

Review: Why subscribe to Office when so much is free?

February 11 2015, by Anick Jesdanun



This screen shot provided by Microsoft shows the Android version of the company's Powerpoint app. Microsoft's Office 365 subscription will appeal to people who use the Office programs, such as Word for text documents and Excel for spreadsheets, on a variety of traditional Windows or Mac computers or Windows tablets. But those who primarily use mobile devices such as iPhones, iPads and Android devices can probably stick with the free offerings, even though a subscription unlocks additional features. (AP Photo/Microsoft)

Just as I was warming up to choosing a Microsoft Office 365 subscription over making a one-time software purchase, Microsoft started giving away a lot of subscription benefits for free. The company now offers Word, Excel and others at no cost on most mobile devices.

It's a smart move by Microsoft, but it makes me wonder whether you really need a subscription, which starts at \$70 a year.

The subscription will appeal to people who use Office apps on traditional Windows or Mac computers or Windows tablets, such as the Surface Pro 3. Those who primarily use iOS and Android mobile devices can probably stick with free apps. What's right for you comes down to whether you need a PC or can get things done with just your smartphone or tablet. Here's what to consider.

THE FREEBIES

Microsoft's newly released Office apps for iPhones, iPads and Android tablets are quite good. Microsoft offers Word for text documents, Excel for spreadsheets, PowerPoint for presentations, Outlook for email and OneNote for organization—all for free. (Access for databases and Publisher for desktop publishing aren't available yet.)

I'm writing this review on Word using an iPad and Android tablets from Samsung and Google—the latter with a wireless keyboard. I've edited documents on an iPhone and am pleased it has the same features that are available on the iPad, though with some menu changes to account for the smaller screen.

I'm still not totally used to the mobile apps, especially for cutting and pasting text in Word and inserting cells in Excel spreadsheets. There are

also missing features, such as green underlines of potential grammatical mistakes. But the apps include most of what I use on PCs. You do have to sign in with a Microsoft account, but you can create one for free.

On Apple devices, a subscription would unlock about two dozen features, such as inserting section breaks and tracking changes between drafts. (Some power users might need these, but I don't.) There are fewer features available for Android phones and tablets, whether free or for pay. Microsoft says the Android apps will catch up, as well as the version for Windows phones.



This screen shot provided by Microsoft shows the Android version of the company's Word app. Microsoft's Office 365 subscription will appeal to people who use the Office programs, such as Word for text documents and Excel for spreadsheets, on a variety of traditional Windows or Mac computers or Windows tablets. But those who primarily use mobile devices such as iPhones, iPads and Android devices can probably stick with the free offerings, even though a

subscription unlocks additional features. (AP Photo/Microsoft)

Note: If you have a Windows tablet, you must pay for Office unless you're running a lightweight operating system called RT.

PAY ONCE, NEVER AGAIN

Can't live with just a smartphone or tablet? You can buy Office for personal computers and Windows tablets the traditional way, by paying for the software just once. For \$140, you get Word, Excel, PowerPoint and OneNote. Comparatively, an Office 365 subscription costs \$70 a year for one user, so by year three the subscription is costing you more. You're guaranteed the latest version of Office, which comes out every three years, but the one-time fee is still cheaper.

SO WHY PAY AGAIN AND AGAIN?

— For iOS and Android mobile devices, you get extra features you can't get any other way.

— Most Windows tablets, including the Surface Pro, require a one-time purchase or subscription, even for basic features. The subscription also gives you three apps you don't get with the \$140 one-time purchase: Outlook, Access and Publisher. (You can buy all seven Office apps for a one-time fee of \$400, but the subscription is cheaper.)

— For PCs, a \$70 one-user annual subscription lets you use all seven

Office apps on multiple PCs and tablets by signing in and out. The \$140 one-time purchase limits you to one device and four of the seven apps.

— The subscription is a great deal for multiple users or multiple PCs. For \$100 a year, rather than \$70, you can install the software suite on up to five Mac or Windows PCs, so you don't have to keep signing in and out. That can be five PCs you have, or five individuals in a household. You can switch up the PCs as often as you like. (A subscription also allots you an additional five tablets and five phones, but Microsoft doesn't really enforce that limit.)

— If you have a lot of files to store, a subscription gives you 1 terabyte of online storage through OneDrive, compared with just the 15 gigabytes you get with a free account. You also get 60 minutes a month of Skype calls to anyone. Typically, free Skype calls are limited to other Skype users.

THE VALUE

The days of keeping your digital life on a single machine are long gone, and the subscription makes it easy to manage multiple PCs. But people tend to have multiple [mobile devices](#), not PCs. Microsoft's giveaway of iOS and Android apps eliminates a major need for a [subscription](#).

Then again, Microsoft has little choice when it's competing with cheap and free apps that recognize the Office file format. The company would rather people stick with Office, even for free, in hopes they will buy premium features later. There are signs that's working: Excluding business customers, Office subscribers grew 30 percent to 9.2 million in the last three months of 2014—the same period Microsoft released its latest iPhone and iPad apps and made core features free.

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