

Office 11: It's time to get of the train

I recently updated a web page while on the road, and not having an html tool handy, I made the simple fix using the default on the computer, MS Word XP. The change of a url link from index2.html to index.html seemed simple enough, a simple push of the delete key to rid the offending character, hit save, and upload.

What I got stunned me.

Word took my light, easy to download and render HTML doc and transposed my handiwork into an object that only a hardened XML geek could love. My lovely 28 line code had suddenly become a bloated 229 lined monster, filled with XML syntax and Microsoft specific tagging. What I wanted was a simple fix. What I got was inflexibility.

I started to ponder my 10 years of using Word. When Windows 2.0 was the shell I coded to, and Word for Dos was the upstart, pushing WordPerfect to generate prettier documents in a more user friendly manner. I've liked Word, PowerPoint and Excel. They were truly better than anything else out there.

Now I'm no prude when it comes to productivity apps. I've used almost all of them at some point in my career, often using more than one simultaneously across different computers (right now, I type this on my desktop, while having mail and a presentation open on my laptop on the same desk). I most recently gave Open Office 1.0 a run for its money, to see if I could truly interoperate transparently with my Microsoft standardized co-workers, with good results.

The problem with Office is simple. It is a trap. The reason that people use it is that they always have.

So now that Office 11 is being readied, and Office 10 has barely been shoved out the door into corporations, it became clear to me that the architecture structure of software purchasing is heavily weighted to the front end.

Client side behavior (READ –transparent use with back end) continually drives back end purchasing decisions. The countless thousands of Exchange server installations exist only because Office dictates that for real workgroup scheduling and collaboration, you have to spend

hundreds of dollars a year per user on the back end, no matter what group licensing you got on your front end office bundle.

Office 11 presents an excellent opportunity for companies to evaluate their desktop needs. The switch in file structure, and licensing costs, with little in the way of return on investment, should CTOs the ammunition they need to evaluate alternatives.

Office 11 is the first version that will require back office upgrades from the MS BO 5.0 suites, and it will have tight hooks with other proprietary (and costly) MS Architectures (such as Active Directory and SQL Server). Use of third party back end, as has always been true with Microsoft Office is possible, but sub-optimal at best.

So, having a desktop software cost of over \$600 going to Microsoft (for the XP Pro and Office XP), and a backend licensing cost of well over \$1000 per user, I began to understand that I was at the point to look for alternatives. CTOs and CFOs always have the right to throw a vendor out who isn't adding value, even a vendor like Microsoft.

Alternatives to Office abound. Corel is still out there (although owned in part by Microsoft to keep them out of the Linux market), StarOffice is promising, but Sun doesn't seem to understand the corporate desktop support needs, Open Office is quite good, but there's no one to call if I need training or support, and then there's IBM SmartSuite, a powerful group of apps, but a bit bloated and tied to Notes.

So, like all good corporate users, it's just too much work to switch, and I'll keep paying the yearly Microsoft tax, because no one wants to step up to the plate and set me free.

It's still 8 months or more away from Office 11. Maybe, just maybe, they might....