

Apex Support Bulletin: VL Serializer for Office 2016 for Mac

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Summary

With the release of Office 2016 for Mac update 15.17, a new tool is being made available to Volume License customers that allows for greater flexibility when deploying Office 2016 for Mac. The tool is commonly known as the 'VL Serializer' and comes in the form of a supplemental .pkg contained inside the ISO download of the Office 2016 for Mac Standard package in the Volume License Service Center (VLSC). The VL Serializer is a small command-line based tool which activates the currently installed version of Office 2016 for Mac on the local computer.

Background

The Volume License edition of Office 2016 for Mac allows eligible customers to deploy a pre-activated copy of Office applications on a given users' computer. Prior to update 15.17, the only supportable method of deploying a Volume License was to run the full application installer from the VLSC. The base version of Office 2016 for Mac on the VLSC is typically older than 4 weeks, which means that IT departments could not easily deploy the very latest builds of Office on new computers. IT would need to deploy the base version, and then apply updates to bring a users' machine up to date. This causes the end to end process to become unnecessarily time-intensive.

Due to this issue, IT departments resorted to workarounds that were not supportable, such as copying the licensing plist between computers.

Solution

Customers who download the latest suite install of the Volume License edition of Office 2016 for Mac from the VLSC will notice that there are two packages contained with the ISO image:

- Microsoft_Office_2016_Volume_Installer.pkg
- Microsoft_Office_2016_VL_Serializer.pkg

The first package, which is approximately 1.3 GB in size is a full suite install of the Volume License edition of the software. Installing this single package will deploy Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook and OneNote onto a computer, and activate the Volume License.

The second package, which is approximately 5 MB in size is designed to run on a computer that already has Office 2016 for Mac deployed. Even if the current version deployed is unlicensed, not activated, or designed for Office 365, the VL Serializer will forcibly activate a Volume License.

Supportability

The following scenarios are fully supported use cases of the VL Serializer package:

- a. Deploying any version of Office 2016 for Mac not obtained from the VLSC, and activating it as a Volume License edition.
- b. Converting an existing/activated version of Office 2016 for Mac to a Volume License edition.
- c. Reactivating a Volume License on a machine that is in an unsupported state (e.g. copied licensing plist).
NOTE: The existing unsupported licensing v2 plist will need to be manually removed before running the VL Serializer

Q&A

1. Can the VL Serializer be run against a computer that does not have Office 2016 deployed?
No. The VL Serializer relies on a licensing helper component that is only supplied with the Office 2016 installer.
2. What does the VL Serializer package actually contain?
A binary executable called the 'Microsoft Office Setup Assistant'. It is this executable that actually activates the Volume License.
3. Is the VL Serializer package only compatible with update 15.17?
No. While the VL Serializer is supplied with the 15.17 package, it can be used to activate past, present and future builds of Office 2016 for Mac.
4. Does each customer/organization need their own copy of the VL Serializer?
No. There is a single VL Serializer package which contains a single key that is shared between all VL customer installations.
5. Where does the Volume License actually reside on disk after activation?
/Library/Preferences/com.microsoft.office.licensingV2.plist
6. Why isn't it supportable to copy the licensing plist between computers – it seems to work just fine?
The licensing plist contains data which is encrypted using the serial number of the boot drive on the computer where it was generated. At random time intervals, the Office applications will verify that the plist was created on the local computer by decrypting the data with the serial numbers of drives currently attached to the computer. If the data cannot be decrypted, Office will go into an unlicensed state without warning. Currently, the time interval between validation checks can be weeks or months, which is why copying the plist between computers appears to work at first glance. However, customers who do this end up in a state where computers randomly 'lose' their license. In a future update (currently scheduled for 15.20 in March 2016), the license validation check will be performed on every app launch.
7. Does the VL Serializer work for Office 2011 for Mac?
No – the VL Serializer is specific to Office 2016 for Mac.
8. If I install the Volume License edition of Office 2016 for Mac from the ISO downloaded from the VLSC, do I still need to run the VL Serializer?
No. The Volume License installer already has the functionality of the VL Serializer built-in.