

“If it sounds too good to be true: it probably is.” This piece of advice stands us in good stead when considering buying something. It prevents us from falling for a ‘bargain’ which turns out not to be one. It applies to buying software and enables us to avoid pirated software or dodgy cut-down versions or illegal copies from someone after your money.

But what if it is free? They’re hardly after your money.

There has always been the kind of person who feels that the big software houses shouldn’t be charging high prices for their products. They have written software that does the same job and simply give it away as a matter of principle. No licence, no restrictions as to use and you can give copies away to your friends.

Proprietary suites of Office Software can cost hundreds of pounds and are powerful enough to do just about any job – from a note to a novel; a list to a database or a picture to a presentational slide show with bells and whistles. Open Office (free to download) says it can do it all as well. We recently looked at both suites to see if that is true.

Mike F gave a run-through of what he does with Open Office and although there were slight differences in the way things were done, everything could be done in a way not un-familiar to Windows Office users. Mike reminded us that he uses a mere 10 percent of the software’s capability – most of that being the same as used by everyone plus a few bits in odd corners of the programme that others might not use. (That pattern of usage is quite normal. The entire membership of the club probably uses much less than half of what is available.)

Mike J uses Microsoft Office 2007 and ran through a similar set of tasks. The screen layout is a little different from earlier versions (which Open Office resembles): the latest Ribbon layout gives it a new way of accessing the menus. Even so, the user operations are broadly similar. Mike points out that he will continue with Microsoft Office because he has it and he is used to it.

The free suite is capable of reading and saving formats to suit other proprietary software and this applies to spreadsheets, pictures presentations and databases as well.

To the extent that the suites were demonstrated for home use; the free software could all that the expensive software could do.

Businesses often need and prefer the comfort (and technical support) of proprietary software, but it would seem worthwhile for an individual to download and try Open Office before spending lots of money. (Google Open Office free download). Free software from sources we trust is listed on our website: (penarthcomputerclub.co.uk)

