

## Teenagers and the future work place - the beginning of the end for Microsoft Office?

By Bob Tarzey, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

Two things intersected with each other in the last few weeks that got me thinking about the future of Microsoft Office.

The first was a roundtable discussion ([www.ft.com/dbpodcast](http://www.ft.com/dbpodcast)) about the impact today's kids could have on the workplace of the future. The conclusion was, in a nutshell, that their being at one with technology would be a benefit to those employers that were ready to exploit it. This discussion was more about the use of mobile devices and the like, but it was the second thing that got me thinking about Microsoft Office.

I have been helping a teenager get a PC sorted out for doing school work and, I am sure, other far more interesting things (actually, apart from a credit card little help was needed). It is still quite a cost to get a decent laptop sorted out running Microsoft Windows and this did not include Office. You can get a student edition of Microsoft Office for around €100, but before forking out we decided to take a look at free options.

First stop was Google Spreadsheets and the Writely online word processor, also owned by Google. I was impressed to be up and running with both in a matter of minutes, using my existing private email address (not a Google one) for login and correspondence and finding both were intuitive and easy to use (my only other experience of such tools in the last decade having been Microsoft Office).

To be objective, I also gave Microsoft Office Live a go. In fairness to Microsoft, its response to Google's online office tools is still in beta, but it was a pretty lousy experience by comparison. First, I could only register by giving a false physical address (which was compulsory). Microsoft will only accept a valid US zip code. I got round this by giving the first part of my own address and the zip for Microsoft's HQ in Redmond. This worked; I was on my way in, although I had to use a Microsoft Hotmail address, rather than my preferred email address.

But then the real problem came, it wanted credit card details for this free service—not, you understand, to extract money, but to validate that I was a “legitimate entity”. A teenager would probably have to give up at this point, but I decided to persevere, until I realised that my credit card company would probably not like my hybrid email address.

So based on this brief experience, Google pretty much 10/10, Microsoft nil-points. OK it is early days, and Microsoft will most likely get things sorted out eventually, although there is much reporting of strife in the Office Live camp. But this is not really the point.

If teenagers start to use free tools and get used to these, they will arrive in the workplace with these skills. One of the main reasons businesses say they continue to invest in Microsoft Office is that it is what all their potential employees are familiar with. This may not be the case in a few years time unless Office Live quickly becomes more usable.

Of course, both Google and Microsoft have ongoing problems to consider with the use of on-line office tools. Businesses will be wary of availability and bandwidth problems, more so than for other “software as a service” applications, because nearly all information workers have to make use of them on a regular basis. And then there is the problem of making money with such free delivery models.

Google relies on attracting people to its services and then advertising to them, not something that businesses will be too keen on and there will be plenty of security issues with the remote storage of business documents to be considered too (although the fact that they are stored in a safe location would be a boon for many an SMB). It might well be that Google would start offering charged for on-site servers—almost full circle.

Microsoft has a lot to lose even if Office Live has legs. How does it recover the licence revenue from those who desert in favour of free software even if they choose Office Live?

Something disruptive is needed to break Microsoft hegemony of the office tools market and Google's service may evolve to become that. And, I bet any self-respecting teenager with €100 to blow can think of more fun things to spend it on than Microsoft Office.

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