Office 2010 preview

REVIEW: The latest update to Microsoft's productivity suite boasts welcome enhancements, but also a significant change: Web-based versions of apps

By Jason Brooks

Microsoft's Office 2010, which eWEEK Labs tested in a Technical Preview release, has quite a bit in common with the past several new Office upgrades—namely, the new suite is brimming with enhancements to core Office capabilities, many of which center around exposing the apocryphal 80 percent of Office functionality that most users overlook.

For example, Microsoft's Office team has put a great deal of work into the fairly mundane area of cut and paste, calling on the Smart Tags that first appeared in Office XP to save users the trouble of rooting through the Ribbon to access the suite's style and formatting controls.

Along similar lines, the charting capabilities that have always lurked in Excel have undergone a major overhaul in Office 2010. Not only is there a handful of new chart types from which to choose, but Microsoft has made Excel charts significantly more useful by integrating them into spreadsheet data cells.

However, in addition to the incremental improvements that mark every Office upgrade, Office 2010 apps break significant new ground by expanding beyond the bounds of the Windows desktop to appear in rich, Web-based versions that perform as well on Firefox and Safari browsers as on Microsoft's own Internet Explorer.

Microsoft has not yet made the Web-based versions of Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook available for testing, but Office product managers demonstrated these applications for me in our San Francisco lab offices. I'm withholding further judgment on Microsoft's Office Web applica-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12
A bit of data visualization fun comes in the form of Sparklines in Excel. I could spawn quick, in-cell charts with highlighting for high and low points on a curve.

The OpenDocument Format support that Microsoft added to Office 2007 in SP2 carries over to Office 2010. I could save files in ODF, and open ODF documents in Word, Excel and PowerPoint.
OFFICE 2010 FROM PAGE 14
(the application previously known as Groove).

The Technical Preview release that I tested will be accessible to a limited group of users, but should be followed by a broadly available public beta later this year.

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This story can be found online at: tinyurl.com/nbmn7

Perhaps the most compelling feature of Office 2010—the new Web-based versions of the suite’s components—was one that wasn’t yet available for testing. Microsoft demonstrated Web versions of Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook for me, and the apps certainly seemed impressive.

Word sports a cool new sidebar search tool in Version 2010, which I used to tally up and locate all 27 instances of the word “experience” in the Office reviewer’s guide.

PowerPoint and Word both have a Ribbon option for inserting screenshots of active windows into documents or presentations. I could also grab new screen clippings to insert.

In its 2010 release, PowerPoint gains the ability to trim embedded video clips right within the application.