

# Small Business Connections

PC Tips For Small Business

Presented By

**On-Site Support**

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## Welcome!

Welcome to the first issue of Small Business Connections, the newsletter of On-Site Support. On-Site Support is a PC services and consulting firm based in Spartanburg, SC. We specialize in offering quality computer services to small businesses which do not have a full-time technology department. We have been in business in Spartanburg for over 5 years and have helped many small (and occasionally large) businesses over that time with a wide variety of computer and network issues. We hope that you enjoy this newsletter and that it is beneficial to your business. It is our goal at On-Site Support to help small businesses get the most from their technology investment.

## OpenOffice Offers Free MS Office Alternative

Microsoft Office is one of the most common applications seen on desktop PCs today, whether they be in large corporations, small businesses, or homes. Office has gone through 5 major releases since 1995—Office 4.3, Office 95, Office 97, Office 2000, and most recently, Office XP. Each new release has promised (and delivered) new features, more Internet connectivity, and better integration, among other things. MS Office is an excellent product and has been very successful in the marketplace, with its market share currently around 90%.

For many small businesses, the problem with MS Office has been its cost and its very frequent upgrade cycle. The current version of Office, Office XP, sells for \$540 for the Professional version and \$480 for the Standard version (based on recent prices at [cdw.com](http://cdw.com)). Upgrades run \$299 for Office Professional and \$220 for Standard. Of course, if you remember back a few years to the good (or bad) old days of DOS, a copy of WordPerfect, the most popular word processor of the time, sold for around \$250, as did Lotus 123. If you added in a database program, contact manager, email (which barely existed at the time) and presentation graphics program, all of which are included in Office Professional, it was easy to spend over \$1,000 on applications.

Some small businesses facing the \$500 cost for a copy of Office choose to illegally load the same copy on multiple PCs. While this may seem to save money in the short term, it opens the business owner up to possible civil or even criminal prosecution, with fines of up to \$150,000. I recently read an account of a disgruntled ex-employee who reported his former company's software violations. Federal Marshals raided the company and seized all of the computers and backup tapes, forcing the business to close! For more information on the legal use of software and penalties for violations, please visit the Business Software Alliance web site at [www.bsa.org](http://www.bsa.org). The option to load software on multiple computers has disappeared with the release of Office XP, which must be acti-

vated every time it is installed. If the serial number has already been activated, it may not be installed onto a second system.

For business owners who want to remain legal and also don't want to break the bank buying software, there are alternatives to MS Office. The best-priced alternative is called OpenOffice. OpenOffice is based on StarOffice, which was originally developed in Germany, then acquired by Sun Microsystems beginning in 2000. OpenOffice is considered open source software, meaning that it is developed by programmers from all over the world. This is similar to Linux, the Unix-like operating system that many companies are starting to use for a variety of server applications. The best part about OpenOffice is its price—FREE! OpenOffice can be downloaded from [www.openoffice.org](http://www.openoffice.org). It includes a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation graphics, and drawing program. It does not offer a database such as Access or contact manager such as Outlook. OpenOffice can read and write MS Office 97/2000 file formats. The suite has received excellent reviews from several computer magazines since its release. John Dvorak of PC Magazine recently described it as the “biggest threat yet to the Microsoft Office suite monopoly.”



If you prefer to buy your software from a vendor that has an actual phone number you can call for help, there are still a few competitors out there for MS Office. Lotus still makes the SmartSuite program, which sells for around \$375, and WordPerfect is still hanging around as a division of Corel. The WordPerfect Office suite sells for \$327.

Small business owners have to decide what is important to them when making software decisions for their business. If having an industry-standard product that has been around for years and has a clear support channel is a priority, MS Office is the way to go. If saving money, while still using a high-quality product, albeit one without a telephone number, is the priority, OpenOffice is an alternative which is worth exploring.

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*If you would like more information on the topics presented in this newsletter, or any other area of interest, please give us a call. On-Site Support offers free consultations to help small businesses get the most from their technology.*

## VPNs Offer Remote Opportunities for Small Business

Many small businesses are looking for ways for employees to access the office network from home or while traveling. Traditionally, this has involved setting up a remote access server with one or more dedicated modems. The traveling user would dial up to the remote access server and then exchange files, email, or whatever information was needed. The problem with this approach is that dial-up access speeds are very slow compared to being on the local network. Even the fastest dial-up connection of 56K is around one hundred times slower than the slowest local area network connection, meaning that a file that takes just a few seconds to transfer in the office could take 10 minutes while working remotely. Coupled with difficulty connecting and often unexplained disconnects while in the middle of a transfer, remote access by modem is often a frustrating experience.

The advent of the Internet has brought with it many options for working remotely. Among these is the Virtual Private Network (VPN). A VPN offers businesses the opportunity to use the Internet to connect remote users to the home office or to connect multiple sites together using secure technology. To implement a VPN, the office network must be connected to the Internet via a full-time connection, such as a T-1 line or DSL. Fortunately, prices for fast Internet connections have dropped significantly over the past few years. Small businesses can now buy a DSL Internet connection for less than \$100 per month which offers speeds faster than \$1,000 a month would buy 3 years ago. Once the Internet connection is established, there are a number of

ways to set up the VPN. Microsoft Windows NT or 2000 servers have VPN software built in. Some companies prefer to go with a dedicated VPN server, such as the Watchguard Firebox SOHO (Small Office/Home Office) model. This is a dedicated Firewall which can support up to 50 simultaneous VPN users, while keeping hackers at bay. Dedicated VPN servers are generally considered to be more secure than the software built in to Windows NT/2000.

In order to access the VPN remotely, the remote user must have an Internet connection on their remote computer as well. This can be a dial-up or broadband connection such as your home cable or DSL modem. Once a connection with the Internet has been established, the remote user must then start a second dial-up networking session using the Microsoft VPN client. Once this session is established, the user can access office servers, email, etc. just as they would while in the office. For those users fortunate enough to have a broadband connection, the VPN session can be nearly as fast as sitting at the office. The VPN client software is included as part of all versions of Windows since Windows 98 and is no more difficult to use than a standard dial-up connection.

When used properly, VPN technology can save small businesses a lot of money while making remote access to the network much easier.

