



FOSS
Free & Open Source
Software
...a user's guide

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Advice For Life

Open Source Software: a user's guide

Well, you're sitting in your office sipping delicately at your fair trade coffee, making notes on your recycled paper pad, possibly in your sustainable cashmere jumper from Adili made from the hair of llamas that were treated so well they shivered with pleasure until they shed enough to make a top. There's not a paraben on your peachy skin: you've not used a plastic bag since 2003. You're putting the final touches to your organisation's sustainability policy and by gum, if only your manager would cut back on his 4x4 usage you'd be a gnat's breath away from Complete Carbon Neutrality. Life is good. But there's something nagging at the back of your mind, and it won't go away. That sustainability policy - you'll be typing that up on Microsoft Word, won't you? Contributing to the Evil Microsoft Empire? Is that really *best practice* these days? Or (whisper it) is it time to explore the murky world of FOSS, Open Source, FLOSS or whatever those youngsters are calling it these days?

You might have twittered, you might have poked: someone may even have poked you back: conversely you may still be typing with two fingers on a Mac Classic (ask me how I know). But it's fair to say that loads of organisations, whatever their state of IT literacy and usage, haven't got their heads properly around Open Source Software yet. It doesn't help that whenever you go on a Googling expedition you get pages that look as if they've been written by a Linux purist who's been refusing to use any html tags invented after 1996 and who's been spitting on a copy of Dreamweaver while he (and we use this term advisedly) commits his priceless thoughts to Teh Interweb. So here it is, the definitive (possibly not entirely) guide to Open Source, What it can Do for Your Organisation, and why you might want it to do it.

What is Open Source Software?

Well, to start with, what do you call it? You might call it FOSS - Free and Open Source Software - you might call it FLOSS - Free/ Libre Open Source Software - you might call it just plain Open Source Software - *you might call it a lot of trouble*. The key word is Libre (this is French for free. You know that, but just in case you don't.) And this is because the code for FOSS is open and available to everyone, i.e. the building bricks of programming that it's all made of, not like 'proprietary' software' (like Microsoft, for example) where the code is hidden and protected and people can't change it. That's why the 'libre' bit is important: because 'free' implies that Open Source Software never costs anything, whereas actually it can cost money, although typically it is either free (free free: it is always libre :-)) or at a much lower cost than software you would buy conventionally. If you want to know more about it, I've collected some links at the back of this book.

Well, OK I get that. Why should I care?

Because to start with it means that FOSS costs less and everyone loves saving money. It also means that people work on the code like busy beavers, all around the world and in their own time, to improve it, create add-ons etc. It means that FOSS gets improved quicker and develops quicker than proprietary software. It means (if you have the expertise) you can go fiddling about with the code and change it yourself. It means FOSS is a dynamic, living thing that responds to the needs of the people who are using it. By using it you make yourself part of the FOSS community, and you contribute just by doing that. Make sure you've hoovered this weekend and put the Twiglets out: they'll all be round.

I never never never want to engage with Linux, or with anyone who understands Linux. Please tell me I never have to.

You never have to. FOSS works on Windows and Mac as well as Linux: using FOSS doesn't mean sitting miserably in a cold room staring at a command line and wearing sandals (for those of you who don't know what a command line is - good for you!). You may find you really get into Linux at a later date. You may also find you take up Morris Dancing, although this doesn't necessarily have a thematic link and not something I would want this leaflet to encourage. It is entirely up to you.

PS Linux is really useful, honest! But you don't have to engage with it to use FOSS, it's not mandatory.

Go on then, I'm thinking about it. Now do a bit about the ethical case for FOSS because I'm a VCS worker so I read the Guardian, and I can't decide between FOSS and solar panels. Also I'm going to lift what you say and put it straight in my sustainability policy and your introduction had a bit about Llamas which I thought was a bit suspect, so I can't copy that.

Alrighty. Well, FOSS is sustainable. It works on older computers, and older operating systems, so we're like, fighting the system that says all your electronics have to have built-in obsolescence, man. Imagine a landfill site full of boring grey PCs: imagine it shrinking. Zing! That's the power of FOSS! It can be changed by users, and it can be changed by any one person who has enough skill: so, if you have a minority need - for something to be tailored towards a particular group of users, or language etc - it can be met. It doesn't need to be viable commercially.

Also it has huge benefits for developing countries which can't always afford proprietary software, and it's opening out computer use to them.

Thing is, though, my organisation's really big and we can afford to replace all our computers really often and, like, we have a flash new server and we all have Microsoft Office. So I'm not too fussed about money, really. Why should I use FOSS?

Because the more people who use FOSS, the more development there is, the more feedback to developers, the more support, more people used to using it, the more viable an alternative it gets. And that benefits all of us. And just because you can afford to shell out for something doesn't mean you necessarily want to. I myself can afford many things which I do not actually purchase, up to and including any kind of exercise equipment, gym membership, or a ukulele.

What organisation do you work for, though? Have you got any vacancies?

Hmm still not convinced though. Is it really a goer, this FOSS thing? What do you think? Honestly?

OK, look, let's be honest. FOSS isn't perfect. Some FOSS things are great: some are a lot of trouble. It's a bit like this. 3 years ago if you wanted to wear ethical clothing, you had a choice between something made out of Hemp, or, something made out of Hemp with a slogan on and a couple of those embroidered mirrors. Now look at us: Adili, Etsy, People Tree going all Top Shop, Beyond Skin etc etc. Or Fair Trade coffee: a few years ago you drank it in front of people you wanted to impress, you snuck out for Nescafé afterwards in secret. Now it's as nice as any other coffee (I think.)

FOSS - we're still coming out of the Hemp stage. But it's fine, it's useable, it's great in parts, and in three years' time, when it's beyond sexy, wouldn't you want to say you were in at the beginning? Do you think everyone used Facebook to start with? (They didn't actually because it was restricted. Also, complete lack of web 2.0 profile=The New Black. You heard it here first)

And anyway, I'm de-hemping FOSS for you by telling you what the great bits are to start with.

So. Let's say you've convinced me (a bit) and I'm willing to give FOSS a go. What shall I start with?

Firefox, Firefox, Firefox. Shall I say that again? Firefox! Everyone loves Firefox because it is quite frankly better than Internet Explorer, which is the SUV to Firefox's Prius. Here's how you get it: go to www.mozilla.com and click on Download Firefox free. Once you've downloaded and installed Firefox, you can get going on appreciating its features which are pop-up blockers, tabs, all sorts of goodies. Go on, try it: you'll never go back to clunky old IE. Go and click on the add-ons link as well - you'll find all sorts.

Gosh. That was simple and really effective.

Wasn't it just? So now I'll tell you about the problems. Firefox isn't compatible with everything - we have trouble opening our bank account in it and we have to keep IE installed for that purpose. But there are things IE isn't compatible with too (especially if you use a Mac) - I'm having trouble thinking of problems, to be honest. Just go and download it. Stephen Fry was raving about it in the Guardian recently, and for those of us who enjoy the endless repeats of QI on Dave and Dave + 1 there can be no higher accolade.

Come on then, tell me a few more.

Well, I would, but I think it's going to interfere with my hitherto extremely effective dialogue structure. So, how about this? I've put a section at the back of the leaflet where you can see My Favourite Open Source Software Products and how to get them. Not an extensive list, but there's a few to be going on with, and a few links to find out more.

OK. Now, I'll tell you what worries me about Open Source. It's all very well this FOSS stuff, but if I ring the people who normally come round and sort out our computers and ask them to start messing about with it if goes wrong I'm worried I'll get short shrift, because they only know about Microsoft. And short shrift is no fun. I've got enough on my plate.

That's a very important and apposite point.

Is it?

Yes it is. Support for FOSS - it can be a problem, but it isn't necessarily. So, first things first. There are some organisations around who will help you start using FOSS and will help you integrate it into your organisation: contact your friendly Regional Champion and they'll point you in the right direction. Second things second: yes your normal computer maintenance person might balk a bit if you suddenly ask him or her to install a full Linux server or Puppy Linux on all your machines etc but if you've just added Firefox or Open Office to a machine running Windows or Mac OS that shouldn't cause him or her any problems. Also, you'd be surprised how many people who are into computers, as a job or as a hobby, know about Open Source, and often have it

installed on their own computers at home. Open Source: the professional's choice.

Also, because there are so many people around the world working with and on Open Source, it's odds on you can find a forum somewhere where some friendly soul is just dying to answer your question.

You think I'm going to post to Forums and get 'flamed'? You've got another think coming.

Don't knock it till you've tried it - people can be surprisingly helpful. Also you might not need to post. If you're having a particular problem, it's odds on someone's already had it, and if you have a poke round you might find your question answered already.

You know what though? I'm a busy person. I've got a Board meeting, we've run out of teabags, I haven't got time to go looking at forums. You're scaring me. This all sounds like too much trouble.

Well, I'm being honest. If I'm not honest, you'll have false expectations and you'll give up at the first hurdle. This is the thing about Open Source: you do have to engage a little bit more than you do if you just buy a package off the shelf. But look at it like this: the more you know, the better position you're in to make strategic decisions about your IT, to know where you can save money, to know how to take advantage of it (pun!) generally. The organisations that really make IT work for them are the ones that think about it on a deeper level than just, where shall we get our copy of Microsoft Office. I know that doesn't help when you're having the, why is it doing this, panic. But time spent on integrating FOSS will never be time wasted, as time spent learning how your systems work is always good!

Using FOSS at AFL: a personal experience.

AFL is a medium-sized organisation which has advice and ICT projects, and is based in a number of different offices. We tried to move towards using all open-source software and we had (very) qualified success. There were some insuperable technical difficulties (Quickbooks isn't compatible with Open Office, our Casetracking programme stopped being compatible with our Linux server) but our main difficulties were organisational, and getting staff buy-in.

You would be surprised how personally people can take it if you threaten to take their Microsoft away - and conversely you would also be surprised how difficult it is to deal with FOSS evangelism when you have reports to get out and invoices to enter.

What we learned: the ability of staff to do their jobs must always come first - no matter how good it is as a technical solution, if it means people can't do what they could do easily before IT'S NO GOOD: staff need training, even if it seems like they should be able to work it out themselves: and you need a plan for bringing FOSS in, you can't just do it ad hoc. Having said that, we are still using some FOSS products very happily, and no one could have tested them more comprehensively than us!

What FOSS products are useful to use, and easy to integrate?

Firefox - open source web browser with pop-up blockers, tabs and all sorts of thrilling things

<http://en-us.www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/>

Thunderbird - email programme with a strange and complicated way of inserting a signature but great apart from that

<http://www.mozilla-europe.org/en/products/thunderbird/>

Open Office - has pretty much everything MS Office has - versions of Excel, Word, Access and Powerpoint - if I am honest it is not my favourite but plenty of people think it's great

<http://www.openoffice.org/>

Joomla - a web content management system - believe me when I say we have tested this more comprehensively than you would ever wish to test anything, and the fact that we are still using it is a testament to its quality. Lots of support and add-ons available, but get help with the initial installation unless you are very web-savvy

<http://joomla.org/>

Drupal - no personal experience of this one but have heard good things (a CMS like Joomla)

<http://drupal.org/>

Wordpress - open source blogging tool - if you download and install it rather than use the hosting service at Wordpress.com you can go wild(er) with widgets. Templates available, clean and easy to use.

<http://wordpress.org/>

Gimp, the Gnu Image Manipulation Programme - an Open Source Photoshop (is that controversial?). Very effective

<http://www.gimp.org/>

Clamwin - virus protection - sometimes it is a bit overkeen but that is not a bad fault in such a programme

<http://www.clamwin.com/>

And where might I read more about this fascinating subject?

What is Open Source Software - from the Open Source Initiative

<http://www.opensource.org/docs/osd>

The difference between Open Source and Free software (similar to the difference between Star Bellied Sneeches and those whose bellies were plain)

<http://www.slackbook.org/html/introduction-opensource.html>

NOSI (the Non Profit Open Source Initiative) have a useful Primer (how to integrate FOSS, developing the business case and so on) and toolkits

<http://nosi.net/>

<http://sourceforge.net/> - a treasure trove of open source programming - go and lose yourself for hours

Feminism and Open Source - yes it's a very big issue! Beth Kanter has a marvellous collection of links on her blog (and her blog generally is a great source of info)

<http://www.blogger.com/node/18126>

A community of women in the Open Source software community

<http://www.linuxchix.org/>

And...

Links between the philosophy of open source and traditional fibre arts:

<http://open-source-embroidery.org.uk/osembroidery.htm>