

Wondering if Any Solos Out There Using UBUNTU LINUX

A May 2010 discussion on SoloSez, the email listserv for general practice, solo and small firm lawyers

Hi all. Just wondering if any solo attorneys out there are running on a Ubuntu Linux operating system. If so, which programs have you found to be most helpful in running your practice, and how are you using them?

I have been experimenting and am very interested in this topic. For now, I have a Live Ubuntu disk (with persistent changes possible) for experiments and for use in emergencies. I want to get a separate computer dedicated to Linux so I can experiment more easily.

Running Ubuntu has been a breeze compared with my last foray into Linux about 10 years ago!

Jean Binkovitz

I've been running Linux for years.

Zale Dowlen, Tennessee

I use Ubuntu as my daily driver (desktop) and on a 3 year old HP tx1000 laptop (in front of the TV).

Love it for just about everything I do. That said, most practice management specific software does not run (or run well) on it. Using Wine to run things such as Word is not really worth it. The downside to OpenOffice is a slight learning curve and slight differences in appearance of the documents with Word. You can avoid this by sending in PDF (OpenOffice does this natively) but then you cannot edit.

If you are rolling your own website there's great graphic tools like GIMP and Inkscape which work substantially better on Linux than they do on Windows.

You can easily get into some harder core industrial applications that can run entire offices with document management (KnowledgeTree), file services, and a virtual PBX (Asterisk).

Our companies core systems are based on a single dedicated and hosted server running 3 websites, an ERP/accounting system and a document management system. This is on Ubuntu 9.10, 64bit 2 CPU machine with 2GB ram and 2 500 GB disks. We reboot the machine about 1x every 6-8 months. Otherwise, never goes down, never has leaks that require reboots and no known instabilities. I would never even consider trying to do such

a thing with Windows. Too many license fees for the software, hacks and what not for certain opensource packages that just run better on Linux.

One thing to point out. Not everything is free in the Linux world. It might be opensource, but that should not be confused with free.

Bob Bell, France

Zale,

Thank you for the link. It's good that other people are also going down the open source route with regard to their law practice.

I've been using Ubuntu Linux almost exclusively for a year now. I've kept Windows XP on the machine just in case, but I've found that I've logged into it just a few times over the year, but just for programs like TurboTax 2009 (which I probably could have done via the Crossover Linux program if I had the desire).

The problem is that as a brand new solo, I do not know yet what I need to do to achieve what law software programs would offer. What exactly needs to be done? Scheduling? Contact management? For these, there is both Mozilla Thunderbird and the Evolution mail client (which feels to me to be just as quirky as Microsoft Office was.) In the available free software bank (called "repository"), there are two or three contact management software options akin to ACT, but they seem to be overly complex and feature rich, and I believe the problem with them is one of portability. My goal is to be able to move from one computer to another just in case of a crash or a theft, and having your contact data in a proprietary format just seems to be a bad idea.

I foresee that the best solution is making use of Google's suite of products, doing so through Mozilla Thunderbird (with the Firebird calendar extension) which synchronizes e-mail automatically via IMAP, and automatically updates the Google Calendar. OpenOffice has a new version out, but any of their versions have been comparable to what you'll find on the Microsoft Office suite of products.

As for document storage, Linux has a gscan2pdf program which seems to be the easy way to scan in documents with any scanner. I've been using it to scan in documents for almost a year now (I scan them in color at a resolution of 150), and the software takes out data containing empty space, significantly lowering the file size of each scanned page. There are other programs out there such as XSane Image Scanner, etc., but I like gscan2pdf because it is small and it simply works well.

What else do I need to know though to run a practice?

Robert Z. Cashman, Texas

I use dropbox to hold my files. That syncs the files across any platform. It also gives me something of a backup if I lose a machine.

I use Jpilot and a Palm based phone to track my calendar.

Anything you decide to do over the web (SaaS) is usually fine.

Interestingly, the more you use Linux, the more you find that Windows actually has some shortcomings. For instance, I have a few Windows machines around the house. It's a pain in the butt to make a .pdf on a Windows machine, but Linux machines do it intuitively. I don't understand why Windows makes it so difficult.

Zale Dowlen

because MS wants you to use Document Writer XPS files. A format that no one uses/supports, can't be read by anything and is more or less worthless. So why would they want to make it easy for you to print PDF?

And why not jump to Google Apps premium. I believe a number of members here have done so and haven't looked back. Seamless integration with an Android phone too.

Bob Bell

I use Linux Mint (a derivative of Ubuntu) because it has a much nicer UI in my opinion. It is on my netbook, so I don't run my whole practice with it.

However, I would be sure to set up Thunderbird and use a SAAS practice management tool like Clio or Rocketmatter if I were on Linux full time. Of course, OpenOffice is a must-have too.

Have fun trying it all out!

Brian Pedigo, California

I hate to rain on this parade (and for the record I like Linux and run it myself on some machines) but Office 2007 and 2010 both write PDF files natively. In Word 2010 I can save my document as a PDF file with 5 clicks (and I could probably cut that down to 2 clicks if I tried).

If you don't have Office 2007 or 2010 and the app you're using doesn't already create PDF files natively (like WordPerfect does) then there are a variety of open source and free utilities out there that you can download and install to allow any Windows program to create PDF files.

Or you could, gasp, actually buy Adobe Acrobat and then you get all of the power and functionality of Acrobat throughout Windows.

There are plenty of things to complain about with Microsoft's software. Not being able to create PDF files isn't one of them.

Disclaimer: I think I might still own 7 shares of Microsoft stock that I bought back in the early 90s. Or maybe I sold it? Don't remember. And I'm still not a lawyer.

Ben M. Schorr (not a lawyer), Hawaii

You aren't raining on anyone's parade. We all know that you make Windows do it. My point was that it does not do it out of the box, without adding something to it. On Linux, its not just Open Office that does it. Linux does it on every application through the print feature

Maybe my point would have been better made by saying that MS products do not network as intuitively as Linux does. Can you make them? Sure, but as you point out, often you have to buy something else to make the MS product you already bought work. If I can get it for free and adapt to it, why not? Especially in this economy.

Just my \$.02.

Zale Dowlen

Well, o.k., but again...you don't HAVE to buy anything to make Microsoft Office 2007 or 2010 save in PDF format. You don't even have to install anything extra for Office 2010. You don't HAVE to buy anything to make any Windows program save in PDF format - many free utilities exist that are easy to install and use. (easier than installing/using Linux)

You can choose to buy Acrobat and get the extra features and capabilities that Acrobat provides or you can stay with a much more basic (and free) PDF creating utility. That's not an option you get with Linux, by the way, since Adobe Acrobat doesn't support Linux natively. (Reader only)

I like Linux and I use it in certain situations - have used various distros of it for the better part of a decade or so. For most of them the word "Intuitive" is not what comes immediately to mind.

I'm just glad we don't have to compile our own video drivers any more. (At least not in every distro)

Disclaimer: If I could WGET a law degree then maybe I'd be on my way to being a lawyer. But no matter how much I GREP there's just no J.D. to be found for me.

Ben M. Schorr

What about Foxit for a Linux machine and pdf creation, editing, reading?

Jean Binkovitz

Is the reason why you're waiting to 'wget' a law degree is because you're still on the fence with the vi/emacs wars? Feel free to 'curl' up in a corner, this one's not going to be over any time soon.

Vincent Kan, Illinois

emacs r00Lz!

(For the uninitiated, emacs has nothing to do with anything mady by Apple Computer Cop.)

James S. Tyre, California

I'm probably off the deep end in more ways that one now - I'm currently typesetting my LLM thesis paper with vim and pdflatex...

By the way, is the emacs r00Lz line only because we have GNU Emacs but not GNU vi? =)

--Vincent Kan

As far as I know FoxIt Reader works on Linux (or Windows, but not Mac) but FoxIt Creator only runs on Windows.

Disclaimer: I work on Linux, Windows or Mac. Sometimes all three at once. And I'm not a lawyer.

Ben M. Schorr

LaTeX is one of the most elegant computer programs ever written, a variant on TeX, written by long since retired Stanford CS Prof Don Knuth (who I have had the privilege of knowing for quite some years).

The precision of Don's software is legendary. He's always offered a bounty for those who spot errata. But few do, and the few that do hardly ever actually cash his bounty checks. Keeping and framing them is considered by most all of the few recipients to be far more valuable than the actual cash value. (It plays havoc with balancing his checking account, but that's another tale.)

James S. Tyre

Ugh. LaTeX is very good, but my UNIX prof way back when made us write it by hand in emacs or vi. What a PITA to manually typeset an entire document.

Adobe, at least the reader, works OK on Ubuntu but I've found it to be very quirky with the printing and page layout when I want A4 instead of letter. I end up using the default eReader.

And the reason Word 2007 now saves to PDF is because OpenOffice forced it. OpenOffice has exported to PDF for as long as I've used it and well before Word 2007. The CUPS PDF print device has been around for quite some time too. Had this not been the case, I'm not sure MS would have bent over in the 2007 suite.

Bob Bell

Creating and viewing pdf files has never been a problem on GNU/Linux. But if the person who created the pdf uses some non-standard font and does not embed that font, then things can look weird. That's true of any platform. There is no shortage of pdf tools available to do basic editing, such as combining, removing or rearranging pages. There is PDFedit that does more, but it isn't well documented. OpenOffice.org has an extension that

can import pdf files for editing. pdf files are overrated anyway. They are good for some things, but Adobe's vendor lock-in drives me crazy.

Christopher Bumgarner