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The Evolution of Online Office Applications

[Nicholas Carr over on Rough Type](#) has an excellent examination of evolving web-based office applications. He sees the evolution of web-based office apps as:

- *Office 1.0 (1980s): a set of discrete and often incompatible applications for word processing, spreadsheets, presentation creation, and simple database management. Archetype: Lotus 1-2-3.*
- *Office 2.0 (1990 - present): integrated suites of PPAs, with expanded, if still limited, collaboration capabilities. Archetype: Microsoft Office.*
- *Office 3.0 (present - early 2010s): hybrid desktop/web suites incorporating internet-based tools and interfaces to facilitate collaboration and web publishing.*
- *Office 4.0 (c. early 2010s): fully web-based suites.*

I really like his argument:

It's been widely assumed, among the tech-forward Web 2.0 crowd, that it will be the end users who will drive the adoption of purely web-based office apps - and that corporate IT departments will be the obstructionists. I think it will actually play out in the opposite way.

Whatever the flaws of Microsoft Office, most end users are comfortable with it - and they have little motivation to overturn the apple cart. What is absolutely unacceptable to them is to take a step backward in functionality...

What will be attractive to end users - at least a sizable number of them - is to extend the usefulness of the traditional office suite through the addition of web-based tools and interfaces. The key is to extend both functionality and interoperability without taking away any of the capabilities that users currently rely on or expect...

What we're entering, then, is a transitional generation for office apps, involving a desktop/web hybrid. This generation will last for a number of years, with more and more application functionality moving onto the web as network capabilities, standards, and connectivity continue to advance. At some point, and almost seamlessly, from the user's perspective, the apps will become more or less fully web-based and we'll have reached the era of what I call Office 4.0 (and what others currently call Office 2.0). Driving the shift will be the desire of companies, filtered through their IT staffs, to dramatically simplify their IT infrastructure. Mature web-based apps don't require local hardware, or local installation and maintenance, or local trouble-shooting, or local upgrading - they reduce costs and increase flexibility. These considerations are largely invisible to end users, but they're very important to companies and will become increasingly important as the IT world shifts to what might be called utility-class computing.

[Carr's post](#) comes just as [Zoho](#) has announced a really cool new feature called [Quickread](#) which lets Zoho users open Word documents through Zoho without needing Word or any other word-processing software installed locally, this includes opening email attachments with Word docs via Zoho. Want to let your library customers open Word documents even though you don't have Word on the library computers? Here's an answer.

Posted by Michael on September 20, 2006 12:12 AM | [Permalink](#)

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