Taking the Leap

A young potential convert seeks advice from a seasoned Free Software advocate.

By Jon "maddog" Hall

A young man at a Free Software conference in South Carolina wanted to interview me. He was studying marketing while at college, did not consider himself "technical," and only knew about Free Software from his friends. I received a letter from him today:

I have grown quite frustrated with my current computer and all of the headache that it has caused me over the last year or so. I have tried downloading OpenOffice multiple times since I first heard anything about open source software. As you pointed out, I am still working with sub-standard Microsoft Works …, and it has become very difficult for me to use and even more stressful to share documents.

I'm currently using a Dell with Windows Vista; I am sure that disappoints you to hear. I was wondering what sort of advice you would be able to offer me as I begin this search for what I hope will be the "perfect" computer for me. I don't need one that can do everything imaginable; just everything that I need to do, which is not much.

I have had nothing but positive experiences with Apple computers. However, I have not the slightest idea of what other factors should be considered in the selection process.

Any and all insight would be very much appreciated.

To which I answered:

"As you know, I am a believer in Free Software; however, as our country's founders knew, Freedom never comes without a price to pay. We seem to have become a nation of 'instant gratification,' but often the things that have the most value take time to learn.

"Do you ride a bicycle? You don't even think about riding it do you? You just get on and go! But remember that you did spend time learning to ride it … you may even have used training wheels for a while until you got your balance. Once you learned to ride that bike a whole world opened up for you and you could go places that would have taken hours for you to walk, but learning to ride was not 'instant.'

"Today there are several ways for people to get to know Free Software.

"I used to tell people to start replacing their proprietary, closed source software with Free Software on top of their existing operating system. Use LibreOffice (the new split-off of OpenOffice) or some other Free Software office package. Use Firefox or Chrome or some other 'open' browser for web browsing. Use Thunderbird for email. Some people use web-based mail services (I see you use Google mail), but I tend to read my mail using a mail client on my own system. If you decide to use GNU/Linux as your main system, you can continue to use Gmail and the other web-based services you currently use.

"If you were just starting off in computing, I would give you 'Ubuntu' or 'Mint' or 'Fedora' or another fine GNU/Linux desktop distribution. I think these are integrated enough and easy enough to use for 'everything you need to do, which is not much.'

"If you really need a Microsoft system to do particular things, I would set you up with a dual-boot system, but with the default to boot into GNU/Linux. I would also set it up so your GNU/Linux system would share the Windows filesystem. That way, you could mostly work with GNU/Linux, and when (or if) you needed Windows to do one specific thing, you could reboot into Windows.

"Some people run Windows in a virtual machine. This allows them to have GNU/Linux and Windows running at the same time, instead of having to reboot. There is not much of a performance penalty these days to run in a virtual machine, as long as you are not emulating the hardware instructions.

"If you do multi-boot or virtualization, ask for a little help from one of your FOSS friends in setting it up; then, you could write about your experiences and help other people do it. Maybe you could make it your career.

"As far as Apple goes, they usually make good products. But Apple is 'closed,' and I am too much of a rebel to have Steve Jobs tell me the reason my phone is not working is that I am holding it wrong. I just cannot spend my life being limited to things that begin with a small 'i'. But that is your decision.

"One thing … if you stay with Microsoft, or go with the dual-boot solution, do yourself a favor and get rid of Vista. Really … such a wart. I tell people that Vista was the best thing that Microsoft ever did for GNU/Linux." ▪▪▪