Open Source Software for Law Office?

I need to upgrade the computers in my office soon. I was just thinking about maybe using open source software like Apache for my office software to replace Microsoft word, PowerPoint, Excel. Has anyone done this before? I need to share documents with my clients and they make edits to it that I incorporate, will this be difficult to do with Apache writer if they use MS word? Any thoughts would be appreciated.

I use LibreOffice and have not had any issues sharing with clients or other attorneys. I set all the defaults to save as MS Word/Excel.

How is Apache's option?

I have not found an open source pdf option yet (to edit, etc. not just read), so I'm open to suggestions there.

Phil A. Taylor

Ehhh, it's been a couple years since I used OpenOffice, so take this with a grain of salt, but it's slightly clunky, particularly if you need to do something like make a TOC and then share that with someone using Office. I frequently had complaints of weird formatting problems and broken tables, so I just bit the bullet and started using MS Word.

With an Office 365 subscription it's pretty affordable for a solo, but it could become burdensome if you're talking about using it on a bunch of different computers simultaneously.

Bryce Davis, Florida

Phil, I am not that familiar with what's available as far as open source. I just picked Apache because it seemed like a popular open source suite of programs.

Does LibreOffice let you share redline versions with Word users?

Michael A. Blake

Given your particular line of work, you may want to consider carefully this blog post by Carl Oppedahl:

https://blog.oppedahl.com/?p=4704

If what he says is a real issue, it may make your decision for you. (I have no personal knowledge, but Carl usually knows of what he speaks.)

James S. Tyre, California

Sorry to sound snarky, but is this a joke?

Imagine that someone said to you: Hey, if you only buy an extra 12-pack of rollerball pens and enjoy a sandwich once per month, I'll make sure you have the latest and greatest software, handle all updates, toss in some free email and online storage, and make sure you can file share with 99% of the planet."

Would you say no? Of course not. But Office 365 Small Business Premium is $12.50/month and includes online storage, exchange email, and every single office program. That's about the price of a dozen Pilot rollerballs.

Acrobat Pro DC is $15/month. That's probably what you spend to buy the occasional expensive sandwich. If you care that much you can save $2/month and get Standard.

If I add up my Office 365 and Adobe yearly for my office it's about, hmm, less than 2 billable hours per year. And it just WORKS. Also, everyone knows how to use it (including me) and there are 100,000,000 sources of free detailed help for everything I want to know. From books to YouTube to forums, everyone will help you with Word. I'd waste 10x more time just getting to my current level of expertise, you probably will as well.

Not to mention the other side benefits and features. Like, the other day I decided I wanted to have a document e-signed, and--whaddya know--that feature was already built into Acrobat, and thanks to the super clear help and functionality I was able to get it signed in about 5 minutes. And Acrobat has good OCR. And it has portfolios. And bates stamping. And so on.

Really, if you are willing to reorganize your whole electronic system to save yourself $27.50 per month per person, a/k/a $330/year, then you need to reconsider your firms financial priorities. Efficiency is GOLD in this industry, and those programs are efficient as hell. Another way to think of it: If you're like me, you probably spend at least 1,500 hours/year using those programs. If you only lose 1% efficiency-which is not much!--that's 15 hours. Do you want to lose 15 hours to save $330?

Erik Hammarlund, Massachusetts

What he said. Say what you want about MS, the Office suite is the de facto industry standard. If you exchange documents with anyone outside your office, odds are they will want either a Word document or a PDF. And if you do markups and/or have any kind of outline formatting (as with 99% of contracts these days) you really can't count on anything besides Word to properly handle the formatting. The MS Office 365 suite is about as cheap as software gets. Can you get by with LibreOffice or OpenOffice? Sure, but why would you scrimp on the tools for your practice that you use every day, especially when the industry standard is as cheap as office is?

Kevin Grierson, Virginia

I know a few offices running Linux and open source software. Being in a small minority, they have to do workarounds when interacting electronically with others. Programming and technical knowledge helps. Staff training also needs to be exceptional.

Similarly, a larger percentage works with Apple products. They too have to do workarounds, but the market has support. Since support exists, technical requirements are not as high.

The mainstream runs on MS. People assume you have it. File transfers are relatively seamless.

Personally, I keep WordPerfect and LibreOffice on computers in addition to Microsoft Office. I also maintain several different PDF software types. One of the reasons is that keeping cross-trained and current can be helpful when gremlins are afoot in document formatting or other issues.

Frankly I prefer PDF alternatives to Adobe. I get by with an older license or two of Adobe and currently prefer Nuance's product. If you are going to be an outlier in your selections, make sure your workarounds work.

Darrell G. Stewart, Texas

For me, when considering open source, the first proviso that comes to mind is that, if you're considering an open source operating system, keep in mind that you're acquiring the foundational software on which everything else relies. Because it's open source, there are legions of programmers working on it - to fix it AND to break it.

I would not install and run open source unless I had someone competent to handle my IT, at least insofar as keeping up with bug fixes and the like is critical there; someone who knows when to install a patch or update, and when to wait.

Running open source apps is *somewhat* less critical in that regard. If configured properly at the outset, most open source apps play perfectly well with others.

Richard J. Rutledge, Jr., North Carolina

I use LibreOffice for word processing and spreadsheets, for about a year now, and I haven't had any complaints. It took 2-3 months to get used to it just because of the different menus and functions. A lot of just looking for something I needed and then googling it. I have yet to find anything I need that it won't do but Office will.

Rick is correct, when you move into these programs you either need professional help handy or you start learning really fast. I'm computer savvy so I enjoy it.

Be careful how you save the files, .odt, .doc, ,docx, .xls, .csv, etc...

All these extensions become a lot more important when you know the file will be opened by a different program.

I would suggest running both programs in parallel. Take a test document and open it in one program, make edits, save it, open it in the other, make edits, save it, repeat as needed and see if it messes up your formatting.

Once you ditch M Office you can always use OneDrive in your browser for Word, Excel, etc.. . just like Google Docs.

D. Mathew Blackburn