



Open Source and Other Options to Traditional Productivity Software

by Jill Gilbert

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Before most of us had PCs, I used Lotus Symphony, whose spreadsheet module became Lotus 1-2-3. Today, it's hard to imagine life without spreadsheet, word processor, and presentation software installed on our computers and laptops. More and more organizations are entertaining the idea of open source and other alternatives to traditional office software. Some options are online, on-demand "Cloud" applications, something unheard of 10 years ago.

Open Source and Free Software

Open source software is computer software for which the source code is freely available. Users have a license to access to the source code to study, change, and improve the software, rights normally reserved for copyright holders. A computer program's source code is the collection of files needed to convert from human-readable form to some kind of computer-executable form. The Open Source Initiative (OSI), established in 1998, is the steward of the Open Source Definition (OSD) and the recognized body for reviewing and approving licenses as OSD-conformant (www.opensource.org).

Free software refers to freedom, not price. A General Public License (GPL) gives individuals the right to distribute copies of the software (and charge for it, if desired), receive source code, change it, or use portions in new free programs.¹ *Productivity software* refers to office software applications such as word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, and e-mail applications.

Why Use Open Source Productivity Software?

Advantages

Open source software has many advantages. In a recent survey of IT professionals conducted by *Computerworld*, 80% of the respondents cited cost savings as the No. 1 benefit, and 61% said open source has become more accepted in enterprises over the past few years.² Open Source software is free or low cost, compared to traditional, commercial software. Other advantages include a reduced dependence on vendors, ease of customization,

and communities of developers available to offer advice and technical support. Many IT organizations can use internal resources to customize and support the software.

In general, open source applications are free of "bells and whistles," intuitive, and easy to use. Simple menus, icons, and familiar keystrokes (e.g., Cntl + B for "bold" and Cntl + S for "save") result in a quick learning curve. The leading open source productivity software has integrated modules with a common look and feel and navigation. The software uses standard "open" file formats compatible with Microsoft Office and other software applications (but not Office 2007 and 2010 file formats). For example, you can open a Microsoft Word file in OpenOffice.org and save an OpenOffice.org file in a format that you can later open in Word.

Open source software is hardware- and operating system-independent. For software delivered via the Cloud, you need only an Internet connection, Web browser, and minimal computing capacity (see "A Sunny Outlook for Cloud Computing," *EM* July 2010, p. 36). Cloud applications offer online, on-demand delivery with documents and data securely stored online on the provider's servers.

Disadvantages

Cloud applications offer limited or no offline capabilities. When you need to create or edit documents offline, you need software loaded on your computer, whether an offline version of open source software or a copy of a legacy application like Microsoft Office.

The beauty of most open source productivity software is that it lacks the bells and whistles that cause legacy software to become so bloated. This is a disadvantage if you need advanced features; you'll likely need a copy of Microsoft Office software for these situations. You can typically save open source files in Office formats for offline and/or advanced editing.

Free and low-cost software can have hidden support and customization costs. Some organizations can handle support and customization internally. Lack of documentation may cause IT staff to waste time searching for answers on the Internet. For those that require third-party assistance, costs should be on par with customizing traditional software applications. Another hidden cost is that of cultural change. As companies move to new hardware and software platforms, people may be slow to accept the new technology, even in organizations that value change.

Leading Open Source and Low-Cost Productivity Software

IBM: Lotus Symphony and Lotus Live

In its latest iteration, Lotus Symphony includes word processing, presentation, and spreadsheet capabilities. Symphony integrates with the Lotus Notes (paid license required) e-mail application. Lotus Notes Version 8 contains Symphony, and is compatible with Microsoft Office file formats. IBM provides Lotus Symphony at no charge. Plug-in applications are available (<http://symphony.lotus.com/software/lotus/symphony/home.nsf/home>). In addition to Lotus Symphony, IBM offers online applications that allow users to collaborate: Connections, Mail, Meetings, and Events (<http://symphony.lotus.com>).

Zoho

Zoho is a suite of online, on-demand applications. The company targets individuals and small- to medium-size businesses and its name is a play on SOHO—small office/home office. This business productivity suite includes a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, and database modules, plus e-mail, note-taking, wiki, planner, shared document repository, and more. Zoho also offers a full suite of (paid) business applications for project management, reporting, Web conferencing, and online discussion forums (www.zoho.com). Zoho

Considering Open Source Software?

- Implement an open source policy that fits your organization's culture and IT maturity level.
- Define your business productivity software needs and see which open source packages best meet them.
- Understand the risks and benefits of the proposed open source solution.
- Understand open source licensing options, restrictions, contracts, and warranties.
- Obtain a service level agreement for mission-critical applications if you do not plan to provide in-house support.
- Determine up front if you are willing to accept the open source solution "as is," or if it needs customization.
- Start small when considering integration with other applications.
- Identify early wins and consider a pilot test before implementing enterprise-wide.

supports 34 languages, is free for personal use and \$50 per user per year for some organizations.

OpenOffice.org

OpenOffice.org released its first software in April 2002 and Version 3 in October 2008. The software had more than 100 million downloads by late October 2009. Corporate sponsors include Oracle (primary sponsor), Novell, RedHat, RedFlag, CH2000, and IBM (www.openoffice.org).

OpenOffice.org software installs on the user's local machine. Its core modules are Writer, Calc (spreadsheet), Draw, Impress (presentation), Base (database), and Math (scientific formulas). It lacks an e-mail application, but has many optional add-ons, such as mobile device filters for Palm and Windows Mobile operating systems. OpenOffice.org software is free.

Google Apps

Google Docs is a Cloud software suite whose core module are Documents, Spreadsheets, Presentations, Drawings, and Forms (<http://docs.google.com>). This software lets users upload, create, and share documents. Google offers dozens of additional applications, notably, Google Mail, Google Calendar, and Google Sites (free Web sites and wikis), to round out its productivity suite. Google Docs is free for individuals and \$50 per user per year for organizations.

More and more office workers rely on open source business productivity software. It has found a niche in small-to-medium businesses and is gaining acceptance in large enterprises. Oh, by the way... I used OpenOffice.org to write this column. **em**

References

1. See www.opensource.org/licenses/gpl-2.0.php.
2. Brandel, M. Open-Source Software's Hidden Snags; *Computerworld*, May 10, 2010; www.computerworld.com.

