

move protects public information from being rendered inaccessible by Microsoft's, or anyone else's, corporate fiat.

Of course, this being Massachusetts, politics have come into play. Gov. Mitt Romney's administration is backing the plan. So, inevitably, Democratic critics such as Secretary of State William Galvin and members of the Legislature are questioning the idea. No doubt some lobbyists are about to get rich here.

Even if the open document standard is adopted in Massachusetts, one state's action is not a particularly big deal. But if other large customers join in — and a new alliance between Sun Microsystems and Google has been formed to encourage just that — the computer world could be in for big changes. Alternatives to Microsoft Office could be viable. And consumers such as you and I might see something we haven't seen in the software business for a long time: competition.

If you want to get a look at what an Open Document environment is like, it's easy — and free.

Start first at www.openoffice.org, where you can download the new 2.0 version of the OpenOffice suite, which contains all the usual tools: word processor, spreadsheet, presentation program, database, plus graphics and math software. Sun Microsystems acquired the predecessor software and has since released it to the open source world where software is distributed without charge and users are free to tinker with it.

OpenOffice doesn't have a counterpart to Microsoft's Outlook personal information. To plug that hole, go to www.mozilla.org for the Firefox Web browser and Thunderbird e-mail program, both free and both highly regarded. Essential PIM (www.essentialpim.com) will manage your calendar, address book, and tasks.

How do they work? Pretty well, actually. OpenOffice's interface looks to be a generation or two behind Microsoft Office in terms of 3D icons, clever toolbars, and such. But it has most of the same functions. On the other hand, Office's years of evolution show in its generally superior ease of use.

Compatibility with Office documents is good. OpenOffice opened Microsoft Office documents seamlessly and saved to Office formats without problem. One interesting discovery: open document files consistently were much smaller than Office format files.

I wrote this column in OpenOffice Writer, and found it simple to use. But let's face it, word processors long ago stopped being interesting. There just aren't any especially innovative ways to type a sentence. This means, frankly, that if you are pressed for cash, Writer will serve you as well as Word.

There were glitches in OpenOffice — some minor: the transition effects in Impress (the PowerPoint substitute) performed poorly; some major: the Mac version I tested would not install.

But, then, at the price, you really can't complain much.

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