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Office Small Business Edition 2003

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Get ready for Office 2003.

Microsoft Corp. will release the latest version of its business software suite on Oct. 18. Office 2003 isn't an earthshaking update, experts say, but it does add a number of interesting features.

versity of Wisconsin.

The only tough thing to learn in Office 2003 is the XML and SharePoint Portal Server features, Leonard says.

The XML features aim to help

users analyze business information gleaned from customer relationship management applications and enterprise resource planning systems. SharePoint is being touted as a collaboration tool for businesses and or-

Is Evolutionary, Not Revolutionary

organizations.

"If you're going to try to use XML or SharePoint, your training curve will look like the north face of Mount Everest," Leonhard said.

For the majority of business and

home users who will neither need nor use those applications, Leonhard sees a smooth path.

"Anyone who's conversant with Office XP should find the leap to Office 2003 pretty straightforward,"

he said.

Bekker agrees. "As long as the organization's employees have previous (Microsoft) Office experience, it's going to be a pretty seamless transition," he said.

The high-end flavor of Office 2003 — the Professional Edition — will cost \$499 for the full version and \$329 if you upgrade from an earlier version.

Office Small Business Edition 2003, meanwhile, is priced at \$449, or \$279 for the upgrade. And the Standard Edition, which includes 2003 editions of Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook, is \$399, or \$239 for an upgrade.

If previous Office rollouts are any indication, expect a big marketing campaign from Microsoft. The company will likely tout the features of Office 2003 as essential. But some experts say the new software won't instantly make the older version of Office obsolete.

That's not to say there aren't worthwhile new features.

Cosmetic Changes

The most promising enhancements lie within the Microsoft Outlook component of the product, some experts say. That program handles e-mail and scheduling tasks.

"The new Outlook interface is a major departure from the old presentation," said Scott Bekker, editor of ENImag.com, an online publication and newsletter. He follows the use of Microsoft products in corporations.

"There's a much larger (Preview Pane) viewing area for previewing e-mails that takes up most of the right side of the display, as well as a really nice feature called Search Folders, where you can set parameters that bring all related e-mails into one place," Bekker said.

"The Preview Pane is a tiny, cosmetic change, really — but one that can save a lot of time and effort," said Woody Leonhard, editor of the Woody's Office 2003 newsletter at woodysonline.com.

Leonhard also is a fan of Outlook's Search Folders. They improve the user's ability to manage many different types of e-mail, he says.

If you're more interested in the other parts of the suite, there may be less reason to upgrade.

Take PowerPoint, Microsoft's presentation software. In past upgrades, the improvements were more dramatic, says Read Gilgen, author of several books on PowerPoint.

He cites the 2002 upgrade to PowerPoint, for instance, which was called PowerPoint XP. This time around the differences aren't as tangible.

"That's not to say PowerPoint 2003 isn't great, but that's only because 2002 had already added many features needed and asked for by users for a long time," Gilgen said.

Tough Sell

Microsoft is making a big push to attract small businesses and home users with the latest Office, says Mary Jo Foley, editor of the Ziff Davis Microsoft Watch newsletter.

"Microsoft is making a very concerted effort to go after this group with Office 2003," she said. "Previously, Microsoft offered a small-business edition of Office, but only via PC makers who preloaded it on their PCs. This time, Microsoft is offering a small-business bundle at retail."

Large companies may have less of a need to upgrade.

On the corporate front, "Microsoft's got a much tougher sell on its hands," Foley said. "It already has in excess of 95% of the Windows business desktop market sewn up with Office. And if your desktop suite suits most of your needs, why upgrade?"

Most corporate users probably won't upgrade to Office 2003 unless they're also upgrading their operating system, Foley says.

There are reasons not to upgrade that go beyond the price of buying new software.

For instance, workers have to learn the new programs.

In a big company, training those employees can be costly. For home and small business users, meanwhile, taking the time to learn a new product can be a distraction.

In the case of Office 2003, there isn't much of a learning curve, experts say.

"If they are already using PowerPoint 2002, there should be virtually no up-to-speed time, or training expenses," said Gilgen, director of Microsoft services at the U