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DAWN Sci-tech World

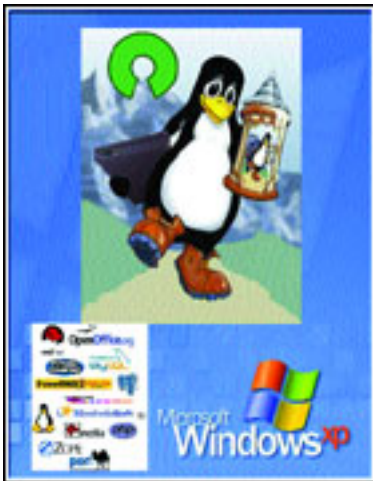
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The open option

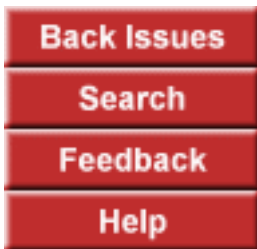
By Seema Javed Amin



A cash-strapped computer student or a professional cannot afford to purchase different software packages of Microsoft's MS Windows XP Home Edition, which costs about Rs5,000 or more per package. But illegal and pirated computer versions are available in the local market at a fraction of the original cost.

The software are being used in our homes and in our offices. We cannot deny that we are violating international intellectual property right laws. Since its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO),

Pakistan has repeatedly been criticized by the international community because of this. But now there is an alternative.



Countries such as Australia, Brazil, China, India, the European Union, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Japan, Malaysia, Peru, South Africa, South Korea, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, the United Kingdom; California, Oregon and Texas in the United States and Zambia have saved a lot of money because their government projects and businesses have switched from proprietary to open source software (http://www.iosn.net/downloads/foss_primer_current.pdf).

This fact might not be very well-known in general, but its proponents have been working quietly behind the scenes, revolutionizing computer technologies since the sixties and seventies, providing computer users, who cannot afford expensive proprietary software with an alternative set of options.

Microsoft's (MS) software, although user-friendly, is vulnerable to malicious viruses and requires regular security upgrades. This is something that only MS's software developers can take care of, because the way in which computer language is used to "write" a program like MS Word is a secret known only to them. This is known as "closed source code."

On the other hand, open source software developers the world over modify and share their written version of an already existing "open source code." This results in open source software, which individual computer users can download from the internet for free. Programs include OpenOffice.org (<http://www.openoffice.org/>), an alternative to MS Office. Browsing the internet with Mozilla Firefox is similar to MS Internet Explorer and Thunderbird (<http://www.mozilla.org/>) can be used instead of MS Outlook or MS Outlook Express. A multi-protocol messenger is also available in the form of Gaim (<http://sourceforge.net/>).

At the local level, open source software's proponents include Linux Pakistan (<http://www.linuxpakistan.net/>) and the Free and Open Source Software Special Interest Group of the Computer Society of Pakistan (<http://www.csp.org.pk/>).

At the national level, Pakistan is open to investment from the private sector, provided it can respect intellectual property rights. The government, however, can also explore open source software as a relatively cheap and security-intensive alternative. The Electronic Government Directorate's (<http://pakistan.gov.pk/e-government-directorate/index.jsp>) e-projects and all mission-critical security, business and financial systems and industrial sectors of the economy can flourish cost-effectively by using open source software.

The Ministry of Information Technology (<http://www.pakistan.gov.pk/moitt/index.jsp>) is currently implementing two open source software-related projects under the Pakistan Software Export Board (<http://www.pseb.org.pk/>).

The "Automation of Domestic Industry on Open Source Systems" project aims to

develop Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software for four to five industrial sectors and to introduce the automation culture in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) with a developmental budget of Rs38 million. This project will create jobs by initiating open source software development in Pakistan, and help local software companies acquire knowledge and experience of open source technologies. It is expected that this will help in eliminating the software piracy issue in Pakistan, and also bridge the gap between the local industry and software companies.

In the first phase, the following industrial sectors have been selected for the development of business process automation software:

- All Pakistan Textile Processing Mills Association (APTPMA).
- Pakistan Association of Automotive Parts and Accessories Manufacturers (PAAPAM).
- Pakistan Ready-made Garments and Exporters Association (PRGMEA) and Pakistan Hosiery Mills Association (PHMA).
- Surgical Instruments Manufacturers Association of Pakistan (SIMAP).

Another project worth Rs29 million, the Open Source Resource Center (<http://www.osrc.org.pk/>) facilitates stakeholders and investors in the software industry, should they decide to shift their businesses from vendor-dependent proprietary software to open source software technology. It aims to create a culture of open source software use in Pakistan through media awareness and training workshops, and act as a virtual community for experts in this field.

A project worth Rs24 million has begun under the auspices of the Pakistan Computer Bureau (<http://www.pcb.gov.pk/>). Its target is to create a talent pool of 4,000 end-users and 200 systems administrators in open source software technologies. It has already trained a number of people in this regard. Another objective of this exercise is to prepare related training material in a simplistic format.

The writer works for the Open Source Resource Center (OSRC) project of the Pakistan Software Export Board (PSEB).

Selecting the right software

Quite a few of us want to opt for open source software, but we don't know where to begin. Sci-tech World presents a few basic tips for selecting the right software, thus making the switch a tad easier. Here is what you should look out for:

1. Reputation — find out more about the software, that is, whether it is able to perform well. Visit your CD vendor several times if you have to, but do not buy a software because you're running out of patience. Discuss your plans with an experienced person before purchasing it.
2. Ongoing effort — quite a few open source software have been launched, but not much has been done to improve upon them. So, before you decide to purchase a relatively unknown software, do find out if efforts are being made to develop it. You don't want to pay a lot of money, only to find out that the software you selected is probably going to fall flat on its face.
3. Standards — choosing the software, which implements open standards is very important, for it could turn out to be very costly, if you buy software that may eventually force you to learn new languages or complex data formats.
4. Support community — make sure that the software you choose does have an interactive support community that is ready to answer your questions about deployment. If not, then you might have a hard time trying to figure out things on your own.
5. Versions — try to buy software that has the latest version available in the market. Doing so will not only make sure that you have all the relevant updates, but will also keep your system relatively stable.

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