

Sounding Off About "Office"

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We asked for reader suggestions, and you certainly obliged. Here are more complete versions of the letters that appear in the July 5, 1999, issue of Business Week as well as a broad sampling of additional letters you sent in. Thanks to everyone who responded.

I mourned the day my company switched from Lotus and WordPerfect to Office. The scam of unneeded upgrades every two years is bad enough, but the complexity of Microsoft Word is maddening. Formatting and editing commands are not intuitive. In fact, they are downright dumb, as are the default settings that suddenly capitalize letters and insert indents that don't work. For home, school, and small businesses, Appleworks for the Mac has great appeal. Their spreadsheet and database are probably too simple for big corporations, but the word processor is great, and in integration of the other applications works smoothly.

Quinn Dahlstrom
Bonney Lake, Wash.

We'll, you're right to be championing "Office Lite," but you're wrong to be dismissing Microsoft Works for the job. Sure it has many inadequacies, but saying it needs features X, Y, and Z to warrant your recommendation is to set your steps in the direction that led to Office 2000 bloatware.

I've long championed Works as a viable alternative to Office for most organizations. Among its many advantages are the short learning curve for its few and basic features. That's a big payoff that quickly adds many multiples to the big cost saving in initial purchase.

Office really only provides a payoff for organizations that need its vast-teams-assemble-vast-projects features.

Peter Norton

Los Angeles

Norton is a pioneer PC programmer and author of numerous books on PC software.

Yes! Definitely! Office Lite with full interchangeability with my office Office, but less facilities and a home price (around half the current?) would be just great. But I reckon the main obstacle is: How many Office sales would such a product cannibalize?

Ole G. Stenhagen

Oslo

Thank you for addressing the issue of bloated software. Your premise that most users do not use many of the advanced features of current software is right on target. Microsoft's premise that trimmed-down versions of its software would not be sellable may be correct, though not necessarily because the software would have fewer features.

I believe the real problem to be a "file format" problem rather than an "application" problem. Microsoft's dominance in the market means that they are setting the standard for both the application (and its features) and for the file format as well.

In the videotape battles of the last decade, the VHS format won out over the Beta format. Once the format was standardized, many different manufacturers were able to produce machines that were able to read and write to this format regardless of the number of features that a particular machine had. Today, a VHS tape produced on a \$600 VCR laden with many features can be played on a \$69 VCR player with no features, without having to do anything different to the tape or to the machine.

If software manufacturers agreed to create a standard word processing file format, then any word processing application could open it. To make this approach work effectively, each manufacturer would have to agree

that this standard file format would be the default file format for their application and that their application would clearly indicate to the user which advanced features [were nonstandard.] A user of an application that did not have the features could still open the file and read it and write to it with no conversion necessary. The rich text (.rtf) format works somewhat this way now, though no software manufacturers use this as the default.

Gerald R. Popelka
Communication Sciences Lab
Washington University
St. Louis

You are absolutely correct less would be more. But you don't go far enough. Let's unbundle the whole suite, and sell the components separately, each, however, with sufficient Internet access to for-pay sites where other components of the ex-suite could be used on a needs basis.

When I started my home consulting law librarian business 13 years ago after a long academic career, I used the first suite (though the term was not used then) PFS: First Choice. I used the word processor for memos, the spreadsheet for my books, the database for invoices and address books, and later, but still in the 80s, a communications module for CompuServe, and a Harvard Graphics-based watered-down presentations module.

Then I discovered WordPerfect 4.2, and that was the end of my use of the First Choice word processor. Then along came Quicken and then Quickbooks. You can see the direction this is moving in.

The point is for those of us whose business needs do not require intimate integration of component modules in the suite, our preference is to pick the best program in each component category, and to take only those we can use effectively. The rest of the integration we need will come on the Internet, and each component should encourage that use.

Tell that to Microsoft, Corel, and Lotus/IBM.

Richard L. Bowler
Albuquerque

You bet I would buy a simplified version of MS Office if it was available! I have longed for a simpler version of this for years. For most of my needs, I would imagine I don't use 80% of the individual programs' features. I have never used MS Works because of its incompatibility with Office, although it sounds like it is a pretty good program. If I could only get my company thinking in this direction .

Included must be a word processor, spreadsheet, something like PowerPoint (becoming more and more important), but also definitely needs a database. Something like FileMaker Pro would be ideal for its ease of use.

Lobby hard. I have a feeling there are thousands of people just like me and you who think the same.

Patrick McKeon
Chicago

I could not agree more and have been grouching about complexity gone wild for two decades. I concur exactly with your approach, except that I would provide advanced features as a library of plug-ins that users could buy to tailor the applications to their needs. It irritates me daily to start up and fly my 747 just to go to the corner chemist.

Phil Mitchell
Canberra, Australia

I would like to point out that the result of the versatility of this new software, for example embedding pictures in an Excel worksheet, is due to a new programming architecture (common object model, or COM) that Microsoft has been introducing over the past few years or so. This

"object-oriented" programming allows files, sometimes in the "infamous" DLL (dynamic linked library) representation, to be more intelligent. That is, the program does not have to care what the file it is using is or what to do with it. The file or "object" has properties and methods associated with it. For example, a method can be the function to use to display its content. Therefore, the Excel program knows how to process a worksheet "object," and when you want to embed a picture, it loads the file with the picture in it, which knows it has to call the appropriate program to display.

That is why you can have pictures embedded in Excel or Word or a program I write using this architecture. If I never use this feature, then I might do without the DLL associated with this feature. These libraries are only loaded as they are used. I believe that Microsoft has to be commended for the flexibility of Office 2000 and the adoption of the COM technology, which is bringing to market very good programs at lower costs. You can always tailor your MS Office so that you do not load this stuff to disk when you install.

Jorge Rodriguez Suarez
Madrid

Your magazine has said publicly what millions of Office users feel but can't quite articulate. The Office juggernaut is out of control.

I started word processing 20 years ago on my Commodore 64 and have been upgrading ever since. Recently, I installed Office 97 on my home PC, simply because it's the standard package at work. Although Office 97 is more HTML-orientated, I can't find anything it does better than Office 95. What's worse, because I retained Office 95 on my laptop for lack of space, I now have to save all my Office 97 creations in 95 format. The average user has more than enough bells and whistles! Give us a suite that does what most of us do regularly: write, use a spreadsheet, and make presentations.

What would I like to see? Microsoft Works is too basic. An Office 95-type suite is sufficient, comprising Word and Excel 7, perhaps with PowerPoint. Even better is your suggestion of stripping Word of its more complex features such as the Visual Basic programming and sophisticated publishing tools. I use my word processor to write letters and articles, the latter sometime with tables, graphs, and picture files. I don't use my word processor to publish newsletters or compose Web pages and would rather cut and paste into dedicated programs like Publisher or FrontPage when I do. Spelling auto-correction should remain, as should a intelligent grammar checker which does not penalize the user for writing sentences of more than 10 words.

The top two items on my wish list have not yet appeared in the MS stable. These are, first, a feature which ensures that adding an extra table with frame or a couple of footnotes to a finished piece will not disrupt the continuity of the printed text. And second, making available free downloadable spell/grammar checkers in multiple languages for those of us in Europe who still write occasionally in French, Spanish, and German. As for Excel, MS still has much to learn from Lotus about producing a powerful spreadsheet package with easy-to-edit graphics, as anybody who has used the rival products to run a simple regression and plot the results will know. Microsoft would do well to refocus on the basics rather than enabling the ordinary user to embed an MPG file in a spreadsheet!

George Irvin
The Hague, Netherlands

As a long time user of Microsoft Works, I like what you say. I use it as much as I can in my business, except in those cases where I need to provide an electronic copy of a letter or report (which is becoming more common these days). This wouldn't be necessary if the files were fully compatible, as you point out. MS Works doesn't handle embedded pictures and other drawings as easily as Word, though.

The older versions of Works had a good set of templates for business including a purchase order and invoice. Where did these go in the latest version?

So, keep up the pressure on Microsoft. A suite that included PowerPoint as well as the current functions would be great. Here's my vote for an improved MS Works for small business.

Peter E. Perkins

Tigard, Ore.

Note: A new version of Works is due this fall, but no details are available yet.

Good column and many good points. In fact, I was about to sit down and give you tons of reasons why Microsoft needs to slim down its feature-abundant programs to add to the doggy pile when I realized that there's a big difference between what people say they want and what they really want. I bet 90% of Microsoft Office users will agree with you. However, nobody likes being the kid on the block with the smallest or slowest bike.

Think of it this way -- I'd love to own a Porsche. And one of its attractions is that it can go 180. Will I ever do that should I be lucky enough to own one? Probably not, even if the cops aren't looking. But man, it will be cool to know I can. Same with all those features on Microsoft products. You're right -- I rarely use them. But I kinda like knowing I have them there. And I kinda like giving Microsoft a hard time about it.

Charlie Barthold

Darien, Conn.

You the Office upgrade is "clearly aimed at big corporate buyers." And you surmise this based on the fact that most people in small companies don't work the way Office 2000 was designed. Well guess what? Most people in big companies don't work that way either! Office 2000 isn't just bloatware for the small company, it's bloatware for everyone.

While I've gone through four different versions of my suite software in seven years, the version I was using seven years ago would still do 99% of what I need from a suite today. And my company could have saved all that money from hardware upgrades forced by the new software upgrades, as well as my lost productivity when I was forced to switch and relearn new hardware and software.

If I had stuck with the old version, I ultimately could have had software that ran faster with fewer bugs than it does today. And this is progress??? There is no doubt, I (and I expect many) would love to have a more simplified Office suite. While my needs are more small-business-oriented, I have worked in large companies, and I know the problems and inefficiencies caused by Microsoft's complicated applications. Typically, very few (5%) need all the features, fewer (1%) know how to use them -- and the rest simply find another way. The key need that everyone has with any "lite" system is compatibility. The key problem for today's users is the lack of competition in the office applications marketplace.

Roger L. Turner
Reston, Va.

I don't and won't use many features of Microsoft Office. I have a laptop with Windows 3.1, and the only advantages I find with 95 (on my desktop) are the red underlining of misspelled words in Word and the function wizard in Excel. I haven't read anything about Office 97 or 2000 that makes me think my life would be easier with them.

Jeneene Brengelman
Cincinnati

The other benefit, of course, is the reduction of bloat. Why do we need to devote hundreds of megabytes to these monstrous pieces of software which do just about the same thing that their older, simpler, smaller brethren did?

This is only an additional comment; your principal point about easier and simpler (and cheaper) is right on.

Doug Cohen
Lexington, Mass.

I'm a heavy laptop PC user, requiring Word, Excel, and PowerPoint for my work. I could function fine with an Office Lite version for work and for my kid's computer. As Microsoft has upgraded, I have used very few, if any, of the new features. I am a heavy but basic user of Office. I hope others respond, and Microsoft listens.

John Greichen
Wilmington, Mass.

I am 65, a retired businessman, and as such a great believer in computers and the many benefits they offer. However, for the average user all software is far too complex. I went from PC to the iMac to ease the tribulation a bit, but certainly its operating systems and application software could and should be made simpler. Perhaps designing and pricing like a car is the answer. A basic model such as a simple word processor without all the bells and whistles would be fine for me. If I want more I can add more with additional cost. I invite any software designer to spend an hour with me and I will show you all the features that I don't use and don't want. The problem, as you suggest, is that I want a \$400 computer with \$100 worth of programs. I don't think Mr. Gates will approve..

Larry Greenberg
Liberty, N.C.

Simpler is often better, as long as full compatibility is there. While traveling, I use a Psion 5a and would love to have a Windows desktop version of it, including instant start, at home instead of Works. The big advantage of Lite is that hardware requirements are less, so applications are faster and more stable. Of course Intel and the likes would not like it.

Pieter van Tiel
Switzerland

I have to agree strongly with your assessment on Microsoft Office's over-indulgence on bells and whistles. I have never found the fancy multimedia and Internet connections of any use -- at home or work. Even the ability to link Word documents and Excel spreadsheets is a very rare occurrence. I have used Visual Basic for applications with a spreadsheet. I admit this was a one-time unusual event. Even so, some kind of simple programming capability is a must, in my estimation.

I believe that actually simplifying the packages, particularly making wizardss more useful, would actually get people to use more of the available features. Perhaps home and small-business-oriented, easily customizable templates would be a good idea (think of the early days of spreadsheet programs with all the how-to mags and prepackaged spreadsheets for accounting, etc.).

Thanks for sticking up for us computer literate small-fry!

Thomas J. Blake
Mentor, Ohio

I could not agree with you more. These Suite programs take up entirely too much hard-drive space for what are mostly useless features for most users. In particular, I dislike much of MS Word as a word processor, yet I use it because it has (unfortunately) become the standard in business. WordPerfect is a far superior product, but Microsoft just outmuscled Corel. Microsoft should not only produce a trimmed-down version but also make the entire program more user-friendly.

I would suggest to Microsoft that they could earn gazillions more dollars if they would pay attention to the vast majority of users who, as you point out in your article, do not use most of the bells and whistles in the software, and produce a streamlined version that works properly and is reliable.

I suggest further that Microsoft would win a lot of converts if they would adopt the "Reveal Codes" feature of WordPerfect, or something similar, to facilitate document editing and formatting.

Peter D. Keim
Alpharetta, Ga.

Question, why did you leave Access out of you suggested suite? I think Access is equally as important to a home user as PowerPoint or Excel. I agree there is a need for a simpler system, but it appears Microsoft is going the other way with the introduction of Office 2000.

Perry E. Hudson Jr.
Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

I am always reading Technology & You for two good reasons: 1. I feel it is attractive because of my personal interest in IT and computer business. 2. It always updates us with the latest technology, specially in IT. Not only that but also I had a small business here in my country which is in the center of the Globe called Sultanate of Oman.

I am totally agree with you that simple Office will be more than enough to most of us. As IT reseller in my place, I can assure you that most of my customers as well as most of my friends and colleague who were using earlier version of MS Office mainly use 25% of its features.

M Al-Rawahi
Oman

There was a time when I needed a full-featured suite, but no longer. I'd buy an "Office Lite" if it was available, but I'll not buy a full-featured upgrade. I will stick with my ancient version forever because it is sufficient.

Dick Mallion
Whitefield, N.H.

I would like to see an Office Lite with a feature set similar to Works but with the same file formats as Office for Word and Excel files.

I'm still using Office 95 at home because I didn't think Office 98 offered me any features worth the cost. I feel the same about Office 2000 for home use (I have been using the Office 2000 beta for several months). I suppose I will be forced to upgrade to avoid being two versions behind.

Earl McGehee
Austin, Tex.

I wouldn't call it Office Lite. How about Office Sensible or Office Write-On. I have Office 97 Small Business Edition and use Excel a lot (carryover from my corporate days) and Word as needed to support a small-business tax and financial reporting business. As you suggest, Publisher is a nice add-on, which is why I chose the SBE version.

Your column is right on. But now what will we do with our gazillion-gig drives if Microsoft programs are right-sized.

Steve Bort
Martinez, Calif.

I am an independent consultant who works out of home. I would definitely prefer a streamlined Office that would be more suited to my needs. Many of the existing features are ones I never use, since I primarily prepare simple documents or spreadsheets, communicate by E-mail, and track multiple versions of report drafts.

While simply ignoring what I don't need or use works fine, the overall complexity of Office and Windows create compatibility problems that lead to frequent lock-ups and crashes. I had had to reinstall Windows, Office, hardware drivers, and other software more than once to clean up Registry problems.

I resent like hell the fact that there seems to have developed a widespread acceptance of such problems and a macho attitude that anyone who can't work their way through them is somehow not "computer literate." I wonder how long the phone company or an auto company would stay in business if their products or services crashed as frequently. If there were another alternative, I would use it in a heartbeat.

Brock B. Bernstein
Ojai, Calif.

I am a college professor in the area of MIS at Norfolk State University in Virginia. The answer to your first question is YES. Actually, I would prefer a simplified version of the Microsoft company as a whole.

As to your second question, in academia the most frequent question from students is: Why do I have to pay \$60 for a book with 20 chapters, when we only cover 12 chapters. The answer is usually, we don't have enough time, the book is more than one semester worth of materials. The analogy with Office is that we don't have enough problems that would fit the solutions/tools offered by this software. You could learn all the functions, but you'll never use 70% of them. Some of the functions are complicated, which may make you feel stupid in case you can't apply them.

I would love to see a basic Office package for the everyday/single user. Some of the features could be: (1) creating, formatting, saving, and printing a document (2) Creating, formatting, saving, and printing a worksheet and a graph (3) Inserting a graph and an image within a document (4) Creating tables within a document using a worksheet and/or a database (5) Creating and updating a database, and generating a report. Those who want more may download additional modules from the Microsoft site for an additional fee.

In case this may create a problem with Microsoft-authorized vendors, consumers may have to go through the Web page of the vendor to

download what they need using an access code purchased from the vendor directly. This could reduce the load on the Microsoft servers, keep the vendors happy, and the customer a little bit richer and smarter. I think that in general, Microsoft executives think in terms of a global Microsoft vs. a global economy. I enjoyed reading your article, and please keep them coming. You never know, we may help Microsoft with its mission whatever that may be.

Moncef Belhadjali, PhD
Head of MIS Department
Norfolk State University

What are you thinking? As general manager of a 16-person company, why would I want to make data processing easier? Next, you'll be suggesting the telecommunications industry simplify their offerings. Clearly, whatever benefits we have gained in lower rates and "greater productivity" have come at a high cost. Purchasing and implementation of data processing and telecommunications equipment has become incredibly time consuming.

In our small office, just the time "unlocking" computers that have performed "illegal operations" would be amusing if it weren't at the cost of actually selling and distributing our products. Oh, I could spend \$70,000 a year plus fringes to hire someone to keep our computers running, but the current depression in the oil-exploration industry that my company serves doesn't seem to care as much about our ability to run an embedded movie in my monthly sales reports as Mr. Gates does.

By the way, can Microsoft really convict me of running those "illegal operations"?

Jim Schindler
Houston

I believe that your guiding principles on simplicity should be applied to Windows itself.

Microsoft's zest to cram more and more features into Windows (e.g. Internet Explorer) has done nothing but make an already weak operating system more sluggish and much more difficult to use than prior versions -- despite amazing hardware advances. For example, have you ever "Uninstalled" a program only to have the system tell you that not all files were removed? To be fair, the system also "wisely" instructs you to remove them manually. This would be fine, if you had a clue what the file names were! It blows my mind that Windows is actually a "success".

We'd all be happier if Microsoft were to focus on a better interface that would streamline system configuration and improve resource management instead of wasting time ramming more unnecessary features down our throats. By the way, how do you uninstall Internet Explorer again?

Regards,
Ranji K. Ragbeer
Chicago

I agree with you on an MS Office Lite. As a technology instructor, I find most people do not need all the bells and whistles. Microsoft is looking at that with programs like Outlook Express which I use for home. At work, the full-blown Outlook handles the job better.

My 25 year engineering background allows me to use numerous Excel functions (equations), but many are wasted on the basic addition/multiplication budgets, financial taxes, and telephone lists. PowerPoint is used a lot, but even it could be serviced with a simple viewer.

I agree with you on Word -- make it simpler.

Sid Forbes
Knoxville, Tenn.

Instead of a lot of new stuff, I would prefer that the old stuff would work properly. If I copy a date from my old Excel sheets to a new one, the dates are all wrong. That is because you have to go to "options" and enable system date 1904. What is wrong with me? Everybody else must see this as a logical step that took me a long time to find the "options" in the first place, let alone to figure out what system date 1904 was. And I still don't. Is 6816055262571859 a number? If you enter it as a "number," Excel will change the last 9 into a zero. Nice if you learned to type without looking at the keyboard or the screen.

Herbert Franci
Banyoles, Spain

Note: Excel can use two different systems for the internal storage of dates, one with begins numbering days from Jan. 1, 1900, and the other from Jan. 1, 1904. Moving dates between spreadsheets using different systems can have strange results. And Excel limits any number entered to 15 digits and will change any digit beyond that to a zero.

I am delighted that someone on the consumer side is speaking out to lighten the Office software. You are right on the point, for most end users, especially in small business, there is no need for many excessive features in the software.

I am sort of going back to use Works for many of my daily tasks, because Microsoft Word has become so complicated. A wrong stroke of key will create a nightmare for user like me. For example, the first time I used Word, I touched a key, there was this so called "office assistant" on the screen. It's funny but annoying, trying to provide help which I did not need. The worse thing was I had to spend time to figure out how to get rid of it so I can continue doing my work.

I believe a productivity-enhancing tool like Microsoft Office should come with a basic word processor, spreadsheet, PowerPoint with a price around \$100, then come with choices of add-on features which can be

purchased separately by individual need. More importantly, there is no need for continued updating from version 5.2 to 5.8 to 6.0. They should spend their time developing other innovative products instead of wasting their resource to make incremental changing and fixing something which is not broken. The government should post a tax disincentive for doing research and development on marginally improving old products. In fact, if it is not to simplify technology application, it should not be considered as an improvement from the standpoint of productivity enhancement.

David Shih
Princeton, N.J.

About your text on a simpler Microsoft Office program, I want to say that I support you 100%, and I hope that Microsoft and Lotus hear your words. Indeed, I have been using the Microsoft Works and the MS Office together for a long, long time, and I always dreamed about a package that would be an average between them. I think that the ideal would be a program with a word processor, a spreadsheet, a database, and a presentation program, with the kind of resources that you mention in your text: simpler than MS Office and better than MS Works.

Finally, I would like to argue that the ideal package should include a database. I love that kind of program, but I understand that Access is too complicated and little intuitive, while the database offered in Works is too weak because it doesn't offer any relational resource. I think that they should start with the Works' database and add some relational characteristics, like the possibility of creating simple direct links between tables or databases.

Ioanis Antonios Klavdianos
Brasilia, Brazil

Please tell Microsoft that some kind of "Office Lite" would not be, in effect, "office for dummies" who are unable to master all the wonderful geegaws embedded in Office.

I have an master of public administration and am writing a doctoral dissertation in economics, and I currently have BOTH Office 97 and Word 6.0 installed on my Pentium at home. I use Word 6.0 for writing my dissertation, because the Word in Office 97 tries to do too many things for me (like indenting when I don't want to indent), and I haven't yet figured out how to turn all that stuff off.

Another problem is that economists are known to put data sets in word or Excel, clean them up, and then transfer them into a statistical program such as [in my case] Stata. It is hard to really clean up a data set if the Word or Excel program is adding its own (invisible to the user) codes. Some people suggest using Notepad for this function, since Notepad doesn't have all the baggage associated with Word, but Notepad doesn't usually have a large enough buffer to hold a data set.

There are times when I'm so annoyed with Microsoft that I'm almost ready to do my word processing in DOS! Thank you very much for bringing attention to this problem in your article.

Landy Johnson
Clark University
Worcester, Mass.

Thanks for your column on smaller and easier-to-use software. I think that the software we have today is the result of the reviewing techniques of PC Magazine and others like it. They focus on the number of features in different software packages by running tables with side-by-side comparisons of software with the features being the primary comparison. So more and more features creep into the software in order to get the highest reviewer marks. We seem to have lost site of the fact that it's all about productivity.

Our company recently switched to an office suite of software that holds the promise of some productivity gains because of its integration. However, I had to spend many hours trying to generate a simple set of mailing labels with the new software that would have taken minutes

using my stand-alone software package. You would think that this common office task would be bulletproof. I still refuse to use PowerPoint because of its inability to generate a line chart that can be seen from across a moderately large room. PowerPoint has many slick features but can't seem to get right the very basic things important in data presentations.

David Swierenga
Washington, D.C.

Please inform Microsoft that for 99% of businesses the Office suite has gotten so big and consumes so much space per file and for the program that it's overkill. As an international consultant and small-business owner, I used and prefer the Works program because it combines everything needed in a small amount of disk space. Unfortunately, its file extensions are different from Office and can't be read or transmitted by E-mail to Office users. If Microsoft just make the Works files the same as Office's, you will see the sales of it quadruple while those needing all the features still will buy Office.

James Parchman
Nashville, Tenn.

Well I started, believe it or not, with Word 1.0, so I have *really* seen the thing grow, at first better and better and then, mostly, just more and more complex. I won't upgrade to Office 2000 unless I absolutely have to. At the center of any suite obviously is a word processor, and nowadays it's essential that this core product be Web-enabled, e.g., I am writing this on Outlook Express. If I wanted to send a Word document, I would have to do this as an attachment, a somewhat cumbersome process. And then you might not open it for fear of bugs. So this integration needs to a major upgrade. Since Word 2000 apparently reads and writes HTML, this may be an opportunity for some other company.

As for simplicity, Word is already somewhat modular: You can add on various sections or not as you choose. It just needs to extend this

capability, hopefully with better explanations of what the sections are all about. Often it's a guessing game. I don't use PowerPoint. As for Excel, it could have 1/100 of its present capabilities and be fine for me. I simply don't need all that firepower. Interestingly, one thing Office doesn't have is a decent search capability. Yes, you can search but it takes all day. I use ZyIndex [a dedicated indexing program] which is terrific, but complicated. An integrated capability would clearly be better. The Mac now has Sherlock, which has the speed of ZyIndex and is much simpler, which is both good and bad for Boolean searches. I don't understand why Office doesn't have something like this.

So -- modularize in a big way, integrate with the Web, add decent search capabilities, and, perhaps, use HTML as the underlying structure. I'll even throw in a name: WebSuite.

Donald F. Padelford
Seattle

Could not agree with you more re: Simplified Office! I would not mind paying the "cost" if it would just do what I want, instead of what MSFT thinks I want -- an easy-to-use Word processor, a PowerPoint equivalent, spreadsheets for business, and stock portfolios, checks, etc. I doubt very much whether you or anyone can change Microsoft -- it hasn't happened so far, so why get our "hopes" up now? Thanks, and good luck!!!

George R. Mateyo
Cleveland, Ohio

For those using Excel 97: Ever wonder why Microsoft applications seem slower with each new release? Apparently the constant rain in Redmond has driven Bill's engineers to obsessive flights of fancy. Below you'll find instructions on how to access a little flight simulator that was inexplicably hidden by precipitation-maddened programmers deep inside Excel 97.

Here it goes... In Excel 97, open a new blank work sheet. Press F5 (go to function) and type X97:L97 in the "Reference" box, then click OK. Now hit your tab key once (you should end up in cell M97). Here's the tricky part: press "Ctrl" and "Shift" while clicking once on the "chart wizard" icon (the one at the top with the blue-yellow-red bar chart). After a few moments you should be flying. Steer with the mouse, accelerate and decelerate with the left and right mouse buttons respectively, and look for the monolith with the programmer credits. You can exit the screen by pressing Ctrl+Shift+Esc.

Tomas Figueroa
Santiago, Chile

I am a lifelong "works" user; had Apples first (II's and IIe's) then Macs. I loved both Apple and Claris Works. I have run Windows for last 6 years and still use Microsoft Works mostly. I have to use Word from time to time and it really is overdone and needlessly complex. I will buy the new Office Lite if you can convince them that enough of us out here want it.

Neff McIntosh
Savannah, Ga.

I absolutely agree with your "Office Lite" article. Apart from the fact that I am 59 years old and computer-ignorant, I do want to take advantage of some things a PC can do for me. As soon as a user-friendly program with the following features comes on sale, I will buy it together with a laptop I can put on my desk and carry with me. The features I need are :

Send and receive E-mail

b) Write and fax a letter

c) Roam the Internet

d) Install a money management program

Alfredo Hsel
Buenos Aires

I have Office 97 and keep two large volumes on Word and Excel next to my desk, just in case I need to do something complicated but have opened them about twice each in two years. I make up class materials and do a lot of various writing and finance-type spreadsheets yet never use 90% of the features available and probably never will. I also agree about Publisher. It's simple and gives me all the formatting flexibility I need vs. struggling to try to do the same things in Word. I believe the entire Office suite could be cut by 50% or more and 90% of users would not notice the difference. And don't get me started on Outlook, which I log off of after every E-mail check because it is so cumbersome.

Stan Chraminski
Seattle

I'm with you. I spend a great of time training real estate agents to use Word, where the most complicated thing they do is an occasional mail merge or print an envelope. There is no reason for them to have to wade through the hundreds of menu choices, when they make their money talking to people, not creating documents! The old Symantec program, Q&A, was plenty of word processor and was mucheasier to teach folks to use.

Dave Bittner
Breckenridge, Colo.

Less would be more. I would like to be able to write a business letter or a letter or note to a friend without going through all the mish-mash of setting up the form. Simplified programs and less complicated spreadsheets would be my recommendation, and if a simplified Office for home, school, or business would be available, I would be pleased to replace it with the one that was installed in my IBM computer with Windows 98

Kay Helffrich
Rio Verde, Ariz.

I would buy a simplified Office from anyone who offered it. I agree that the most critical factor is enabling the programs to use the same files as their Office counterparts. This is needed for both business and personal use. NOTE: I would pay MORE for a simplified version if necessary.

James W. Teegarden
Georgetown, Tex.

I have noted that the faster the chips the greater the desire on programmers menus is to make things more complicated. Someone said, "Simplify, Simplify, Simplfy." We should remember that wise word as we toddle into the 21st century. Too many features on a program are nonproductive, unwise use of my money, and do not contribute to increased efficiency. I would like to see a program with word processing, spreadsheets with simple-to-use graphics and a simple-to-use program to develop newsletters, brochures, and business presentations. The cost of such a program should not exceed \$150. Thank you pointing out to the programmers that they are going too far and need to simplify our technology.

Nels Anderson, Jr.
Dillingham, Alaska

You said, much better, what I have been thinking for quite some time, re Office. Microsoft Works came with my first two computers, and I guess it would be okay, if it was compatible with anything else. I was given Office, and now have the latest version of Word, but I do not plan to upgrade. If Microsoft does not support my version when I get problems later on, I will switch to some other company. My husband and I are retired, in our early 60s, and both have computers. He uses his for E-mail and financial research mostly.

But I am online a lot, and heavily into genealogy. I have two Web sites, and use FrontPage. I used to have Publisher installed, and did a newsletter for my tennis league. Doubt I will upgrade FrontPage either. I use Outlook Express; Outlook is overkill. I don't need all the features in it. I use Family Tree Maker, and it has a very lame word processor involved. How wonderful it would be if I could somehow use Word with FTM! Of course I have Notepad and Wordpad, which I seldom need to use. I have a couple of other programs that have little word processors in them. I would like to see a suite called Home Office, that had the basics as you mention, with the capability for adding on the elements needed. Or, at least, maybe the option to not install all the unwanted features.

Pat McDonald
Houston

I have been a big user of Office and its predecessors since "the beginning" (OK, since the late 1980's). There have been virtually no capabilities added in the last several years that provide any meaningful new capability for the work I do. However, I am forced to upgrade my software in order to be compatible with current versions. That is really irritating! Even more irritating is the fact that I also have to upgrade my hardware, since each newer version of Office is a greater and greater memory hog. Sooner or later people will become "mad as hell and are not gonna take it anymore!"

I think a simpler and cheaper version of MicroSoft Office would be of great use for me at home. Please pass this on to MicroSoft for me. Count me in as one in support of simplified versions of Office. Would love to have a basic level program for Word, Excel, etc. With "plug-in" options for the bells & whistles. I'm a Mac user.

Jan Kunsu
San Diego State University

One further aspect which should be of interest to PC makers. For some time I intend to buy a notebook for private use. But although my desktop

is overdue for replacement I hesitate for the lack of a simplified Office. Whereas I am prepared to spend some money on as big a screen as possible, I am less inclined to spend money for hard disk and RAM capacity just to handle all the needless features Microsoft comes up with any time. The lack of such simplified Office is therefore a hurdle for additional notebook sales!

Stefan Mueller-Meskamp
Koenigstein, Germany

Thanks for an excellent column. I've grown up with Microsoft's Word, Excel, and PowerPoint on the Macintosh, starting long before the nasty word "suite" crept into the picture. I can remember how I used to anxiously await every upgrade because each contained "real" improvements, yet each continued to operate like its predecessor so all one had to learn was the new part. My favorite version of Word is 5.1 on the Mac. I still keep it (despite having and using Word 98) for when I want that truly "elegant" program that does what's needed and doesn't carry a lot of extra baggage. It is far better at some translations than its newer relatives, files take up a lot less space, and it runs on all of my older computers.

As for advice to Microsoft, I would offer two things. First, their new programs automate too many things. Sometimes the automation drives me crazy. Automatic capitalization of the first word of a sentence has created many hard-to-detect errors in my documents. In order to stop Word 98 from setting up a hyperlink every time I typed in a web address, I had to call Microsoft Tech Support and have them tell me the three separate steps necessary to deactivate that feature. And in Excel 5, simply accessing a charting menu made a permanent, irreversible change in a graph that I had worked long and hard to create.

Beyond that, there are too many "wizards" that remove control from the user. It's like forcing a skilled photographer to use a fully animated amateur camera that doesn't permit manual overrides. Second, I wish they would stop relabeling old features and hiding them it totally

different menus. They should understand how irritating it is to have to relearn new versions of old software just because their programmers decide they don't like the old labels. As examples, in Microsoft Excel 4, you could add a hidden "Note" to a cell. In Excel 98, you add a "Comment" under a different menu. In Excel 4 and 5, you could "Extract" information and move it a separate "Extract" area. In Excel 98, you have to "Filter" information. And to add insult to injury, the pathetic excuse for a user's manual that comes with Excel '98 doesn't bother to include a cross-reference for the words "Note" or "Extract." Then there are things called "Pivot Tables" that I've yet to understand. The one paragraph definition in the manual is next to useless.

Truthfully, I've often been tempted to switch to Claris or Microsoft Works for its straightforward simplicity. I would rather see Microsoft offer a variety of smaller, more elegant programs than create more bloatware that does everything for everybody and removes user control through too much automation. They should avoid making changes for the sake of change with an eye on reducing the learning curve for people upgrading to their new versions. Certainly, there are improvements in Office '98 that I love. PowerPoint 98 has great features (although it insists on changing the "date created" to the "date modified" every time I make a change in an older document and resave it). Sorry for going on so long. Thanks for reading.

Bill Steinbicker
Minneapolis

Note: Microsoft is aware of this date defect but doesn't intend to fix it until the next upgrade

I agree 100% with the need for an "Office Lite" product for home use. In addition to the need for a given program to be office/home-compatible, i.e., sharing data via floppy disk, the program(s) need to be (a) backwards compatible, and (b) light enough to E-mail with short transmission times. The alternative is to zip and unzip large files, but not every PC has this facility. My wife, who travels in her work and uses a laptop, and I frequently E-mail draft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint

documents back and forth. Because of the complexity and size of the programs, we must repeatedly zip and unzip documents we send, particularly those in PowerPoint. Bottom line is that it would facilitate our work if the programs were "lite" enough to E-mail without zipping and unzipping.

Gerald Gault
Litchfield, Conn.

I use Access for my customer database, and it too needs to be simplified greatly. Pass it on to Microsoft and its competitors. And please let your readers know what the response to your article has been.

Niels H. Nielsen
Princeton, N.J.