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What is Office 365? Is it for you?

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I get a lot of questions about Microsoft Office 365. Because it's a unique concept in software acquisition, some users don't understand what it is or how it works. In brief, Office 365 is a Microsoft Office suite to which people subscribe rather than purchase from a store. This option first appeared on the market in 2011.

There are several versions of Office 365 designed for different audiences. Two of them are best suited for home users. Office 365 Personal includes a single installation for one user. Office 365 Home includes five installs to a computer, tablet, and smartphone. If a family has parents and three children, for example, each person can install Office 365 to his computer, tablet, and smartphone.

You can still purchase the traditional boxed version of Office in the store or download it from the Microsoft site. You will get the most recent Office edition, which is currently Office 2016. It includes four Office applications -- Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and OneNote -- to install on one PC or Mac. New boxed versions come out about every three years.

What are the differences between these two approaches? The Office 365 editions contain more applications than the boxed one. Office 365 Home or Personal includes seven apps. These are listed below with their functions compared with the boxed edition:

Office 365 Apps	Boxed Office 2016 Apps	Function
Word	Word	documents
Excel	Excel	data management
PowerPoint	PowerPoint	presentation
OneNote	OneNote	note-taking and organization
Outlook		e-mail
Publisher		newsletters
Access		database

Office 365 also offers extra benefits. Perhaps most interesting is the automatic upgrading of apps almost every month. It doesn't take long before the apps in Office 365 contain newer features than the boxed version, which does get all security updates and bug fixes.

Other perks that accompany Office 365 include 1 terabyte (1000 gigabytes) of online storage in the Microsoft cloud, called OneDrive, for each installation. That means each of the five users with Office 365 Home has 1 TB of storage. Office 365 Home and Personal users also receive free phone support from Microsoft, an hour of free local and international calls on Skype per month, and the ability to collaborate in real time on projects with other people.

How do you get Office 365?

A major misconception about Office 365 is that it is just an online service, as some digital subscriptions are. In fact, every Office 365 owner has a Microsoft account page from which he or she can install or reinstall the full suite to as many computers, tablets, and phones as his edition includes. The Office 365 suite is fully installed on the devices and can be used without an Internet connection. The Internet, however, does play valuable functions, such as updating, re-installing, collaborating, and using some of the new features. Therefore, having Internet access is key to taking advantage of the full potential of the suite.

What does Office 365 cost?

Office 365 Home (five installations) costs \$99.99 per year or \$9.99 per month. Office 365 Personal (one installation) costs \$69.99 per year or \$6.99 per month. Office 2016 (boxed) costs \$149.00 and goes on sale at times.

Those are the facts. The decision is up to you whether you think Office 365 would benefit you. It depends on what you do with your computer. Here are some scenarios to help you decide whether Office 365 is for you.

The Scenarios:

1. You have a desktop or laptop computer, but since you got a tablet or smartphone and use it for email and Internet searching, you don't use your computer as much as you used to. Occasionally, you need to create and print documents. You may have never owned Microsoft Office.

Possible Solution: Use Microsoft WordPad, a free Windows app that is installed with Windows, for your documents. It has fewer features than Word but enough to create documents and format them. Search for it using the Cortana search box since it may not be found on the app list. Another option is one is to use a free Office Suite – Open Office or Google Sheets.”

2. You have a single computer and own the box version of Microsoft Office. You use your computer often to create documents like minutes of a club for which you are secretary. You keep an address list and budget on an Excel worksheet. Last year you put together a slide show using PowerPoint for a family reunion. You have quite a few Word documents and Excel sheets stored on your computer.

Possible Solution: You may be a candidate for Office 365 Personal. You use enough of the Office apps to benefit from the upgrading, and you may benefit from the extra perks that come with 365, especially the free online storage and free phone support.

3. You are a loyal Microsoft Office owner. You enjoy your tablet for entertainment and your computer for projects. You are the curious type who likes to learn new things. You enjoy putting together professional-looking documents and presentations. You travel a lot and often need to plan complicated travel arrangements. Your household owns four computers.

Possible Solution: You are the kind of person that probably would be glad that you subscribed to Office 365 Home. You will enjoy exploring the automatic upgrades. You can save money by being able to install the 365 Home suite on your four computers, as well as your phones and tablets. You can offer the fifth installation to a friend or relative at no charge.

Disclaimer: This is not intended to be an advertisement for Microsoft Office 365. We all have to decide what is best for us. I hope it helps clear up any confusion you might have about this product.