

The Open Pitt



What's cooking in Linux and Open Source in Western Pennsylvania

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Switching to Open Source on the Desktop, Part 2 by Carl Benedict

Last month, we looked at some commonly-used applications. Now we'll finish by covering other items you will need to consider when switching over to an open-source desktop.

Compatibility Concerns

Connecting to Windows-based systems is generally not a problem. There are many software packages devoted to bridging this gap. Worthy of special note is *Samba*, which allows you to connect to Windows network drives and printers. For managing or remotely logging in to Windows-based systems, *Rdesktop* is an Open Source program that connects to Windows terminal servers. There is also an ICA Client available from Citrix for their MetaFrame terminal servers.

Another hurdle is compatibility of file formats. Make sure you do your homework on each application that you intend to use for day-to-day operation. Don't assume that programs that complete similar tasks will read and write the same files. Businesses need to be especially conscious of file formats since they often have to ex-

change files with clients, vendors, and others using Windows. If you really need to have *Word* and *Excel*, check out *Crossover Office*, *Wine*, *VMware*, or *Win4Lin*.

If you already have a lot of files that you wish to bring into the Linux world, you will want to look at your options in regards to reading these files. It may be desirable to convert these files to a new format, especially if the source format is a proprietary one. This will increase the portability of your files. Of course, using caution when doing this so you don't lose important data. Make sure you have a backup before you begin.

What about Support?

So you've gotten stuck. The first obvious place to look is the software's documentation. The *man* command is often helpful, and many programs put additional help documents under `/usr/share/doc`. If you can't find an answer there, most software has online support forums where users can ask questions about the product. Take a look at their website or try Google. You might also want to look at Usenet newsgroups under `comp.os.linux` for related articles. Your local Linux users group (LUG) mailing list is another great resource. You are very likely to get some type of assistance using these methods.

If you still are unable to find an answer, it may be desirable to hire a professional to assist you. For some, this

can be a confusing point. After all, isn't it supposed to be free? As it says in the preamble of the GNU General Public License, "When we speak of free software, we are referring to freedom, not price."

In The End

From choosing a Linux distribution to setting aside your Windows software, taking the open source path isn't always easy. However, it can be done through patience, research, a willingness to learn, and a desire for something better. As more migrate to open source each day, the process gets easier for everyone. In the end, we each have to make the choice for ourselves. I, for one, will never look back.

Carl Benedict is the owner/operator of Pittsburgh Techs in Cranberry Township
<<http://www.pittsburghtechs.com/>>.

Sound Off!

Have something to say? *The Open Pitt* needs contributors to write on how Linux and Open Source are used locally.

Just send e-mail to the editors at <top@wplug.org> and we'll work out the details. Who knows, this could be your ticket to fame and fortune!

July Roundup

Jul. 17 General User Meeting: Mark Dalrymple of Borkware presented his method of using the *rsync* utility to perform backups. He covered backing

up static files and the trickier cases of *PostgreSQL* databases and *qmail* files. A PDF version of Mark's slides and a detailed article are available.

<http://www.wplug.org/meetings/one-meeting?wp_meeting_id=3008>
Slides - <<http://www.wplug.org/files/rsync-slides.pdf>>
Web Article - <<http://borkware.com/rants/rsync-backups/>>

Coming Events

Aug. 8: 3rd Annual WPLUG

Open Source Picnic. 1PM to 6PM, Snyder Park, Whitehall

Aug. 14: General User Meeting,

Topic: File Sharing with *Samba*. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

Sep. 18: Installfest. 10AM to 5PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

Sep. 25: General User Meeting, Topic: Using Open Source to Solve E-Mail Problems. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

Oct. 2: Ohio LinuxFest. 10AM to 6PM, Columbus, Ohio: see <<http://www.ohiolinux.org/>>

Oct. 9: General User Meeting. 10AM to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon Hall, CMU

The public is welcome at all events

From the Editors: Open Source in Government

As more Linux adoption happens in offices everywhere, one important category to watch is government users. A crucial aspect of government purchases is that, at least in theory, they are free of any prejudice or bias. The requirement should be clearly defined, and a purchase made based on which offer provides the best value.

Of course, in practice no process is free of bias. But the hope is that government purchases don't resemble a *Dilbert* cartoon quite as much as private-sector purchases. This gives Open Source a chance to compete fairly against proprietary alternatives.

Not that it isn't used already. In late 2002, the MITRE Corporation released a study written for the Defense Information Systems Agency identifying over a hundred Free and Open Source software applications used within the U.S. Department of Defense. Some have gone even further. The city of Largo, Florida, uses thin clients for most of its desktops. They connect to Linux servers which are centrally managed, eliminating the hassles of dealing with hundreds of PCs scattered throughout various departments. Even the police cars are equipped with thin-client tablets.

As we are acutely aware in this region, government entities are strapped for cash and cannot afford to spend a lot on expensive proprietary licenses. Largo officials reckon that information technology costs them half as

much as most cities of the same size. Also, governments often have customized software, which can be more easily tweaked with knowledge of the underlying operating system code (and bugs in the OS itself found and fixed). Finally, a basic principle of our system of government is open public access to records and decision-making processes. Doesn't it make sense that the software which powers these processes would be open as well?

Recent news of note includes guidance issued by the Department of Defense and the White House's Office of Management and Budget on acquiring Open Source software. Massachusetts has put out a statewide policy requiring software purchases to comply with open standards. And the federal court system is in the midst of a large-scale server migration to Linux.

It has not all been smooth sailing, however. Activists Tom Adelstein in Texas and Ken Barber in Oregon tried to get their respective state legislatures to ensure that Open Source solutions were given equal consideration in acquisitions. Both ran head-on into fierce lobbying by proprietary software interests.

But they have not given up, and resources like eGovOS and Government Forge have sprung up to support government users of Open Source. In the end, it's all about providing the greatest value for the taxpayer's dollar. May the best software win.

Giving Back to the Community

Jeremy Wise posted a message to the WPLUG mailing list describing his experience with Northside Common Ministries, a Pittsburgh homeless shelter and food bank. He came in from Cleveland to do normal volunteer activities but was quickly conscripted to help straighten out their computer systems, which were rife with viruses and adware.

As in many nonprofit groups, the hardware is aging and nobody performs support on a consistent basis. Jeremy asked if anyone could volun-

teer their time to perform a more thorough review and clean-up of their systems, and several WPLUGers stepped forward.

Dirk Kalp, Aaron Riley, and Brian Sammon have visited on-site and done some initial assessment. In addition to the problems noted above, there is no central file storage and an Access database used for important data has serious stability problems. Also needed is a firewall to cut down on the viruses and other problems coming in from the Internet.

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<<http://www.wplug.org/top/>>

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What is Linux?

Linux is a *kernel*, the core of a computer operating system, created by Linus Torvalds. It is typically packaged as a *distribution*, which includes the extra programs necessary to make a computer functional and useful. Since 1991, it has grown from a one-man project which ran on one computer to one with thousands of contributors running on everything from personal organizers to million-dollar supercomputers.

What are Open Source and Free Software?

Open Source and Free Software provide you, the user, with the opportunity to see the source code of the programs you use. You are free to use it, share it with others, and even make changes to it if you wish. While the Free Software and Open Source communities differ in their philosophical approach, in practical terms they share nearly identical goals. Learn more at <<http://www.opensource.org/>> and <<http://www.gnu.org/>>.

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Preliminary plans are to set up a file server and *MySQL* or *PostgreSQL* to take over the back-end database functions. The possibility of adding some Linux desktops is being investigated, perhaps in a thin-client configuration.

What You Can Do

While a pool of volunteer labor has been assembled, there is still a need for hardware. In particular, the following items would be helpful:

- RAM (16 MB and larger SIMMs or 32 MB and larger DIMMs)
- Hard Drives (IDE, 4GB and larger)
- PCMCIA (not CardBus) Ethernet adapters

If you have any of these lying around, you can donate them by either posting to the general WPLUG mailing list or to a project-specific list which has been established (see URL at the bottom of this article).

<http://mail.brians.pghfreenet.org/mailman/listinfo/computer-volunteers_brians.pghfreenet.org>