
Document Foundation Launches Breakaway Open Source LibreOffice 3.3 Suite

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The Document Foundation launched its first stable version of the open source LibreOffice suite, after its breakaway from OpenOffice.org and Oracle's control.

The Document Foundation launched LibreOffice 3.3 on Jan. 25, just a mere five days after announcing a release candidate. This is the first stable release of the open-source office suite since its breakaway from Oracle's OpenOffice.org project in September.

Concerned about Oracle's plans for OpenOffice after the Sun acquisition, about a third of OpenOffice developers formed the Document Foundation and forked the software into their own version. LibreOffice and the new foundation have a number of big names backing it, including Red Hat, Google, Novell and Canonical.

In fact, Canonical plans to include LibreOffice in its next version of Ubuntu, codenamed Natty Narwhal. The alpha version of Ubuntu 11.04 released in December had OpenOffice, but now that LibreOffice is available, Canonical will be making the switch. Novell's openSUSE also includes LibreOffice.

The development community has been concentrating on this release as well as cleaning up the codebase inherited from OpenOffice, said Italo Vignoli, a founding member of the Document Foundation. "It was necessary to prove that we are able to have our own software and development process for the future," Vignoli told eWEEK.

The number of developers working on LibreOffice has nearly quintupled since September, according to Vignoli. The community has been discussing the "evolution" of office suites, said Vignoli. "We feel that office suites are 20 years old and what is happening around the user is really going in different directions from where the office suites were, when Windows was born," he said.

He pointed to the proliferation of alternative platforms available, including tablets, netbooks and smartphones, and said that office suites were not designed for them. "Our developers were telling us that the source code was a little bit too old to match the vision for the future," said Vignoli.

While LibreOffice 3.3 is still not yet ready to support mobile platforms—"we cannot change software in a few days"—the cleaning has started, resulting in a leaner software than its OpenOffice 3.3 counterpart, Vignoli said.

While LibreOffice 3.3 has new and original features, Vignoli said the focus was on cleaning up the code and integrating new infrastructure to make the project sustainable and independent of Oracle. "For too many years, the focus has been on adding features, but the normal user is using 10 to 20 percent of the features," Vignoli said.

Saying it was "probably useless to continue to go to war on the features," the community will concentrate on flexibility to fit user needs, which are changing all the time, Vignoli said.

Even so, the list of new features is pretty extensive. LibreOffice 3.3 has all the new features that exist in OpenOffice.org 3.3, especially the ones that were contributed to the OpenOffice.org project before the formation of the Document Foundation. Some of the common features include new custom properties handling, new fonts, document protection, increasing the number of allowed rows in a Calc spreadsheet to one million, and an easier-to-use print interface.

LibreOffice 3.3 also has new and original features of its own, such as the ability to import and work with SVG and Microsoft Works files, a easier way to format and number text blocks in Writer, and improved sheet and cell management in Calc. The developers also bundled new extensions, such as PDF import, a slide-show presenter console, and an improved report builder.

LibreOffice also integrated all the language versions into a single Windows installer executable with this release. In the past, each language had its own installer, taking up over 75 GB on the download sites, which could stress the servers during high traffic. With this integration, the sites need less space as everything fits within 11 GB, he said.

Despite getting the first release out, the team doesn't have a lot of time to relax. Vignoli said the first enhancements, including critical bug fixes, new icons and localization improvements, will be available in February. A release candidate of version 3.3.1 is expected by Feb. 7, followed by a final release on Feb. 14, he said.

A second set of enhancements, which will include critical bug fixes and more localization improvements, is expected on March 7 as a release candidate, and final version on March 14. After that, development will be settling into a regular release schedule, with a beta for version 3.4 with new features expected in late March, with a final release expected in May. The version 3.4 dates are still tentative, he said.

He also said the differences between LibreOffice and OpenOffice will be more pronounced with LibreOffice 3.4.