

IBM's Free Symphony Sings Familiar Songs

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IBM hopes to challenge Microsoft's Office franchise with its own release of OpenOffice.org branded as "Lotus Symphony." However, Symphony provides few advantages over existing OpenOffice.org distributions.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 18 September 2007, IBM announced IBM Lotus Symphony, a suite of free software tools including Lotus Symphony Documents, Lotus Symphony Spreadsheets and Lotus Symphony Presentations. It supports Windows and Linux desktops as well as multiple file formats, including Microsoft (MS) Office and Open Document Format (ODF). It can also output content in Portable Document Format (PDF). The stand-alone Symphony applications are identical to the productivity applets bundled in Notes 8. Lotus Symphony is available and can be downloaded online.

Analysis

It may seem that IBM has made a bold move into a market dominated by MS. However, the Symphony release is not as significant as it may seem. Symphony is an IBM distribution of word processing, spreadsheet and presentation applications from the OpenOffice.org (OO.o) suite of productivity applications, much like the StarOffice suite available from Sun (and also distributed by Google). StarOffice and OO.o have been available for many years; they have additional database and MS Office macro conversion, drawing and calculator modules not included in Symphony. Differences in the IBM offering include support (a forum and fee-based support), Section 508-compliant accessibility, a different user interface and the Eclipse development platform framework.

Organizations have not widely implemented OO.o because their versions of MS Office are still supported (MS supports office versions for 10 years). Also, compatibility is not perfect, requiring some users to run MS Office. Organizations need to classify users to decide who can use OO.o and who needs MS Office — something they don't like to do, partly because OO.o does not offer significant functions that cannot be performed in MS Office.

Some users will appreciate the backing from IBM, and shortfalls in accessibility in other OO.o distributions have hampered its adoption in some government agencies. Nonetheless, the Eclipse framework will not carry much weight in attracting organizations that are not IBM-centric.

Meanwhile, competitors are not standing still. In the long term, we believe Web 2.0 applications that provide easier deployment and real-time collaboration could be more of a threat to MS Office.

Recent developments — like the inability of Ecma International's Office OpenXML document format (created by Microsoft) to gain International Organization for Standardization (ISO) fast track support — could boost interest in ODF format. This could lead to more interest in OO.o. However, aside from raising awareness, the announcement of free availability of Symphony does not significantly advance the cause. IBM, with its late entry last week into the OO.o Foundation, will help by applying its expertise to improve accessibility of OO.o, but it will take a long time to see results in the broader OO.o product set.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Enterprises:

- Don't change organizational strategy because of this announcement.
- Evaluate OO.o and decide if it is appropriate for certain users.
- Examine migration costs to see if there is a business case.

- Don't expect to be able to replace MS Office for all users with OO.o.

RECOMMENDED READING

- "Survey: Office 2003 to Peak at 60% of Installed Base" — We expect Office 2003 to top out as Office 2007 begins implementation. **By Annette Jump and Michael Silver**
- "Office Software Battle Moves to Open-Source Theater" — The need for compatibility with Office file formats helped Microsoft dominate the office productivity software market, but now the battle is on to replace the proprietary format with an "open" or "standard" one. **By Michael Silver and others**

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