Smart Sheet

Technology Information Newsletter of

In this issue...

- How a 5 year old PC can be used in business today.
- What exactly, in a nutshell, is Mozilla?
- Some interesting statistics on spyware.

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Smarts On Site
Computer Support Services
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Can you use a 5 year old PC in business today?

The short answer is YES, but then comes the question of "How?". Read on and, like the fellow in the ING banking commercial says, "save YOUR money".

There are those who will tell you that at the age of five a personal computer is ready to be broken down for scrap. They might try to tell you that it is too slow and that it would be less costly to simply get a new machine. Well it could be that these people are on a mission to separate you from your hard earned cash and are feeding you a load of hooey.

A Pentium III or an even older Pentium II based PC can surf the web with the best of them, it can also run your word processor, do your books, run spreadsheet programs, and use the latest hardware, all the while saving you money and keeping software costs to a minimum. How? By being the tool that meets your needs and not necessarily your wants. Microsoft™ will soon no longer support Windows 98™ and that means if you run your business using Windows 98™ then you are being forced, at considerable cost, to "upgrade" to Windows XP™. Your old hardware might not run XP and you will be forced into buying a new computer when the one you have can do the job quite nicely. Some liken getting a new PC to buying a new car, but computers are not like cars, they don't rust out, they don't eventually leak oil and they don't loose power. Thats right, the old slow PC in front of you is just as powerful today as when initially purchased.

You can improve performance and take control of your computer simply by not giving in to the pressure to upgrade to Windows XP™. You can keep on using Windows 98™ and switch your office tools to Free Open Source Software like Open Office. Open Office can read and write Excel and Word files, so you can still create documents for those who still use MS Office™. Be vigilant about your Windows 98™ machine and keep your anti-virus and anti-spyware tools up to date. Make sure you're behind a firewall BEFORE you connect to the Internet and everything should continue to hum along. But what happens when you can't get anti-virus or anti-spyware updates for Windows 98™?

Enter Linux, an open and freely available alternative to Windows™, with which you can do all of the business tasks mentioned earlier, reduce your exposure to viruses and spyware, and can get yourself off of the upgrade treadmill. If you switched to Open Office while still using Windows 98 then thats even better! All of your Open Office documents will work under the Linux version of Open Office just as they did under the Windows 98™ version. The makers of Open Office realize that it's important to have things work as you would expect them to, regardless of the Operating System you use. They also realize that it is important to be able to save documents in formats like Word Perfect, MS Word, or even HTML and PDF! Thats right, with Open Office you can create PDF files directly from your word processor WITHOUT any other PDF creation tools!

Making the switch to Open Office is painless, everything works and looks much like you would expect. Making the switch to Linux is relatively painless. Both give you more control over your costs. Linux has the added benefit of reducing your exposure to viruses and spyware while increasing your computer's security, therefore reducing or eliminating the need for specialized software (anti-virus etc) to keep your system clean and your data intact.

I've put together a little FAQ on Open Office and Linux. If you have any additional questions don't hesitate to ask, I'll put them in the next newsletter so we can all share in the knowledge

Can I read MS Word files with Open Office?

Yes. Open office can be set up to default to MS Word format. If you are installing Open Office on a Windows PC then the installation script will even ask you if you would prefer to use MS Word, Excel, and power point files as the default for Open Office. Very thoughtful.

Will I have to re-learn everything to make the change?

I think you will find that the people who created Open Office took great pains to make everything work the way that you've become accustomed to them working. It's kind of like riding a bicycle, Open Office is just a different make of bicycle, you already know how to ride it...all you have to do is get on and pedal.

Will my MS Office Macros work on Open Office?

No. The Macro language in MS Office is based on Visual BASIC which is proprietary to Microsoft and is a security risk. Macro Viruses have been created and MS Office products now warn you when a file containing macros is being opened because you are putting your machine at risk. Open office uses the Java language for it's macros. Java is inherently more secure than the Visual Basic Applettes used in MS Office™ products.

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What if I switch to Linux to be more secure but want to keep using MS Office? Can my MS Office run on Linux?

Yes and No. (Nice answer huh?) I'm not trying to be sneaky, MS Office™ will work (and work as you would expect) under Linux by using an application called "Crossover Office". This lets you use MS Office™ on Linux making the "Crossover" to Linux a little easier for those people who, for whatever reason, just have to use MS Office™. Having said that please understand that MS Office™ will not run under Linux without having something to help it along. MS Office™ NEEDS Windows™. So thats why I said "Yes and No"

Open Office runs on Linux and Windows™ without any helper programs such as "Crossover Office". Open Office can read and create MS Word™ documents, MS Excel™, and Powerpoint™ slide shows. Open Office™ costs you nothing, you can download it from the net for free (high speed Internet is a good idea if you plan on doing this). The makers ask you to register and if you like the software (and I think you will) you might want to make a donation to help them keep up the good work, They do not specify how much you should donate... that is up to you. The product is freely available for you to download and install. And good news for the Windows™ users, it does not have spyware or adware built into it.

I only use Internet Explorer™ and Outlook Express™, do these run under Linux?

Stop using these two programs now and save yourself a lot of grief later. Internet Explorer™ and Outlook Express™ are the two BIGGEST security vulnerabilities on your PC. A web surfer using these can be hacked just by visiting a site (its called a "drive by foisting") or opening an HTML email in Outlook™. It's so bad that Outlook™ could be renamed Look Out! Please download and install mozilla. During the Install mozilla will import your bookmarks from Internet Explorer™ and when you set up the email it will import your Outlook addresses.

Does Linux run Windows™ games?

Yes it can/does, using a piece of software based on WINE (Wine Is Not an Emulator) developed here in Canada by a company called "Transgaming" (www.transgaming.com), however the point of this article is to make an older PC useful again, and older PCs don't run the newest Windows™ games very well, even when if they are using Windows™.

Can I get on the Internet with Linux?

Oh yes! Linux is perfect for the Internet You can connect to high speed services without having to install any of the Internet Service Providers "special" software. In fact, in most cases Linux will work with the high speed services without you having to do much of anything! Most of the Internet is run by computers using Unix or a variation of it (Linux is one such), so you're in good company.

Is anti virus software available for Linux?

Yes, but you won't need it. Linux, because of the way it is put together, is virus resistant. Note, NOT virus PROOF but virus RESISTANT. There is also no spyware or adware to speak of for Linux so you can kiss the need for anti-spyware and anti-virus programs goodbye.

Will my accounting software work on Linux?

It might. Quickbooks™ is reported to run quite well under WINE (WINE stands for Wine Is Not An Emulator and allows you to run many Windows™ programs) but Simply Accounting™ refuses to install properly (although that will probably change). There is also a financial package called "gnu cash" that comes with most flavors of Linux. gnu cash is a simple and powerful dual entry book keeping application which can produce reports such as cash flow and balance sheets at the click of a mouse button.

Is Linux hard to use?

No. There was a time when all Linux users had was a command line like MS DOS. Today you can pick from several nice Graphical User Interface environments, some can even be made to look a lot like your old Windows™ desktop to make you feel right at home.

Bottom line? Changing your office suite or perhaps your whole Operating System is pretty much painless and can reduce your operating costs. If you're interested and you live in the greater Barrie area I can give you a short demonstration, just email me sbungay@mail.smartsonsite.com.

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What exactly is Mozilla?

   Mozilla is the web browser that Netscape is based on, and it is so much more than just a browser. Mozilla is friendly, easy to use, has a pop-up advertisement blocker built in, and even comes with a nice web page creation application that lets you quickly and easily set up a web page. The Smarts On Site web page was authored using mozilla composer.

   Mozilla is free to download, it has no spyware in it, and like most open source applications if you like it please send along a token of your appreciation to keep the good folks producing top-notch products like this one. The mozilla developers also have a smaller leaner meaner web-browser named Firefox, and you can download a separate email application called Thunderbird or a calendar/day timer application called Sunbird.

   Setting up multiple emails in mozilla mail is very straightforward (even more so if you've set up your email in Outlook™) and it doesn't suffer from the security holes found in Outlook™.

Spyware Stats

   An AOL/National Cyber Security Alliance (NCSA) On line Safety Study - conducted by technical experts in the homes of 329 typical dial-up and broadband computer users across the US - found that most computer users think they are safe but lack basic defenses against viruses, spyware, hackers, and other on line threats. Only half of broadband consumers used a firewall.

   Worse still four in five of home PCs inspected were infected with spyware. The average infected user has 93 spyware/adware components on their computer. Two thirds lacked up to date anti-virus software. One in seven users (15 per cent) had no AV software at all - so it comes as no particular surprise that one in five of the surveyed PCs were infected by a virus.

   Despite this legion of problems 77 per cent of those polled think they are safe from on line threats. The NCSA wants to shake this complacency and encourage more people to guard from attack, the sensitive personal and financial information that many people keep on home PCs.

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