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Firefox

OpenOffice.org

Open Source Software

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Is it Ready for Your Desktop?

After years of work by (some) computer companies, legions of hobbyists and more than a few ideologues, open source software is coming of age. Today, its reliability and overall quality has improved to the point where open source software can replace many commercial applications. But is it a viable alternative for those of us who don't have (or want) a computer science degree? **Chris Dillon** investigates.

What is Open Source Software? According to the Open Source Initiative (www.opensource.org), open source software must be available without charge; the underlying source code for the program must be freely accessible; and the software licence must allow for derivative works and permit the software to be modified and redistributed. The software licence must not discriminate against a person, group of people or field of endeavour, and it must not restrict other software or be dependent on a technology or style of interface.

A brief history

The open source software movement began to take shape in the early 1990s, when Linus Torvalds, a Finnish university student, began developing a free variation of Unix, a computer operating language invented at Bell Laboratories. Torvald's program, known as Linux, an alternative to systems such as Microsoft's MS-DOS and Windows families, was noteworthy because it was not created by a centrally managed team but by a group of volunteers who collaborated to write, test and refine the software. New versions were released frequently and bugs were identified and fixed quickly.

Linux rapidly gained a following among hardcore programmers who valued its reliability and its tight, economical structure. The development of Linux closely tracked the Internet's transition into a modern communications tool and today, Linux is a mainstream operating and server system.

A defining moment for the movement occurred on January 22, 1998, when Netscape announced it was giving away the source code for its Internet browser. While not a major news story at the time, the gift had important consequences because the Netscape code became the basis for Firefox (www.mozilla.org), an open source browser that is now challenging Microsoft's dominance in this segment. Firefox recently achieved a 10 per cent market share – an impressive accomplishment when you consider that Internet Explorer is pre-installed on many new computers.

Crazy like a (Fire) Fox

If you've been thinking of trying open source software, Firefox is a good place to start. It runs on the Windows, Macintosh and Linux

operating systems, and will happily co-exist on your desktop with Internet Explorer, so you can compare the two programs without making a long-term commitment. And, like all open source software, it's free.

One of Firefox's strengths is that it is impervious to many of the virus-

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es, spy-ware programs and worms that have been written to exploit security flaws in Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Firefox also includes a feature called tabbed browsing, which lets you open multiple websites with a single click, and has a built-in, customisable link to a range of popular search engines. It also includes a pop-up blocker that makes the browsing experience much more pleasant.

Firefox is being continually improved and several hundred add-on programs, or extensions, are available to add new functions to the browser. For example, you can download extensions that display

multiple time zones or the weather forecast on your browser. You can also install an extension that automatically tracks UPS, FedEx and DHL shipments.

While all of these features are nice, what really makes Firefox attractive is the fact that it works well and is simple to use. In fact, the only drawback I've found is that there are a few web sites (typically operated by banks and by Microsoft) that are built to accommodate Internet Explorer exclusively. Otherwise, it's been my default browser for the past year.

Creative tools

To appreciate the breadth of open source software that is available, your first stop should be Sourceforge (www.sourceforge.net), which bills itself as the world's largest open source development web site. With over 100,000 projects, Sourceforge is a clearinghouse for everything from basic applications to specialist programming tools.

One popular category is creative tools. Inkscape (www.inkscape.org), for example is a graphics editor that offers many of the functions available in programs such as Illustrator, Freehand and Draw. Gimp (www.gimp.org) is an image editor, similar to Photoshop. Both are sophisticated packages that rival commercial software costing thousands of dollars.

In addition to graphics, Sourceforge offers powerful audio software, including Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>) a multi-platform software package that lets you record, edit, mix and modify digital sound samples.

Sourceforge also offers tools for using Really Simple Syndication (RSS). With an RSS reader such as Owl (<http://sourceforge.net/projects/rssowl>) you can subscribe to CNN, BBC and other news feeds, and to your favourite web

logs (blogs) and other content providers. Owl aggregates information from multiple sources in a single location, saving you time and helping you to stay on top of the news that is important to you.

You can also find a large selection of productivity tools on Sourceforge. These include Password Safe (<https://sourceforge.net/projects/password-safe>) an encrypted database for storing passwords; 7-Zip (<http://sourceforge.net/projects/sevenzips/>) a file-archiving program that supports many common file compression formats; and PopFile (<http://popfile.sourceforge.net/>) a trainable e-mail filter. Another favourite is Freemind (<https://sourceforge.net/projects/freemind/>), a mind-mapping program that is useful for brainstorming and planning projects.

And that's just the beginning. Sourceforge also includes links to games, educational programs, business and scientific applications and more, with new projects added on a daily basis.

Why do they do it?

Open source software is created for a variety of reasons. Some companies do it to undermine a competitor, or to showcase their programming skills. Individuals write open source software out of a desire to tinker and experiment, and from discontent with commercially available products. Hackers also enjoy the community and personal satisfaction that comes with collaborating to produce code that is elegant and well written.

Running for Office

While Firefox and Linux challenge Microsoft's browser and operating system franchise, the big prize lies in creating a competitor for Microsoft's Office software suite, traditionally

one of the company's more profitable businesses.

Unsurprisingly an open source package, Open Office (www.openoffice.org), has appeared to fill the void. Developed by Microsoft rival, Sun Microsystems, Open Office includes word processing, a powerpoint-type

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presentation system, spreadsheets, drawing, mathematics and database programs.

The recently released Open Office 2.0 is a major improvement over earlier versions. It has a look and feel that are very familiar, making it easy for long-time Microsoft Office users to switch. I installed Open Office to write this article. The installation was straightforward, and I was able to use it without difficulty or major adjustments.

Open Office includes a number of thoughtful touches. For example, in

the latest version of Calc, Writer and Impress – Open Office's spreadsheet, word processing and presentation programs, respectively – the save to PDF files function has been radically improved. Calc also includes a decent spell checker, a helpful addition for those of us who use spreadsheets for mailing lists and other text applications. Writer, however, lacks MS Word's grammar checker, and its mail-merge capabilities are not as easy to use as those of its MS Office equivalent.

The programmers behind Open Office have also addressed compatibility, one of the issues that prevents many people from switching. In addition to allowing you to open and modify documents created with Microsoft software, Open Office lets you save documents in Microsoft formats, as well as Open Office's native formats.

User support – an area that has long been a source of frustration with commercial software – is available through FAQ (Frequently Asked Question) lists, user forums and a growing number of books. And while Open Office's primary language is English, both the software and supporting documents are available in a number of other languages, including simplified and traditional Chinese.

So is open source software ready for your desktop? As someone with an interest in technology but without a lot of time to spend tinkering, I found these packages surprisingly easy to install and use. And while I am not sure how appropriate they would be for a large organisation, for my small business and home use, the open source software worked very well. And the price cannot be beat. FCC

Chris Dillon (www.dilloncommunications.com) is the principal of Dillon Communications Ltd, and is a recent convert to the open source movement.