

Time to take a **different** direction?



Ability Office claims to be a serious competitor to Microsoft Office. But are its **price, features** and the fact that the product is well matched to the new **small laptops** enough to justify a school taking the decision to adopt it?

Fortunately for the readers of *The Informed Executive*, the electronic format adopted in 2007 removes any constraints on the number of pages that can be devoted to a topic – which would have been the case if the title were still being printed on paper. It means that if we come across a topic during our research that justifies inclusion in the edition, or being covered in greater depth, we are able to do that.

A good example emerged from our interview with the Qualifications & Curriculum Authority, in the person of Mick Waters, its Director of Curriculum. (page 58). Speaking about the role of ICT in the school curriculum, Mr Waters had commented that “We would expect children to be familiar with technologies such as laptops, palm-held devices and internet access, so that they can make ICT a powerful vehicle for studying other subjects.”

He went on to talk about the extent to which a toolkit of office-style applications had permeated the schools sector from the early years upwards, Mick Waters believes that “Children take word processing for granted and use it with ease.

“By Key Stage 2, spreadsheets are widely used as they provide a vehicle for the data

which will be used in many different classroom subjects.

“There is a concern that if they cannot use a spreadsheet by that stage, they will be held back in those subject areas. That is true of graphics and presentation software as well. It is important, therefore, that there is complete confidence in using those tools.”

Office-style products in schools

Here we have a major figure in the education system making a strong case for ‘office’ products in the classroom; an environment which seems set to be broadening out from the traditional desktop and laptop machines to encompass the new generation of netbooks that are based on the Intel Atom chip.

We could not fail to notice the number of High Street stores selling suites of office applications, at a price much lower than Microsoft Office. Among them are Tesco, Sainsbury, and Woolworth. Closer investigation revealed that all of the software was a re-branded version of an established product called Ability Office.

The biggest volume seller in the proprietary office software arena has been Microsoft Office; the suite that is based around Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook. And, as we suggest overleaf, on page 78, no-one has ever been fired for buying Microsoft.

The product set is 'safe', comprehensive and a classic. But it is also quite expensive, even in its editions for students, and the education sector clearly has to think twice before purchasing it out of their limited budgets.

Fear of obsolescence

There are other issues facing the education sector, however. More than ever before, schools and colleges are deeply concerned about obsolescence. If they purchase a line of hardware for their classrooms and computing laboratories today, will the kit be able to handle increasingly resource-consuming applications one year or five years from now, or will purchasers have to invest in more sophisticated hardware simply to keep up with software developments?

The objective has to be to maximise the longevity (and therefore the cost-effectiveness) of their hardware. As we observed when considering the Intel Atom chip earlier in this edition (page 66),

“... software developers have often taken a backward step each time a new processor has emerged, creating less efficient and less 'tidily written' applications which simply mop up the extra resource without a proportionate increase in software performance or functionality. This 'bloatware' as it has come to be known, is a case of Parkinson's Law applied with a vengeance.”

It was therefore worth trying to identify a product line that was

- priced competitively to Microsoft Office,
- had a track record that would re-assure those who were uncertain about a third party solution,
- would run efficiently across the complete range of Intel processors found today – and in the future – in UK schools.

We could not fail to notice the number of High Street stores selling what appeared to be suites of office applications, at a price much lower than Microsoft Office. Among them are Tesco, Sainsbury, and Woolworth. Closer investigation revealed that all of the software was a re-branded version of an established product called Ability Office.

That was interesting because the editorial team at the publication had installed an earlier version of Ability Office back in 2005 when preparing a critique for publication. As the results then were highly creditable, we decided to look further into Ability.

If the product set still withstood scrutiny as an office solution, this could become the office solution of preference for schools keen to provide a unified office 'experience' across classroom and admin office.

Price of Ability

The first hurdle is probably the easiest to clear: the price of the current version, Ability 5, is a very good reason why a potential user of Microsoft Office should be looking at Ability Office.

- The Business version of Ability Office 5 comes in at £34.99.
- The Home version, which omits the database application, comes in at £27.99

Both prices are inclusive of VAT and provide two licenses. Per seat site licences are also available for larger enterprises and educational establishments.

If we take the Business version as the basis for this commentary, there are seven components; four of which mirror the Microsoft element in the corresponding space.

Ability's Write, Spreadsheet, Presentation and Database are self-explanatory.

The three additional modules are Photopaint Studio (which the developers describe as having been “designed with Adobe Photoshop users in mind”), Draw, which provides vector illustration facilities and Photoalbum, an image organiser.

Add to this collection a facility for creating PDFs from any of the applications in the suite, and Ability Office Business must justify further scrutiny by even the most traditional purchasing authority.



Taking **responsible decisions** about software purchases

Has anyone ever been fired for buying an IBM mainframe? Computer industry folklore is full of stories about corporate executives signing off multi-million pound orders for boxes with the IBM logo rather than 'taking the risk' of buying an ICL or a Tandem or a Unisys machine with a spec that would probably achieve the desired result and certainly have saved a few per cent in the process.

Taking the 'safe' route

The IBM route was inherently 'safe' to the accountants and the company boards who were aware of the cast-iron credentials of Big Blue – but knew very little else about computing.

Thirty years on, read 'Microsoft' for 'IBM'. Anyone who has been able to monitor the progress of the software company's core applications over the years will be aware of the huge amount of development that has found its way into products such as Word and Excel and Access.

Those three words are synonymous with the Microsoft Corporation, with or without the name Microsoft and its trademarks ahead of them.

Even the phrase 'death by PowerPoint' has passed into business parlance to describe long and tedious corporate sessions made possible by the huge array of features that the vendor's presentation software contains.

Similar but different enough

It would follow that any developer hoping to come to market with a suite of office products that go any distance towards matching the features of Microsoft Office is going to be in for a very hard time.

If the new entrant is too close a clone of Office, Seattle law firms will be having injunctions put in place in every country where the perceived threat is sold: if it falls outside the scope of the Microsoft copyright and patents in any material respect, then the question must be why a developer even considered investment in a near-lookalike in the first place.

Public bodies and major corporates, for example, keen to protect the value of their investment in their business software are unlikely to risk buying product from a mere upstart which could go out of business because it failed to attract sales or finance, or was closed down by the order of the Courts. Microsoft makes for an inherently safe investment.

Is Ability Office a 'safe investment'?

So where does that leave Ability in the 'safe investment' stakes? The Ability Office product set was developed by Ability Plus Software Ltd, but the exclusive worldwide rights to sell, market and distribute it worldwide were taken up by the UK-based and AIM-listed Formjet Plc in September 2004.

All of the high profile companies who carry Ability in one guise or another are sensitive to any product or activity which could damage their reputation. It would be reasonable to assume that Tesco, Sainsbury, and Woolworth - and there are more - would have subjected both Ability Office and the Formjet Group to intensive scrutiny before the products were taken on board.

Where do you stand when buying direct?

We looked earlier in this edition (page 64) at the role of Becta, the body which has traditionally created purchasing specifications for ICT solutions. It was established there that schools and local authorities have no statutory requirement to accept Becta's advice.

Schools are free to conduct their own investigations, and purchase whatever technology they consider meets their requirements, either for teaching or administration. There is little evidence to suggest that the freedom of choice which the self-administered funding provides has found schools 'coming unstuck'.

The advice must be that if a school's managers are satisfied that Ability Office is the right product to take on board, they are within their rights to do so. As the banking world would be the first to agree, zero risk is no longer a valid notion. But purchasing a solution like Ability Office to run across all of your classroom, portable and administrative computers must fall at the very bottom of the risk scale. §

Installing and operating

Despite the diversity of applications which the Ability Office Business contains, installation is quite straightforward.

What is immediately obvious about all of the modules is their look and feel: to a first-time visitor, it would be easy to mistake the product for a new version of Microsoft Office; how the screen is laid out and how the command structure operates are both very familiar to Microsoft customers.

The Ability Office suite, like its higher profile competitor, is highly integrated, allowing data to be shared and edited across the component applications. That has always proved to be a major selling point of Microsoft Office and the Ability developers did not lose the opportunity to incorporate that feature.

High degree of compatibility

There is also a high degree of file compatibility between Ability and – as the vendor’s marketing material puts it coyly – “other leading office brands”. In practice, that would mean that a document created in Microsoft Word could be opened and edited in Ability Write, and vice versa.

That is a sufficiently high degree of compatibility for an organisation which had been working with several generations of Word to install Ability Office and continue using all of the files created with the Microsoft system.

The same degree of compatibility is true of the spreadsheet – files created in Excel can be opened and edited in the corresponding Ability Spreadsheet, and saved back to Excel. Ability allows the .doc and .xls formats to be set as defaults, ensuring that documents retain this interchangeability.

And so the compatibility continues, with Ability Database and Ability Presentation.

The Adobe Photoshop file format often creates problems for non-Adobe systems, but Ability Photopaint appeared to have no problems in opening a .psd (Photoshop) file made up from 7 layers of graphics and saving it again. More to the point, Photoshop could re-open the file.

When the same file was then saved as a ‘native’ Photopaint file (.apx), that was when the 100% compatibility ended as Photoshop was unable to open it as the version of the Adobe system being deployed did not recognise that file extension.

There was one relatively small problem when Photopaint attempts to open Photoshop PSD files. Users are immediately alerted to the fact that it cannot handle all types of PSD file,

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including 32-bit files and CMYK, the method of storing colour component information used by the process colour printing industry.

Since educational establishments tend not to go in for producing full colour separations, that particular problem is unlikely to be encountered very often.

Production of Adobe PDF files

On the question of support for Adobe’s PDF format, which the Ability developers have hailed as an important feature of the suite, this has to be regarded a valuable asset.

Listed as a printer option, and therefore available to each of the applications in the system, the Ability-PDF converter was able to convert the Photoshop file considered earlier in this commentary into a high quality .pdf file, for example, along with the customary text and spreadsheet report files more normally associated with PDFs.

While the PDF image taken from the Photoshop file could not be opened in one of the older versions of Adobe Acrobat Reader (4), there was certainly no problem with Acrobat 7, which is now widely used and available as a free reader download.

Latest news

Ability Office on Atom-based Fizzbook

It is encouraging to find that the netbook manufacturers agree with our assessment of Ability Office as the office solution of choice.

The **Zoostorm Fizzbook** is a full-spec Classmate PC machine that has been launched into the UK both as a high street retail offering and into the schools market. The system is offered complete with Ability Word and Spreadsheet, along with two educational packages sourced from the same UK group as Ability Office.

It is inevitable that other manufacturers will follow that lead given the small footprint of the application on the Atom-based machines and its price-competitiveness.

Time to decide about Ability Office?

To write a treatise on each of the Ability components, itemising their features one by one, would serve little purpose apart from providing an advertisement for the product.

It would be safe to say, however, that the range of features supported by all of the Ability Office Business modules is extensive and a user of Microsoft Office would not feel short-changed were a transition to be made.

Committing to Ability Office

At the schools and small business user end of the office systems marketplace, there should be few problems in making a commitment to Ability Office in preference to Microsoft Office, if only on grounds of price.

Trying to find an equivalent version of the Microsoft product against which a price comparison can be made is difficult given the US vendor's policy of creating restricted home and student editions, and including additional functions in its own Professional version. However the packages are viewed, Ability Office Business represents a saving of at least 50% on Microsoft.

Price is clearly important to the larger organisation, but a lack of awareness about Ability could be enough to bring out the 'IBM factor'. Who is behind the Ability products, for example, and would a school be putting its activities at risk if it were to purchase them? We address those factors on page 78.

Compatibility between versions

Ability 5 has moved on significantly from its predecessors and there are a few issues of backward compatibility which need to be addressed. It requires Windows XP or Windows Vista: this version is unicode format and will not run on the earlier Windows 95/98/ME.



And for the handful of PC users still committed to Windows NT and Windows 2000, there would be the problem in that neither operating system is supported.

A minor concern would be that files saved in Version 5 cannot open in version 4 due to the unicode support for the version, which is not backward compatible.

Were Version 5 to be implemented in phases across an enterprise, documents and spreadsheets could be exported to .doc and .xls format and then opened in Version 4 where necessary. That would be a small price in terms of the overall benefits, however.

Is Ability suitable for schools?

Whatever else it might be, this publication is not in the business of teaching children or running a school. Could the features that we found very positive be totally irrelevant to the audience we are addressing on this occasion?

To make quite sure we were on track rather than simply 'on message' with Ability 5, we checked up to see what the schools software evaluation site TEEM had been doing with the product.

As independent reporters on software solutions for schools, that organisation relies on school teachers who have been trained in the process of evaluation to run and report on the applications.

Ability 4 came out of the live scrutiny very well: there has been a similar reaction to Ability 5 which will be published on the TEEM site very shortly. We would recommend visiting the TEEM site at www.teem.org.uk.

At the schools and small business user end of the office systems marketplace, there should be few problems in making a commitment to Ability Office in preference to Microsoft Office, if only on grounds of price. The fact that Ability runs under Microsoft Windows XP on the Intel Atom chip should overcome any hesitation on the part of schools

Would we adopt Ability?

The Informed Executive has been running Ability Office 5 to prepare some of the features that you are reading in this edition: the Introductory feature that was illustrated on page 79 is a good example.

Perhaps more to the point, would we adopt Ability 5 in an 'open market' situation, having been users of applications like Microsoft Word, Excel since the 1980s: there is a huge amount of experience of the Microsoft product in place here.

Would the same editorial team have any reasons not to convert to Ability Office under normal circumstances, and the answer would be 'no', And that is for a business whose activities are inextricably tied up with Word files and Excel sheets and Access databases.

On the evidence of the analysis conducted for this report, those activities could equally be framed in Write and Spreadsheet and Database. Ability Office is very much a serious player on the education scene. §

Further information on all ASI products suitable for education can be found at www.asiability.com/webpage.aspx?p=263 Ability Office be downloaded on 30 day trial from www.ability.com/ab5/en/setup.exe

If you liked Ability Office . . .

There is the danger that a product like Ability Office could be a one-trick pony; an application that does a good job on its own but does not form part of a more complete, multi-dimensional management suite. If a vendor produces a portfolio of products targetted at the same market, and these have a common feel to their operation so far as possible, this can be a distinct advantage to the user.

It was worth checking up to see what else Ability Software International - ASI - provides in addition to the Ability Office suites. And while our function is not to advertise a company's products, the list of products marketed by ASI should certainly be of interest across the whole of our target readership.

That includes the education sector: as we have observed earlier in this edition, because schools manage their own budgets, they are classic SMEs in their own right, facing most of the issues in which traditional profit-focussed businesses are involved. We had a look at a selection of ASI products.

Ability Accounts Small Business

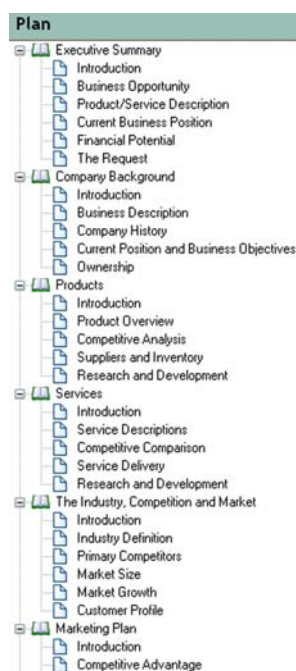
It was encouraging, therefore, to find an accounts suite - Ability Accounts Small Business - in the ASI offering. Business accounts are probably the first piece of business management software that small businesses acquire when they get started, and move rapidly beyond an Excel workbook (or Ability Spreadsheet, of course).

What the typical SME executive needs is an accounting system that keeps track of revenues and capital items in a straightforward manner: producing the details needed for the VAT return is usually high on the priority list.

Given that all of the small business accounting packages meet that objective, while providing management reports and period accounts, the decision to opt for one package or another is usually down to cost and the 'feel' of the product.

At £79.99 inclusive of VAT, Ability Accounts is sensibly priced given the considerable functionality it provides. What should tip the balance is the comparative ease with which ledgers are created and maintained.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that the publishers of The Informed Executive installed Ability Accounts in April 2008; loading its own financials into the system and - for a short period - to another SME accounts system it had been running 'live' for two years previously. It was not long before Ability became the accounting system of choice.



Ability Business Planner

Most SME executives may feel that they do not need a planning system: surely they know more about their operation than anyone else? In practice, the discipline which the Ability tool provides could help the smaller business avoid many of the pitfalls they could encounter. The vendors claim that it was designed for entrepreneurs and start-ups by small business owners and experts:

Business Planner requires the input of essential data and forecasts: it then 'interviews' the executive to assemble the remaining information required.

Like Ability Accounts, the Business Planner is priced at £79.99.

Ability Staff

This application has been designed both for general managers and specialist HR departments. It assembles data on every aspect of an employee's relationship with the organisation, including statutory information and tax details.

Given that each section of an employee's file may have to be accessed by a different member of the management team, there is extensive password protection, which maintains the maximum degree of confidentiality. Price £79.99 again.

Ability Appointment Manager

It does precisely what it says - setting up an appointments for staff with customers, maintaining waiting lists if required, and generating email appointment reminders. Also at £79.99

ASI Beanywhere

This is the latest addition to the vendor's range, providing remote access to up to three PCs using a secure USB device. It can access over an internet connection applications, files, emails, documents, etc, from anywhere in the world. From a security perspective, the application is claimed to be wholly secure, leaving no trace when the USB device is removed. Price £39.99