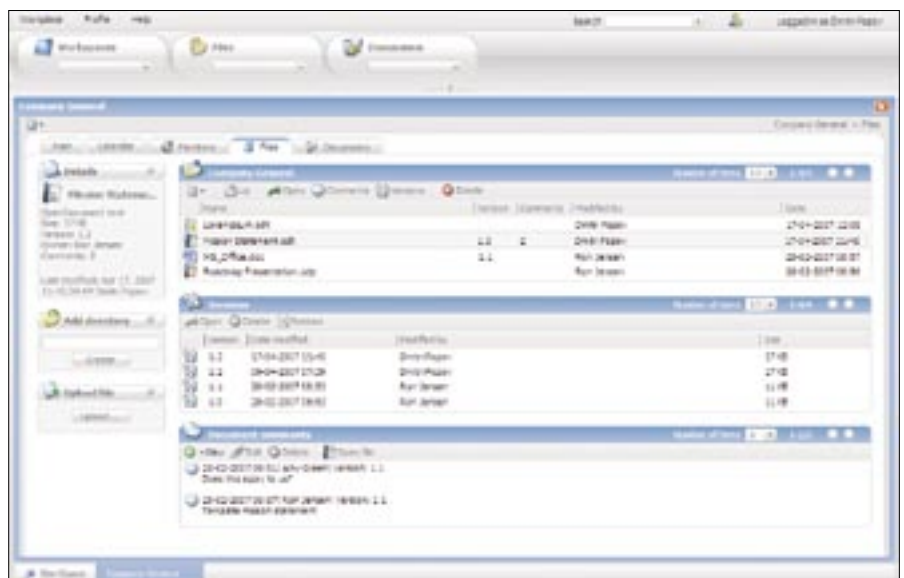


Figure 3: Workplace Spaces provides a comprehensive set of document management features.

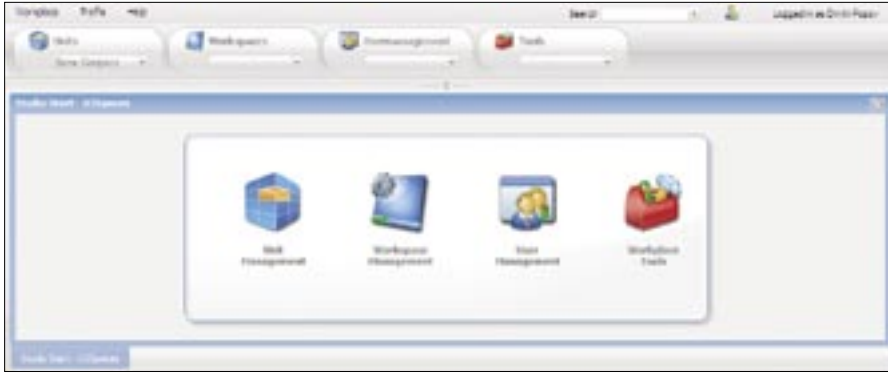


Figure 4: The Workplace Studio provides a web-based administration interface.

With the use of Workplace Spaces' version-tracking capabilities, you can easily keep tabs on all the document's versions as well as roll back a document to a previous version. Of course, Workplace Spaces also allows you to add, read, and manage comments attached to a particular document. As you might expect, Workplace Spaces sports a powerful indexing and search feature that allows you to search inside the documents (including PDF files) as well as document versions, discussions, and document comments.

Although Workplace Spaces provides all the features you need to keep tabs on your projects and manage documents, its real power lies in its tight integration with the OpenOffice.org and Microsoft Office suites. The tool that makes this possible is the Workplace Assistant. When you log in to Workplace Spaces, you can enable the Workplace Assistant. The first time you do that, the system launches the Workplace Assistant installer that installs a desktop utility as well as an OpenOffice.org extension. The

Workplace Assistant utility does two important things: it allows you to jump quickly to a particular Workspace directly from the Desktop, and it acts as a link between Workplace Spaces and OpenOffice.org.

Once the Workplace Assistant is up and running, it sits quietly in the tray doing its job. To open a document with the Workplace Assistant, right-click on its icon and select the desired workspace from the *My Workspaces* menu. This opens the specified workspace in your browser, and you can open the document you want by double-clicking on it. The Workplace extension that the system installs into OpenOffice.org provides even more seamless integration with Workplace Spaces. Using the extension, you can easily open any document from any available workspace directly from within OpenOffice.org by simply choosing *File | Open* from Workspace and selecting the document you want. With the *File | Publish document* command, you can also upload a new OpenOffice.org document to a workspace. The extension

also allows you to view comments attached to the currently opened document and access a list of available versions of the document. When you open a document from a workspace, the Assistant automatically locks it, so no one except you can edit it. Once you're done editing the document, save and close it; the Assistant saves the document in the workspace as a new version.

Workplace Studio is the third piece of the solution that provides a web-based administration interface. The Start screen of the Workplace Studio provides access to essential administration features like *Workspace Management*, which gives you access to the tools necessary to manage workspaces, and *User Management* for keeping tabs on users.

Although O3Spaces is a complex solution, the Workplace Studio makes its administration straightforward. The Workplace Studio has a few nifty features that make the process of managing workspaces and users more efficient. For example, instead of creating every new workspace manually, the administrator can create a set of workspace templates that can be used to quickly set up new workspaces. Creating a workspace template is easy, too. To create a new template and create a new main page, press the *Add* button, then use the *Actions* module to add new spacelets to the page. The *Properties* dialog box lets you configure the spacelets' settings, and you can create additional tabs and pages to group the added spacelets.

Final Word

There's little to fault in O3Spaces. It offers a polished and customizable interface, as well as seamless integration with OpenOffice.org and Microsoft Office. Its administration tools make the maintenance tasks easy enough for the average user, and O3Spaces' pricing makes the whole package an attractive alternative to SharePoint for small- and medium-sized businesses. Moreover, O3Spaces has the potential to turn OpenOffice.org into a serious player in the document exchange and collaboration scene. ■

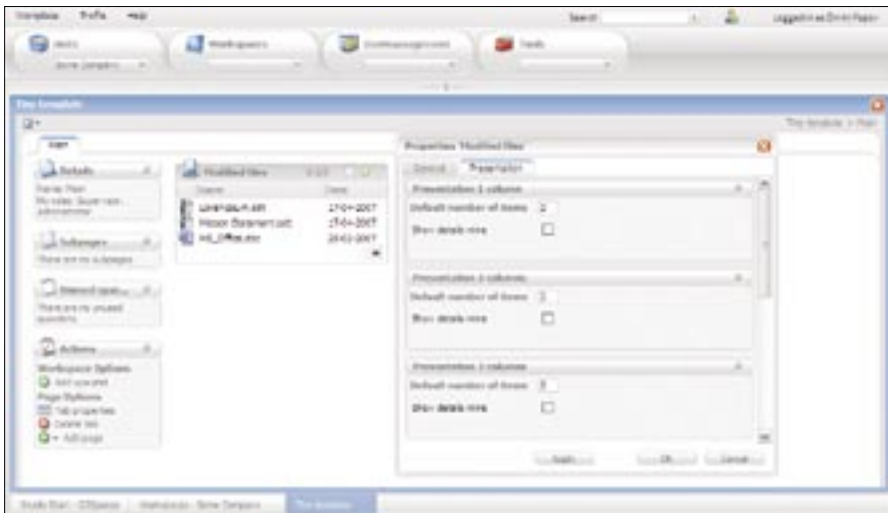


Figure 5: Setting up a new workspace template.

INFO

[1] O3Spaces: <http://o3spaces.com/>

[2] O3Spaces Editions: <http://o3spaces.com/Page/sp32/ncttrue/index.html>