

The Interview

Not the American Office

Maarten Roelfs, Office.eu

The entrepreneur trying to create a Microsoft 365 alternative



Are European businesses growing more fearful of leaving their sensitive data in the hands of American companies? Maarten Roelfs is sure of it, which is why he's founded Office.eu, an EU alternative to Microsoft 365 and Google Workspace.

The service promises to store all customer data exclusively in the EU, where the company promises it will be safe from US authorities and access won't be shut off at the whim of the Trump administration. The service is based on an existing open-source project called Nextcloud (nextcloud.com) – which is what we used to chat with Roelfs over a video link.

PC Pro: Tell us about the Office.eu project and why you've started it?

Maarten Roelfs: We have some other businesses, and I decided that I wanted to migrate away from the big American tech. I did my research, we were looking at all kinds of alternatives, but there was nothing easy – nothing like Google Workspace or Microsoft 365 [where to] open an account, you give your details and you're ready to go.

I saw a lot of self-hosted, open-source software, including of course Nextcloud and I thought this is pretty good. Actually, it's really good. It certainly does the job and exceeded a lot of expectations. But I thought I want to have it as easy as possible.

Europe does need this. And if entrepreneurs don't pick it up, who does? So I said, OK, let's go. And that was about a

year and a half ago. We did a lot of work under the radar and preparing stuff, because it looks really easy, but actually it's not, and we've made a tremendous amount of mileage. And now we've come to the point that we said maybe we need to tell the world that this is coming.

And to be frank, I'm surprised about the level of interest and attention we get. It is

“ We've got thousands and thousands on the waitlist already ”

mind-blowing, almost. We've got thousands and thousands on the waitlist already.

PC Pro: Is this purely a cloud offering or is there desktop software available as well?

Maarten Roelfs: It is, at the moment, purely cloud. We will make iOS apps available pretty soon, and for the second half of 2026 we think we will have desktop applications available as well.

You still can use it offline [now], because a part of the product is what we call EU Drive, which is just a cloud drive which continues to sync with your laptop or with your own PC. So you could sync everything, work offline, and the moment you're back online, it will sync back to the cloud.

You need to have a software application to work offline. So that could be LibreOffice, Collabora Office or, in the near future, our own application. If you've got your licence of, let's say, Microsoft Word or Microsoft Excel, where you still want to use that specific desktop application, you still could use that. Of course, you could also use it offline, but you're no longer forced into the strong online ecosystem built by the Americans, which they use for whatever purpose they want to use it for.

PC Pro: Let's explore that further, because the chief selling point of Office.eu is that this isn't US-based or your data's not being stored in the US. Why should customers fear having their data stored in the US?

Maarten Roelfs: There are a couple of things. One, and it's probably remote for smaller companies, is the risk of the kill switch. Microsoft crossed the Rubicon with the International Criminal Court. [Last June, Microsoft told the ICC that US sanctions against chief prosecutor Karim Khan – who indicted Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu for war crimes in Gaza – meant it had to deny Khan access to the company's services.]

Last year... Microsoft sent one of its top guys in Europe to assure customers everything was fine. If something happens to you, we will fight for you in court, etc. Five days later, the ICC is locked off. Five days later.

Then on 10 June, a very senior executive for Microsoft in France, under oath... had to admit that the US government can access all of your data. [To be clear, Anton Carniaux, Microsoft France's director of public and legal affairs, was asked in court whether he could guarantee data from French citizens stored in Microsoft's cloud would never be passed to US authorities without French government approval. He said he couldn't guarantee it, but "that it has never happened before".]

Look into the transactional nature of where the US is heading. Private consumers in Europe – including the UK, of course – but also businesses, they might not have a lot to hide, but they have an awful lot to protect.

The gap in features between what we offer and the Americans will offer, there's still a small gap, but that will narrow over time, because there's more money going into Europe and software development. And software development itself becomes much faster due to AI, so it's easier to develop. So, I think Europe will be on par very soon, and there's no reason to leave all of your vulnerable data in the American cloud.

PC Pro: For better or worse, businesses do trust Microsoft, though. We've seen many open-source alternatives to Office over the years that always nibbled around the edges but never really took off in the mainstream. What convinces you that you're going to be able to do that?

Maarten Roelfs: People did trust Microsoft. And right now there's a lot of distrust in Microsoft. I think Microsoft has a very hard time nowadays, because every customer they speak to says we don't trust

THIS IS NOT AMERICA

Microsoft and Google are the two big beasts of office productivity software and its associated cloud storage, but they're not the only options for consumers or businesses worried about storing data in the US. Here are two more alternatives, in addition to Office.eu.

Zoho (zoho.com)

Zoho offers a suite of online mail, word processing and spreadsheet software, on top of a wide range of business-focused products such as CRM. It's an Indian company, but it promises to store data according to where you reside. The UK is counted as European, so it's not EU only. The sign-up form states your data is stored in the EU if you sign up from a UK IP address. It's worth reading the company's privacy policy, though, as there are limited instances where non-EU staff can access your data.

RIGHT Proton is a non-profit organisation based in Switzerland

Proton (proton.me)

Similarly to Google Workspace, Proton offers online Mail, Docs, Sheets and Photos apps as well as online storage for both consumers and businesses. It's based in Switzerland, which isn't part of the EU, but also outside of the reach of the US. Its majority shareholder is the Proton Foundation, a non-profit organisation, meaning it can't easily be acquired.



you. What do you do with our data? We don't like what's going on with the geopolitics. We actually don't want to buy any more with you. We feel locked in. Actually, you're not locked in, but people feel locked in.

Now, sure, we have to build our trust. We have to prove that we're trustworthy, and Rome wasn't built in one day either. That takes time. We have a very seasoned team, we've got serious money, and we have a long-term horizon. We want to grow in a very steady, predictable way, and make sure that the customers we work with are happy.

PC Pro: Office.eu is based on Nextcloud – tell us about that.

Maarten Roelfs: Nextcloud is a big open-source project. It's being used by millions of users globally, and they basically sell the software to big organisations, for example, one of the *Bundesstaat* [federal states] in Germany runs on it, a ministry in France runs on it, hospitals, universities, things like that.

What they don't do is hosting, and they don't offer it for smaller customers, they go for the big organisations. We want to make it available for everybody, including the smaller ones.

PC Pro: Is this effectively a white-label product?

Maarten Roelfs: Well, it's for a big part white label, but we build a lot around it, and we will continue to develop more around it to make it really suitable as an SaaS product to customers. It's very proven technology and that's a really good thing. How trustworthy is it? The fact that ministries run on it, hospitals run it, that tells you something. ●

LEFT The Office.eu project is currently only cloud-based, but the organisation has plans to release desktop apps later this year

