

Microsoft Office Professional Edition 2003

Reviewed by Don Lewis

Product Information

The professional edition consists of the 2003 versions of Word, Excel Outlook, PowerPoint, Access, Publisher and Business Contact Manager for Outlook.

The Retail price is \$499. The upgrade price is \$329. An Internet search reveals many offers at deeply discounted prices. The price at Amazon.com is \$395.99 and \$274.99 for the upgrade. Exercise caution if buying online to be sure you get the genuine product with the license.

Introductory Summary

After Windows, Microsoft Office suite may be the most recognized software product.

After many years of enhancements and improvements, the product is very mature.

Microsoft has created a collection of integrated tools from the individual applications in this suite. They all work well together and maintain a familiar interface. Most computer users are familiar with at least the base components of Word, Excel and Powerpoint.

The research task pane is one of the most useful additions. The Research library interface integrates into nearly all of the Office 2003 Applications. Word, Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint and Publisher can all make use of it. The research pane allows users to search reference materials, Internet sites, Encarta and thesaurus. You can look up words or phrases, synonyms, research encyclopedia articles and get translations without leaving the Office application.

One major new feature is expanded use of the Extensible Markup Language (XML). XML provides the ability to tie data from a back-end server database such as an SQL or Oracle server to the Office documents, keeping everyone in a work group using the most up to date information. These features are clearly directed toward business users. To use much of these new group features requires that all users in the group have the Professional Enterprise or Professional version. XML forms must be created using the Professional Enterprise or Professional package. I was not able to try these features for this review.

Information Rights Management (IRM) is new in this version. It is also meant for business users. IRM lets you specify who is allowed to read, edit, or distribute documents. There is a free Passport-based service to authenticate users. IRM documents are only usable with Office 2003 or Internet Explorer. Enterprise and Professional editions can create IRM protected documents. Other Office 2003 editions can only read and edit the documents if they have access rights.

All applications have been updated with a fresh appearance. It is brighter, more colorful and easier to read.

Requirements

- Operating System: Windows 2000 with service pack 3 or Windows XP or later
- Pentium 233 MHz or higher
- 128 MB or more Ram
- 400 MB of hard disk space
- Business Contact Manager for Outlook requires Pentium III 450 MHz or higher, 256 MB or above Ram and 190 MB of hard drive

Installation

Installation was uneventful, just the way I like it. I chose upgrade to replace the old software rather than the clean install which would have left two versions. It took about ten minutes to uninstall the old software and install the new. There is no restart of the system required. Activation is required, but it was no problem.

None of the applications changed file types in Office 2003, so there is no issue of converting documents from back versions. Files created in Office 2003 may not function properly in back versions when functions new in 2003 are used.

After installation I checked for updates. I found that Service Pack 2 was available for download. The download of the 100MB file took about 45 minutes on a DSL link. There is no way to uninstall the update. That was a little scary. I created a System Check Point before installation. The installation of Service Pack 2 was routine and caused no problems.

Features of Office Professional Edition 2003:

Word

What is New?

Other than support for the new features of collaboration, XML, and IRM, Word has not changed much. It does have a few neat features like the reading layout view. This gives you two pages or columns of text. It is like looking at an open book. This view is meant for reading, but editing is allowed. However, changes may appear differently in the normal view. All text is displayed with Microsoft's ClearType technology. You can change text size without affecting the document.

The research pane is one of my favorite new features in this version of Word. There is no more need to use a hardcopy dictionary or go to a different web based dictionary.

Word 2003 also has an enhanced Undo feature with a drop down menu on the toolbar of all items you can undo. You can select the last edit you performed or select multiple actions to undo. This must be used with care. An accidental click can undo more than you intend and it is hard to find what should be put back.

It must be very difficult for Microsoft developers to come up with new functions for Word. Word is already everything you could want in a word processor.

Excel

What's new?

There is very little new, other than support for the new Office 2003 suite features. The only new feature I see is the List Management capability. The purpose is to allow Excel to see that the information is related when working on a spreadsheet with categories such as months or types of expenses. Its purpose is to carry over the existing formatting and calculations as you add to the spreadsheet. I found it easy to create a list by selecting the column and clicking List in the Data drop down menu. However, I have not yet found a use for this.

Excel 2003 retains auditing tools for debugging complex spreadsheets. All charting features are still there. I noticed no changes or improvements.

Excel supports Smart Tags. These are links to external data. For example, you can use a stock symbol Smart Tag to look up and display the current price of a stock. Third party developers have provided many downloadable smart tags to enhance those provided by Microsoft.

PowerPoint

What is new?

PowerPoint 2003 is Microsoft's presentation software. The user interface has been updated and support for Smart tags added. Multimedia support is improved. PowerPoint now supports playing .avi, .mpg, and other video files full-screen from within your presentations. Video playback controls can be placed directly in the slide show and you can stream both audio and video into your presentations. Windows Media Player allows you to play streaming audio and video within a slide show. The Research library interface is a convenient addition. New charts and diagram types have been added with improved new animations. Autocorrect and SmartTags support are now available.

Copying slideshows to CD has been improved. The copy to CD function lets you export an entire slideshow, including all associated files and a viewer to a CD. The viewer allows playing the slideshow on any Windows computer without PowerPoint.

Publisher

What is new?

Microsoft has added ten new design templates to their desktop publishing program for a total of 45. There is a design checker to assist correcting printing problems. There is a

task pane for wizard like help for new users. Support for CMYK Composite Postscript has been added. There is a new Publication Task Pane with new categories to help new users. Publisher supports all of the autocorrect features just like word. A baseline guide has been added. This is very useful in keeping paragraphs in line across columns.

Publisher is a more recent addition to the suite. It is not as mature as the other applications but appears to have benefited from improvements to the others. This version seems to have cleaned up some bothersome glitches. I use Publisher to develop the club newsletter. Past versions have been plagued with occasional crashes. The Print Preview function could not be trusted to show an accurate picture of the print. I am pleased to see that this version works better. There is still a few annoying short comings. Word supports bullet lists with a seemingly unlimited support for sub bullets. Publisher only supports one level. I often paste articles from Word documents to a Publisher document. Pasting lists with multiple levels creates a distorted mess. Printing also has a few flaws. You can print individual pages, but printing a selected set of pages will not work. You cannot print all odd or all even pages, so you cannot print a document on both sides of the paper.

Publisher still remains my preference for creating our newsletter.

Access

Access 2003 is Microsoft's desktop database solution. It includes all of the XML features that the other Office 2003 products do. Other than that, there is not much new. It does let you back up the database you are working on from within the program. You can find errors in forms and report designs automatically. It also supports SmartTags and autocorrect.

I was not able to test the XML features. I have read in online reviews that this feature still has problems.

Outlook

What is new?

Quite a lot has changed. It seems that Outlook enjoyed a major makeover. Out of all of the Office Systems programs, Outlook 2003 has had the most improvement. I have been using Outlook Express as my default email client. I have changed to Outlook because of these improvements.

The interface makes more information available in one place. The email preview pane moved to the right side of the screen, making it easier to read with less scrolling.

Word can be used as the email editor, including all Word features like autocorrect and spell checking.

Organizing and filtering mail is much improved in this version. You can arrange mail by conversations so you can read e-mail by related topic. You can now choose one of six colors when you right-click the flag for each in-box listing. You can arrange your inbox by flag. This could be useful for prioritizing your mail. If you group your messages by arrival time, Outlook labels the groups “today”, “yesterday”, “last week”, and so on. I am still experimenting with this to see how to make the best use of it.

The Spam filter may be the most important improvement. The filter is set to the lowest level of filtering by default. Messages identified as spam are moved into the junk mail folder where they can be scanned to see if any good messages have been falsely identified. There are several degrees of filtering from none to safe senders only. The safe sender level only allows messages from your list of known senders.

I have an email address that has never been used for real traffic, but it receives about forty Spam messages a day. On the first try, 28 of 36 messages or 78%, were identified as junk. The messages allowed into the Inbox were 4 Viagra ads, 1 ad from Staples and 2 ads in Spanish. The worst was a phishing message trying to get me to provide my Pay Pal information. I am experimenting to see how to tweak the settings to get rid of more of the Spam.

Outlook provides for image and Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) blocking. You download the images and HTML message, if you decide they are safe. You can add the name of trusted senders to your safe list.

Outlook also supports the research task pane and Information Rights Management (IRM) common to most of the applications in the suite.

The calendar is much improved too. It provides for viewing multiple calendars next to your own calendar, making it easy to compare schedules and to schedule meetings. This is especially convenient for business users.

You can now have a signature per account, so every different e-mail account can use a different signature. You can add photos to all your contacts.

I was able to import email accounts, messages and address book from Outlook Express. Outlook supports contact lists and address books. Outlook imported my OE address book into a contact list. The two different lists caused some confusion. The contact list stores all information and can be viewed and sorted in many ways. The address book displays information from the contact list, but only displays name, email address and fax numbers. Items without an email address or fax number do not appear in the address book. The address book is always in alphabetical order. I found how to sort the contact list by last name, first name easily. It took quite a bit of digging to get the address book to display this way.

Business Contact Manager for Outlook

The purpose of this product is to assist businesses to manage and share customer information and sales leads. It requires .NET Framework to be installed and 190 MB of additional disk space. I did not review this feature.

Documentation

The only documentation included is a 46 page booklet called “Discovering the Microsoft Office 2003 Editions” and an 11 page booklet called “Getting Started with Microsoft Office Outlook 2003 with Business Contact Manage and Office Publisher 2003. These booklets mostly deal with installation and explanation of new features in this version. However, the Help function is quite complete and helpful. There are many tutorials and training lessons.

Product Support

Support is available from Microsoft either by phone or email. Email has response time of one business day. Phone service is available Monday thru Friday from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. and Weekends from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. Pacific time. A charge of \$35 per request applies to both services. There are also many newsgroups, Blogs, chat rooms, forums and user groups to provide free online help. Microsoft also has an extensive FAQ and Knowledge base.

Conclusion

In my opinion, Office 2000 and beyond contains almost any function the average home user really requires. If you are using a version prior to XP, upgrading to this version may be worthwhile because of the cleanup of bugs and the cleaner interface. Keep in mind that another version is due out in the second half of next year. If you do not have an office suite, this one has everything you will want.