

How to outfit your office with free software!

Now more than ever you hear about people being arrested for illegal downloads and software piracy. What if I told you that you didn't have to go vigilante to get all the business applications you need for day to day operations? It is true! With the right software you can have your business up and running in no time. So, put away the peg-leg and shoot your parrot, I am about to tell you about the joys of using open-source software.

The official definition of Open-source is: "an approach to the design, development, and distribution of software, offering practical accessibility to a software's source code". Got that? Okay now let me translate. It means that a programmer or a team of programmers create a program and then make the source code for it available on the web at sites like <http://sourceforge.net>. Then, other programmers around the world are able to download the code and make improvements or further the development of the program in some way. When they finish the code is put back onto the internet in its improved version and this process happens again and again throughout the life of the program. The benefit to the end user is that you are able to download programs that do the same things as the expensive retail packages for free or in some cases small contributions.

Lets take Microsoft Office 2007 Small Business as an example. It usually sells for around 300\$ and it includes :

- Excel
- Word
- PowerPoint
- Publisher
- Outlook with Business Contact Manager

It is a fantastic bundle of software and has become the standard for large and small businesses but many people simply cannot afford it. In response, a group of programmers got together to create an open-source alternative called Open Office. Lets see how their programs compare:

Microsoft Office 2007	Programs Include	Open Office 3.1
Yes	Word Processor	Yes
Yes	Spread Sheet	Yes
Yes	Program	Yes
Yes	Database Program	Yes
Yes	Slide-show	Yes
Yes	Creator/Viewer	Yes
Yes	Multimedia Designer	Yes
Yes	Email Client	No

So, by going to www.openoffice.org you can get almost all of the programs that Office provides for free. Now you may be worried about the compatibility issue, especially if you email your documents to clients for review. There is not cause for concern because open office will allow you to save your files in a variety of formats, If your client can only view .doc Word files, you can save them into that format before you sent them out.

The only drawback that I can see for open Office is its lack of a email client but that is easily resolved. Thunderbird is an open source alternative to outlook that is just as robust and has an entire

library of add-ons that allow you to customize it to your needs. It was created by the same people that brought you Firefox which is in itself becoming a more popular web browser than Microsoft's Internet Explorer.

As you can see, you do not have to go broke outfitting your company, especially not in the early stages when you can least afford. I personally use open source software as much as possible but you can always use it to get by until you can afford the pricing retail bundles. When you have time, do a little research on the web. I am sure you will find open-source alternatives for many of the programs that you feel you cannot do without.

Here are a few tips to take with you on the search:

- Not all open source programs are free and some have conditions for use so be sure and read the EULA before getting started
- Be careful what you download and make sure to scan your download with your anti-virus program.
- Make sure that you are downloading an open-source program and not freeware, ad-ware, or trial-ware software