Traversing the End of the Microsoft Office Asynchronous Binary Age to the Start of the Microsoft Office Synchronous XML Epoch

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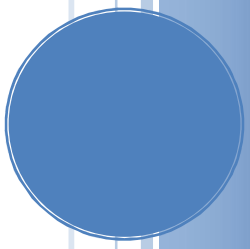

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Traversing the End of the Microsoft Office Asynchronous Binary Age to the Start of the Microsoft Office Synchronous XML Epoch

On January 30, 2007, the Microsoft Office Asynchronous Binary era, with its shrouded commands, cascading menus and copious toolbars, ended with Office 2003 giving way to Office 2007. With trepidation, those of us who had a personal eighteen-year business relationship with it knew what was coming. We had a choice; we needed to either acclimatize to this new environment or fall behind technically like those who clung to Lotus 1-2-3 and WordPerfect 5.1. The Microsoft Office Synchronous XML version of Office (Microsoft Office 2007) ushered in an epoch of user interface paradigm shifts and new file formats. For those of us who find ourselves caught between these two eras and want to transverse from one to the other, it is important to understand why and how to make this crossover.

Eighteen years prior to January 30, 2007, firms invested hundreds of thousands of dollars over time on various versions of Microsoft Office. I call this the Microsoft Office 2003 era. It began in 1992 with Office 3.0 and ended with Office 2003. A huge investment was made in training, in-house development, product support, and additional Microsoft Office integration applications.

Microsoft Office Asynchronous Binary Age was built on the confusing file formats of Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. These file formats were created in the early 90's when each of the Microsoft Office applications were relatively simple. As Microsoft added more features, the binary format became more complex with each Microsoft Office version. The documentation for the binary file format was very complex, which made working with the binary format outside the intrinsic Microsoft Office application very difficult. Very often, the internal binary format became flawed and "file corruption" ensued, or the document would behave strangely and become difficult to manage.

Additionally, this phrase "file corruption" (whether or not corruption actually occurred) was sometimes substituted as an excuse for poorly trained users and weak best practices. In this era, many important features were buried amongst numerous toolbars. Fantastic tools, macros, and applications were built to fix document problems. This allowed users to produce digital work product that was sub-par, but looked great when

printed. Over time, users got used to the complex mix of user-interface-design elements and became accustomed to poorly formatted documents.

The version changes of Microsoft Office in this age consisted of slight cosmetic changes, menu changes, new menu items and the addition of even more features. For many firms there wasn't a compelling reason to upgrade from one version to the next, and if they did migrate to a new Microsoft Office version, training on the new versions became less and less of an issue because the differences were insignificant. Most firms skipped versions, which helped reduce costs.

The Microsoft Office Synchronous XML Epoch

Epoch (ee-pok) means the "the beginning of a distinctive period in the history of anything." This new Microsoft Office Synchronous XML era truly signifies the start of a new age of Microsoft Office. It is the first time in Microsoft Office's history where firms have a choice in a migration starting point, if the firm has already purchased Microsoft Office 2007 and has not implemented it. In my opinion, there are no significant differences in Microsoft Office 2007 and 2010 for a firm traversing from the previous Microsoft Office era. Microsoft Office 2007 hit the market during a worldwide economic crisis and most firms just couldn't afford, or were apprehensive about, the costs of training and infrastructure upgrades. The pivotal change from Microsoft Office 2003 to Microsoft Office 2007 was so drastic that firms also paused to take a longer look at it. It was an unfortunate time for Microsoft Office solution providers, firms, and Microsoft. The firms that did migrate to Microsoft Office 2007 are presently ahead of the technical evolutionary power curve, but may need to invest in the training they put off. A firm with Microsoft Office 2007 will have no problem interfacing with Microsoft Office 2010 users.

Synchronous in the New Era

What do I mean by the synchronous nature of the new Microsoft Office? I mean that commands and features are contextual to what the user is doing. For example, if a user is working in a Word table, the commands associated with the features for tables are dynamically available to the user, via a Ribbon. In the old Microsoft Office era the table features were buried in a menu and a toolbar. The user now doesn't have to know where those features are or search for them; they are just "there."

By replacing toolbars with Ribbons, the user is presented with a contextual interface that provides functionality based on the context the user is working in. The Ribbon user interface provides the user with graphical representations of document control features grouped by functionality. The Ribbon may also contain Tabs to expose different sets of features, eliminating the need for different icon based tool bars. This synchronous nature is propagated throughout all the Microsoft Office applications. By being more intuitive, the long-term costs of ownership are truly lower with this new Microsoft Office epoch.

XML in The New Era

From a technical point of view, the differences in Microsoft Office's new file format are on a magnitude such that it cannot be called an improvement in a species, but rather the creation of a new genus. The new file format is XML (Extensible Markup Language). This new file format can be accessed without using the intrinsic Microsoft Office application, such as Word. Microsoft Word (or Excel and PowerPoint) is no longer needed to create or edit a document. This ease of file access means that document content and metadata can easily be viewed and changed. The new XML file format is smaller, thus making it a more efficient digital format for web or cloud based applications.

To be successful in any new environment you have to embrace it in order to thrive and grow. This holds true for the new Microsoft Office XML file format. Even though the new Microsoft Office versions (2007 and 2010) allow files to be saved in the old binary format, in my opinion, the new format should be unconditionally embraced. To hold on to the old binary format is only placing your firm in precarious position of future collaboration issues with your clients and cloud based applications.

New Significant Microsoft Office 2010 Features:

No "real" differences exist between Microsoft Office 2007 and 2010, yet a couple of very significant new features, which may be important to a firm, have been added to Microsoft Office 2010.

Microsoft Office 2010 Backstage View

When Microsoft released 2007, one of the user interface jolts was that the "File" menu was gone. The one common interface element in almost every windows application was no longer there and users were faced with learning how to work with files (Save, Open, Close, Print, etc.) using the Office Button. I believe Microsoft realized this mistake and gave us the Backstage View in Microsoft Office 2010, which is essentially the "File" menu brought back and integrated into Microsoft Office 2010.

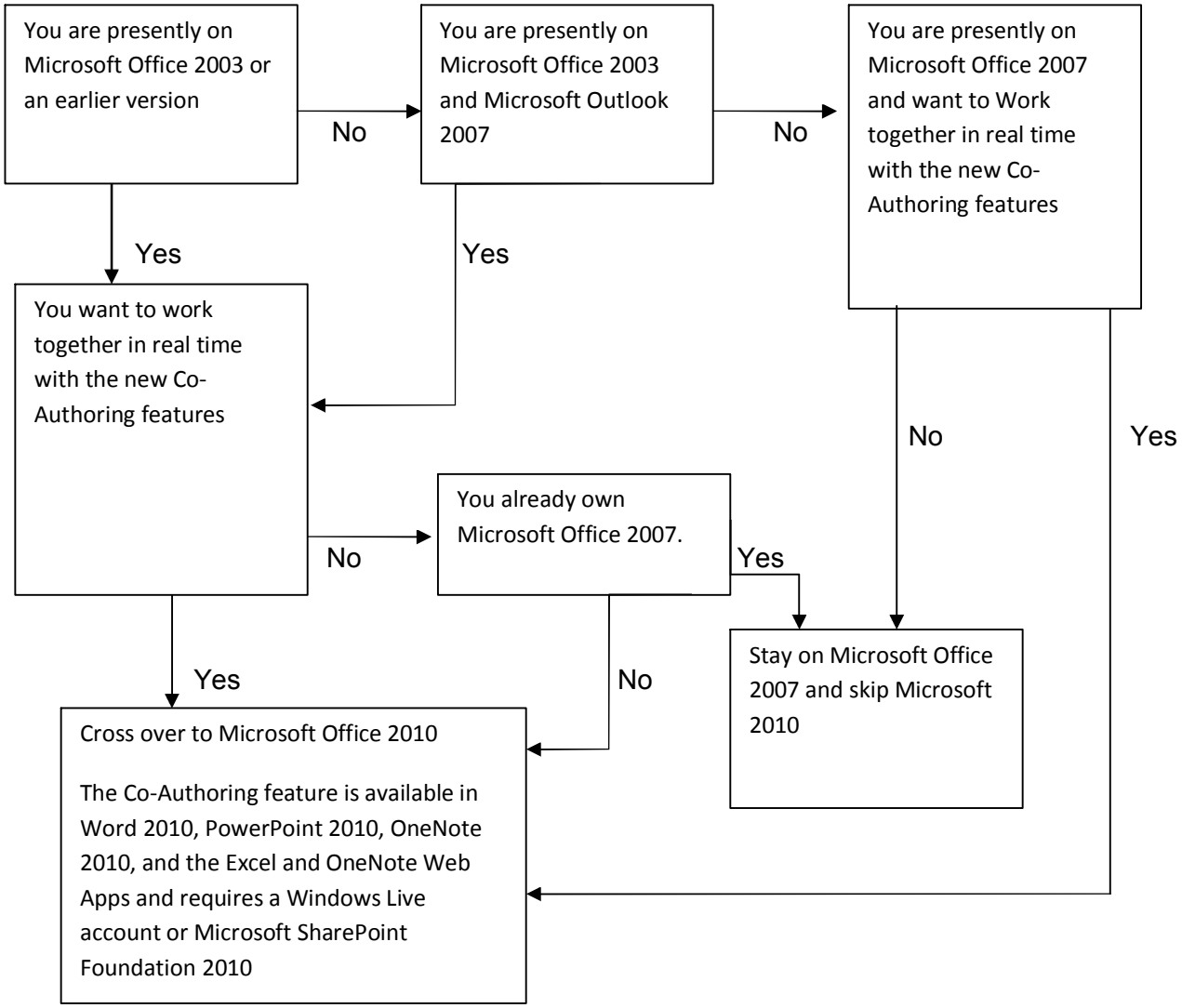
Microsoft Office 2010 Co-Authoring Features

One of the significant new features of Microsoft Office 2010 are the new co-authoring features available in Word 2010, PowerPoint 2010, OneNote 2010, and the Excel and OneNote Web Apps. The co-authoring features require either a Windows Live account or Microsoft SharePoint Foundation 2010. Co-Authoring lets users edit a document at the same time (synchronously) or at different times, with other collaborators. With co-authoring in the past, users trying to work synchronously on a document would be locked out from editing if another person was working on it. When a document was sent out for review to multiple collaborators, the document would often come back with edits

from each collaborator, leaving one person to compile everyone's changes. Before co-authoring, version control was a nightmare.

Traversing to Microsoft Office 2007 or 2010

The question now is, "what version of Microsoft Office application should you traverse over to?" The decision tree below should help you make that decision.



The Microsoft Office Synchronous XML Epoch Has Started

The Microsoft Office Asynchronous Binary Age is over, and for good reason. It was a dead-end productivity environment. It was bound to die a slow death like many other technologies of the past. The Microsoft Office Synchronous XML Epoch brings together modern technologies such as XML and a synchronous user interface experience that increase productivity and reduce long-term cost of ownership. Depending on your

current version of Microsoft Office, the result is that you should be traversing to either Microsoft Office 2007 or 2010, sooner rather than later.