

Estimating the Complexity of Your Microsoft® Access® Project

An OpenGate White Paper

Traditional Access UI Design

Microsoft Access is the world's leading desktop database application, with approximately 12 million licensed copies worldwide (according to Microsoft sources). With MS Access readily available on many PCs at work, a large number of prospective users try their hand at creating an Access database application to improve their group's productivity and minimize information errors often caused by maintaining data in spreadsheets. While Microsoft made many improvements in Access 2007 to simplify database creation, there is still much to learn when developing an Access database project. This brief paper is intended to help you better gauge how complex your project may be in order to evaluate the trade-offs between using a spreadsheet-based method versus Microsoft Access.

Step 1: Determine Your Database's Purpose

The first thing to identify is the purpose of your database. There are two fairly buckets you can place a database project into:

- A) **A database that can be used to organize and track information.** The simplest type of database, these sorts of projects are primarily to make sure you are efficiently storing information you need. Unlike spreadsheets, a simple database can help you avoid entering the same information multiple times, as well as help avoid errors like duplication of a customer name, or a misspelled product name that causes your reports and charts to show inaccurate data. **If this is the type of database you will be creating, give this step a score of 1**
- B) **A database that can be used to organize and track information *and* automate one or more processes.** This type of database is similar to the one above, except that you go beyond simple data entry and reports to try to automate some of the daily business processes you manage. For example, sending letters to clients, creating reports for your management team, or performing complex calculations to estimate the cost of a project. This is another area where Microsoft Access can be an exceptional resource. Automating processes can make a huge impact to your organization's productivity, help you gain more visibility with your management as an innovator, and improve your customer's satisfaction. But naturally it takes time, learning, and effort to develop your database into a functional application. **If this is the type of database you will be creating, give this step a score of 4**

Step 2: Determine Your Database's User Audience

This is perhaps the easiest step. You simply need to decide if the database you are creating is intended for just you, or for many other users in your organization.

- **If this database will only ever be used by yourself, give this step a score of 1**
- **If this database will only ever be used by yourself and one or two other people, give this step a score of 2**
- **If this database will be used by yourself and three or more people, give this step a score of 3**
- **If you intend to distribute this database as a product for others to purchase and use, give this step a score of 6**

Step 3: Define Your Must-Have Requirements

Your "must-have" requirements are any features your database needs for you to achieve your goal. It is important to think carefully about what you envision your end-product to look like. All too often the excitement of learning to create a few simple Access forms and reports can distract a new user from planning carefully. The result is frustration when the user realizes the forms and reports were only the tip of the iceberg. In other cases, however, a database starts very simply as a way to organize and track data. As users gain experience, the potential of Microsoft Access becomes more clear. Either way, contemplate what you need your database to do at a minimum for you to realize the benefits you expect. **For all of the following, add the score next to each to your total score if it applies to your database:**

Forms with many related types of information on one form (e.g., customers, their orders, contacts)	3
Reports with many related types of information on one report (e.g., customers, their orders, contacts)	3
Mass print reports via paper	1
Mail merge to send information via email	2
Collect data from other sources and import into your database	3
Fast performance with >3 users (upsizing Access to SQL Server/MySQL Server)	5
Data analysis (charts/queries)	3
Security (limit users from seeing specific data or accessing tables)	4
Menu navigation using the Access Switchboard (giving users a menu to navigate between your forms and reports)	1
Menu navigation using a custom menu (giving users a menu to navigate between your forms and reports)	3
Menu navigation with user-level menus (giving users a menu to navigate between your forms and reports based on their role)	4

Step 4: Calculate Your Score

Now add up the scores from each step and compare to the table below to see where your project falls in terms of complexity.

Score	Complexity	Typical Skills Needed
1-8	Simple	Patience, ability to follow wizards
9-16	Medium	Some SQL, an solid understanding of desktop applications, basic macro creation
17-30	Advanced	Solid understanding of database design and SQL, advanced macro creation and intermediate Visual Basic
31-49	Professional	Advanced Visual Basic, application packaging, SQL Server or MySQL Server

Getting the Access Resource to Help You Succeed

Whether your project is simple and straightforward, or requires you to become an Access pro (or hire one), there is a vast network of resources to help you succeed.

Microsoft Access Community Sites

- UtterAccess.com
- AccessWeb
- DatabaseDev.co.uk

Microsoft Access Templates

- From Microsoft ([2003](#) [2007](#))
- [From OpenGate Software](#)

Microsoft Access Tutorials

- [YouTube](#)
- [599CD](#)

For world-class Microsoft Access tools to help you simplify your database project, [visit OpenGate Software's website](#).

About OpenGate Software

OpenGate Software offers world-class business applications and tools for Microsoft Access databases. Our experience ranges from creating mission critical public safety applications for 9-1-1 data processing, to popular Microsoft Access tools used by 1,000's of organizations worldwide. We build solutions easy enough for the average user to understand, and powerful enough to save experienced developers hours of custom work. OpenGate Software is a Microsoft partner.



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