

Small Business Software Mini Primer

This PDF is designed to give you a few pointers to the sort of software most small businesses will have to choose from. For a business being careful with your budget is so important, what software to choose can seem like an impossible task given the options.

Since technology moves on so quickly, there may be some aspects of this PDF which become outdated. Sorry about that, I'll try to update when necessary, but feel free to comment via the website at www.woodcom.co.uk

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Do I need Microsoft Office or will Works be sufficient.

What you hope to do with the software? It is often said that 80% of users use only 20% of the available functions. If you will primarily be writing letters, doing basic accounts, and maintaining a small contacts database, then it may well suit you to get Microsoft Works. It's certainly come a long way from its rather humble origins and can now read both Word and Excel files and is often bundled with new computers such as Dell.

Although most modern word processors, spreadsheets, and databases have the means of reading files created by other programs, you will sometimes find that it doesn't end up looking quite the same. However, if you never swap files with anyone else this is not a problem. In fact cheaper versions of Office can have both Word and Works included in the same package. Above that there are a number of different versions of Office differentiated by the individual programs that are included in the bundle. To include the Access database you'll have to go for the most expensive. Because each edition comes with a different mix of software titles, one will most likely have what you want, so check before you buy.

The programs you will need to consider whether you need are Excel, Outlook, Word, Powerpoint, Publisher and Access. It is worth noting that there are upgrades at reduced cost for owners of genuine copies of previous versions, charities and educational users.

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Do I need Microsoft anything, what are the alternatives.

No you don't have to buy from Microsoft, there are alternatives to Office, such as Lotus SmartSuite from IBM and Corel WordPerfect Office. Truth be told that they have been somewhat sidelined by the Microsoft behemoth now whereas particularly WordPerfect was the market leader before the advent of widespread Windows usage. There are also alternatives to Works, such as Clarisworks and Ability Office although again Works has become something of a standard in this area especially being bundled with major computer manufacturers new machines. Maybe the main benefit of these alternatives is they are certainly somewhat cheaper than the Microsoft offerings.

The cheapest option however is Open Office www.openoffice.org which has the benefit of being free! It is fully featured, although not as full of features as Microsoft Office, but does have word processing, spreadsheet, database, drawing and presentation programs. It has the ability to produce Adobe pdf files although you can only export to pdf and cannot edit the files afterwards. As long as you have kept the original document, you can of course edit that and re-export to pdf. It's also multi-platform and multi-lingual. Put simply it means that if you have a number of different operating systems such as Windows, Apple OS and Linux, there is an Open Office suite for all of them. And if you happen to use more than one language it can cope with that as well.

What you decide on will probably depend on what you are used to, what your computer has space and power for, and whether you will have to swap files with other people (see above). Of course you may just go with what may have been bundled with your computer when you bought it.

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What accounting software meets my needs.

If you intend to run a full accounting system with invoicing, stock control, multiple cost codes and such like, then you are spending serious money and need to set aside a lot of time to get to grips with the packages. However TASBooks, Intuit QuickBooks and Sage all have low-end as well as full-blown versions.

Although they are all well established now, they could not realistically be described as easy to use, and unless you have some accounting knowledge, they can be difficult to set up to get the best from. If all you need is to keep track of income and expenditure, then programs like Microsoft Money may be sufficient.

One program worth looking at is the free accounting software available through Quickbooks. Yes, Quickbooks Simple Start quickbooks.intuit.com is a complete accounting package for free. It does have its limitations, and obviously Intuit are hoping you will at least buy the full edition of QuickBooks SimpleStart but none the less you may not ever need more if you are a small business with no more than twenty clients. However it does have time saving features such as being able to produce PDF invoices and email them to your contact from within the program.

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Is it worth buying a DTP program, if so, which one.

The distinction between word processing and desktop publishing is increasingly blurred. Even the cheaper word processors have the ability to do multiple columns and include graphics. So why buy DTP at all?

Well, if you regularly send files for colour printing, you may need to send colour separation (where each of three primary colours is effectively sent as a separate file). Even if this is not the case, the print bureau may only be able to print from high-end DTP packages like Adobe PageMaker, QuarkXPress or Corel Ventura. The output from these programs is of a professional standard, even down to specifying colours according to international standards (Pantone), and is more likely to print out as intended.

The complexity of these programs can however be mind-boggling. At the lower end, there are programs like Serif PagePlus and Microsoft Publisher which will enable easy production of fliers, leaflets and publicity, particularly if used with a colour printer. You may find that you already have Microsoft Publisher as part of an Office bundle, or that PowerPoint will give you all you need for publicity production.