

Did Someone Say Free?

The tech world is full of enough acronyms to drive even the most seasoned engineer or technician crazy; SIMM, DIMM, RAM, ROM, DNS, DHCP, NAT, FAT – well you get the idea. I wouldn't blame you if the thought of being introduced to yet another "techronym" makes you want to jump to the next page, but this next one may save you money so don't start thumbing just yet!

FOSS (Free and Open Source Software) is the general term for software licensed in such a way that it grants users and developers the ability to examine and modify the program's source code. To the average user or business owner that may not seem like such a big deal, especially if you're not even sure what source code is, but the end result is simple: the final product is usually FREE.

Take for example OpenOffice.org, a popular FOSS office application suite. More commonly known as OpenOffice, the suite contains a word processor, spreadsheet application, a presentation creator, a database application and some additional tools similar to those found in Microsoft Office. It's currently distributed in over 70 languages and is available for Windows, Macintosh and Linux operating systems. It writes to the Open Document Format (or ODF – sorry, last one!) but can also open and save to Microsoft Office formats. It's easy to use, with an interface similar to the Microsoft Office 2003 applications and generally includes the same functionality – all without the extremely high cost of its commercial counterpart.

If you've already got your office applications covered, there are still ways to integrate free software into your organization. There are operating systems for desktops and servers, image editing applications, PDF readers and writers, free software for Web FTP connections and much more. Sometimes open source software may not replace a paid-for counterpart but may simply provide an alternative application that's better than the original. Adobe Reader has been the standard PDF viewer for years; however the newest version is bloated with features, inefficient and has an installed footprint of about 200 megabytes. An alternative called Foxit Reader is also freely available, but with a footprint of only 7 megabytes it's much quicker to load and uses less system resources.

For those of you waiting for a "but", I won't disappoint. There are some downsides to using open source software, especially in a business environment. For starters, the software you're looking for just may not be freely available. PDF writers are one thing, but looking for an alternative to your proprietary agency management software probably won't get you very far. Additionally, free and open source applications are usually (but not always) developed by communities of volunteer developers or small corporations with limited resources. Granted they're more nimble than a Fortune 500 company, but it also means that the premium services that may be included in the price of commercial software (support and maintenance, updates and upgrades, etc) may not be available. Peer help groups - where users help each other by relaying past issues and the steps taken to fix the problem - take the place of 1-800 numbers and you may have to do a Google search if you run into an installation snag or receive a strange error message. The more obscure the software is, the greater the chances are of not finding any help.

Most FOSS is presented "as is", which means that if it causes instability on your system or is incompatible with your particular setup, there's not a whole lot that can be done even if there is lasting damage. FOSS may also leave your employees a little lost. Due to intellectual property rights and even the nature of the development process, FOSS may look or feel different than its paid-for counterpart. The differences may be negligible or they may require you to reeducate your workforce to help them with the transition. Finally, the data formats of your FOSS application may be incompatible with a more widespread product or may require special configuration to run smoothly with other products – leading to increased roll out costs.

I strongly believe that you get what you pay for; however FOSS is definitely the exception to the rule. You may not be able to take advantage of open source software at all, but you shouldn't assume it's worthless simply because it's free. If you're curious how Free and Open Source Software can help your organization cut costs or increase productivity just ask an IT consultant – we're always happy to talk about the cool new apps that are available!

Until next issue,
Robert Merva



Robert Merva, CEO of Avrem Technologies, LLC a Youngstown, Ohio IT consulting firm, is a lifelong Mahoning Valley resident and technophile. Questions may be emailed to courier@avrem.com. A complete archive of articles, as well as other information, can be found by visiting <http://www.avrem.com>.