



How to Run your Organization with Free Software

Many free software programs are as good or better than expensive versions. Here are the best.

By Ian Anderson

For years huge software companies have dominated the marketplace while charging hefty prices for using their software. Thankfully, some software developers offer free alternatives.

Open-source software is usually as good as — if not better than — the commercial versions. Of course, the benefit of commercial brands is their popularity. With free software, it will be harder to find people with whom you can share experiences and troubleshoot. But if you're a pioneering sort, unafraid to strike out on your own, you'll find that these free products are a great fit for nonprofits.

Here's a list of commercial products and their open-source alternatives (with descriptions) that you can use to run your nonprofit. All these open-source software titles are free.

Using General-Office Software

Commercial Product: Microsoft Office

Open-Source Alternative: OpenOffice (www.openoffice.org)

OpenOffice has most of the features you need to run your nonprofit. The entire office suite is here. Need to keep track of information and perform donation/membership calculations in a spreadsheet? "Calc" can do it. Giving a presentation to the board on a projector? "Impress" can give you all the functionality you need in on-screen presentation software. Want to track donors in a fully functional database? "Base" is for you. And all the word processing Microsoft Word does, "Writer" can do.

There are more applications in the suite, so I recommend you download and install OpenOffice

These products are a great fit for nonprofits.

for free and compare the features before you go out and purchase Microsoft Office for \$679.99. OpenOffice can be used on Apple and PCs.

Zippping Files

Commercial Product: WinZip

Open-Source Alternative: 7-zip (www.7-zip.org)

Zippping files is a great way to compress and archive them to save space. You can then group and copy these files and unzip them when you need to work with them.

If you (like most people) downloaded WinZip (the most well-known file-compression utility) but didn't buy it because of the high purchase price, don't worry. Download 7-zip, and get all the nice features of WinZip for free. I like the way it adds a new right-click menu entry for zipping files (just like WinZip).

Mind Mapping

Commercial Product: Mindjet MindManager

Open-Source Alternative: FreeMind (freemind.sourceforge.net)

The people who develop mind-mapping software are amazing. Such software lets you create diagrams of relationships between ideas, helping you visualize complex aspects of your organization. But you may not want to spend \$349 for MindManager to get your ideas out of your head. If that's the case, try FreeMind. It can do everything you need when it comes to structuring your ideas and can be used on Apple and PCs.

Creating a PDF (Portable Document Format)

Commercial Product: Adobe Acrobat/Adobe Distiller

Open-Source Alternative: PDFCreator (www.pdfcreator.com)

PDFs are a great way to get people to see your documents as you intended. These fixed-layout formats, independent of the operating system, let you share information from any computer application with anyone around the world without changing the documents' original look.

Adobe Systems created and perfected the PDF, but its \$449 price tag may be an impediment. Let me introduce PDFCreator.

PDFCreator basically adds a printer (that you can give a custom name) to your available printer list. When you're ready to convert any document to a PDF, use File > Print like you normally would; then choose your PDF printer from the list; hit Print (then save) and you're done. It works great.

Checking E-Mail

Commercial Product: Microsoft Outlook

Open-Source Alternative: Mozilla Thunderbird (www.mozilla.com/thunderbird/)

Freeing your nonprofit from the "@hotmail.com" stigma is a wonderful thing. Now you have the problem of "How do I check my new e-mail address if I don't have Hotmail?" You have two options: Buy Microsoft Outlook for \$109.99, or download Mozilla Thunderbird for free. If you just need to be able to check your e-mail, Mozilla Thunderbird is a great choice.

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Commercial Product: Vonage

Open-Source Alternative: Skype
(www.skype.com)

I'd been using Vonage for about a year (paying \$24.99 a month) when I heard about a new Skype deal (\$29.95 for unlimited calling per year). There are cordless phones that are compatible with Skype, so you can call from anywhere in your office. It's compatible with Apple and PCs. And you can take your number with you to different locations, as when you move offices or use the number at both home and office, even easier than with Vonage.

And here's something really cool: Belkin (and a few other manufacturers) have created Skype handsets so that you can use Skype without being connected to a computer. These devices connect through any open wireless network. If you have one of these devices and the unlimited Skype account, you have an unlimited-use cell phone. Vonage can't do that!

Why Pay Huge Prices?

As you can see, you can obtain some great nonprofit software without paying the high costs. If you need help finding and downloading any of these open-source titles, just contact me and I'll help you out. Enjoy! ■

Ian Robert Anderson (info@clickitz.com) is founder of Clickitz (www.clickitz.com), which offers a simple way for nonprofits to raise funds using the Internet. Clickitz gives nonprofits a complete Web store with thousands of digitally downloadable products (no packaging, no shipping, no credit card processing). All nonprofits need do is direct traffic to their Clickitz Web store; with every sale, they receive a commission.

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Nonprofit Sector Growing Pains



The economic crisis may be just what's needed to turn the nonprofit sector around. Here's what we must do.

By Bruce Glasrud

Over the past few decades, the nonprofit sector has become one of the fastest growing sectors of our economy. Most of us have assumed that such growth is something to celebrate — a sign that nonprofits are showing increasing influence.

That's not the real story, however. Some of this growth is unnecessary and counterproductive, highlighting weaknesses at the heart of the nonprofit sector. Today's weak economy is bringing the problem into full light.

Some of this growth we can do without.

Leaving a Legacy?

Case in point: I was recently approached by a successful, soon to be retired businessperson who wanted me to help him start a new

Many nonprofits — far more than we like to admit — do an appalling job of engaging volunteers.

nonprofit. When I inquired about his intended mission, he said he wanted to raise money for a national nonprofit he had always liked. It took me considerable effort to convince him to forget starting a new organization and, instead, offer his sizeable talents directly to his favorite cause. (I cut out the middleman — and cut myself out of a lucrative contract. Ethics and bank accounts seldom walk close together these days.)

Of course, I can only hope the favored nonprofit has the good sense to involve this businessperson properly. Many nonprofits — far