

Art for tech's sake

Visio package draws circles around Microsoft's unwieldy design tools / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

I AM NOT A PROFESSIONAL artist, but I am being called on to create more and more professional-looking drawings for business purposes. I used to make my drawings by fumbling around with Microsoft Office. It was a frustrating experience. Microsoft Office lacks good drawing tools, the clip art is cheesy, and it is difficult to control precisely where the drawing appears in your document.

A friend suggested I try Visio, a business drawing package created by Seattle-based Visio Corp. I did, and I am convinced that Visio is a great package for creating great business graphics.

In many ways Visio starts where Microsoft's built-in drawing tools stop. As with the Microsoft tools, you can draw circles, squares, and other shapes and then connect them with lines, arrows, and arcs. But Visio gives you much more flexibility and control. For example, Microsoft lets you lock the object in place on the electronic canvas. Visio lets you lock any combination of the object's width, height, aspect ratio, X position, Y position, or rotation.

Visio comes with a rich library of shapes tailored to a number of special applications. Think of it as clip art that you won't be embarrassed to put into your presentations. Visio has an "office layout" template that includes de-

tailed drawings of an office table, a conference room table, desk chairs, a circular table, telephone jacks, outlets, a plant, and other items that you would expect to find in a modern office.

There is a "Web diagram" template that includes ready-to-use icons for a Web server, an FTP server, newsgroups, downloaded files, and URLs. Another set of templates has outline drawings for each of the 50 states and Canada's provinces, as well as for all the world's nations.

Visio comes with a rich scripting environment (based on Microsoft's Visual Basic) that can be used to make your drawings active. For instance, the program comes with a template for building Gantt charts used in project management. You can create a number of tasks, each with its own duration; assign some of them together. This is pretty standard stuff for project management applications, but not for drawing programs.

There are three versions of Visio on the market. Visio Standard 5.0 (\$149) is the basic drawing program. Visio Professional 5.0 (\$329) has a larger shape library for drawing networks, Internet sites, and databases. It also has shapes for the unified modeling language and a UML Semantics Checker for building large software systems with the UML

methodology. Visio Technical 5.0 (\$329) includes 2,500 SmartShapes for drawing engineering diagrams, ventilation systems, and manufacturing processes.

While Visio is not a full-blown computer-aided design (CAD) system, the program can import and export diagrams to AutoCAD. Visio Technical allows you to view individual layers from a .DWG or .DXF file. Visio Professional includes a Network Diagram Wizard that can automatically generate the network diagram from data stored in an organization's database.

All versions use the same drawing engine, so a document created with one version can be edited with another. Visio requires Windows 95 or Windows NT 4.0.

If you need to document a lot of networks, take a look at Visio Network Equipment (\$495), an add-on for Visio Professional. The package includes more than 2,000 predrawn shapes for network equipment, arranged by manufacturer and model number, each drawn to an uncanny level of accuracy. For example, the shape for my Cisco 2511 router shows every light and plug on the router's front panel.

But the library isn't perfect. The detailed drawing of my Farallon Ethernet hub has all of the RJ-45 sockets mislabeled. Fortunately, the shapes are all Visio drawings themselves. You can simply ungroup the shape, make the necessary corrections, and regroup the component lines, circles, and text. Visio sells a subscription to its Network Equipment package, which is good considering how often new equipment comes to the market.

Visio transparently integrates with Microsoft Word and Excel. After you install the program, you'll find a new icon on your toolbar called "Insert Visio Drawing." Press the button and you can create a new Visio drawing right there in your word processor, without having to switch into the Visio application. The magic that makes this happen is Microsoft's OLE (object linking and embedding) technology.

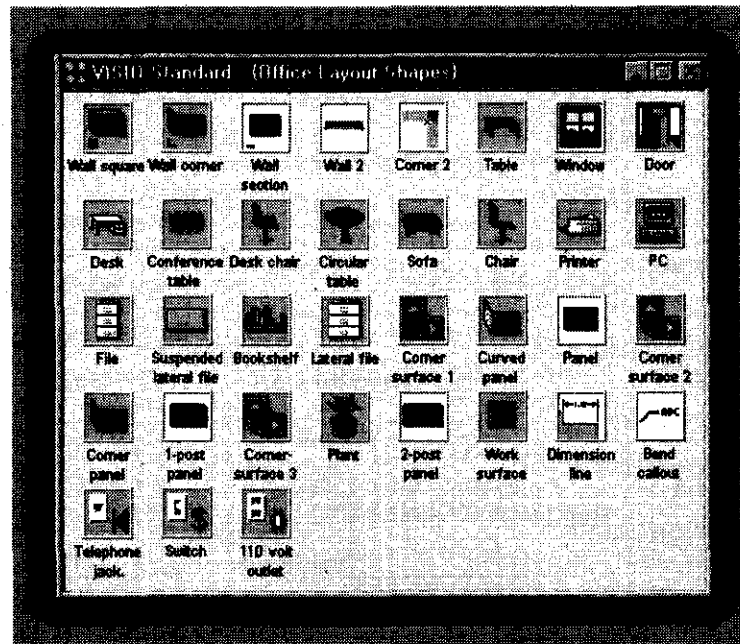
You can also use Visio with PowerPoint presentation software, but the integration is not as smooth. Instead of creating the drawing in place, you need to create your drawing inside Visio first, then copy-and-paste it into your PowerPoint presentation. Once you've pasted the drawing in place, you can edit it by simply double-clicking. But be careful: If you move your PowerPoint presentation to another computer, you won't be able to edit the drawing itself unless Visio is also installed on that other machine.

If you want to put your drawing on a Web server, Visio will happily save your drawing as an HTML file with embedded GIF or JPEG images. You can even embed links to other Web pages.

All in all, Visio is just the thing for drawing complicated flow charts, organization charts, marketing diagrams, and network architecture diagrams. In a business world where people are being called on to be more and more self-sufficient, Visio is just the thing to help nonprofessionals produce professional-looking drawings.

Visio 5.0, Visio Corp. (www.visio.com, 800-248-4746)

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