

Review: Intriguing new Office suite hindered by interface

July 25 2012, By Troy Wolverton

The [new version of Microsoft Office](#) has some cool new features, but it suffers from taking design cues from the upcoming Windows 8.

Microsoft announced the new version of Office last week, then provided reporters and columnists with a tablet running the latest pre-release version of Windows 8 and preview of the new Office suite.

Office, with at least five applications and some seven related programs, has become such a behemoth that I haven't had time to test it thoroughly. But I have used it enough to form some initial impressions. Foremost among them is that I like many of the new features, but find the latest Office disappointingly difficult to use.

Like Windows 8, the new version of Office was designed with post-PC devices in mind. Microsoft officials said they revamped all the programs so they can be more easily used on [touch-screen](#) devices. And the company completely redesigned two applications - the [OneNote](#) notetaking program and the Lync communications program - to make them run natively on the new touch-centric interface found in [Windows 8](#).

Borrowing a page from [Dropbox](#) and [Google](#) Drive, Microsoft has built into the new Office its cloud-based [storage system](#), called SkyDrive. Once you install it, SkyDrive shows up in the file manager as a local drive. You can save documents there from each of your Office apps and then access those documents on other Internet-connected computers or

devices.

In addition to SkyDrive, Microsoft has added other features to make the Office applications more socially connected or more useful on non-PC devices. From within Outlook, users can see if their Skype friends are online and can call them instantly. They can use Word as an [electronic reader](#), flipping pages in a document by swiping across a touch screen. They can present a PowerPoint slideshow to a [Web audience](#) at the touch of a button. And while giving a [PowerPoint presentation](#), users can draw on the screen to underline or circle particular points for emphasis.

Excel, meanwhile, has a new feature called Flash Fill that automatically recognizes and separates discrete sets of data within a column of cells.

Microsoft also is offering a new way for consumers to buy Office. Instead of having to pay a large one-time fee for the latest version of the suite for each of their PCs, they will be able to sign up for a subscription that allows them to install it on multiple machines and get future upgrades included in the cost.

A lot of these new features are compelling or welcome changes. But the new Office has a big problem it shares with the new Windows: Its interface is a mess.

In an attempt to make Windows more versatile and competitive in a world where touch-screen devices like smartphones and tablets are outselling PCs, Microsoft bolted a touch-based interface onto its traditional Windows desktop. The result is a confusing hybrid that forces users to repeatedly switch between the two incompatible interfaces - and constantly forces them to think about how they are supposed to interact with each.

Although the touch-based interface, dubbed Metro, was designed with

devices like tablets in mind, it now serves as the home screen for Windows, forcing you to use it even on PCs and laptops that don't have touch screens. Conversely, many Windows applications are still desktop applications, which means you may often find yourself in the Windows desktop - which was designed to be used with keyboards and mice, not fat fingertips - even when using a touch-based tablet.

In other words, the new version of Windows isn't aware of context. It presents the same front no matter what device you are using and that front offers problems for both traditional and touch-based devices. And Office generally suffers from the same problem.

The five major [Office applications](#) - Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access and Outlook - remain desktop applications. They retain their confusing collection of menu commands and the ribbons of formatting icons that they had in previous, desktop-only versions.

Those commands are fine for power users and are easy enough to navigate on a traditional PC. But you're not going to want to use them on a touch-based tablet. Microsoft has made little effort to streamline that confusing collection of commands for a touch-based interface or to provide a touch-centric way of interacting with these programs.

The one exception is when you tap or click on the file command. Instead of a ribbon, you get a Metro-like interface with wide-columns, large thumbnails and large-font commands and options. It's how you'd expect a Metro version of an Office application to look throughout. But in this case, it's an interface that's likely to be confusing and disorienting to desktop users, because it's such a different way of interacting with the application than what you see when you click on the other menu commands.

Microsoft obviously thought a lot about what Office should be able to do

in the post-PC era. I just wish it had thought more about how users would interact with it.

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

(c)2012 San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Calif.)
Distributed by MCT Information Services

Citation: Review: Intriguing new Office suite hindered by interface (2012, July 25) retrieved 13 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-07-intriguing-office-hindered-interface.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--