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It Is All about the Policies

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What is open-source software?

Did you know there are software alternatives that replace those expensive programs that are business “necessities” today? Open-source software is, in most cases, free software with



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programming or “source code” that is visible, or open, to the public.

It is basically the opposite model of, say, Microsoft Windows. Windows is not open

source. Microsoft does not show outsiders their code, and they charge for the finished product. That makes sense, right? I mean, why would a company give its work away for free?

There are many reasons, but for the purpose of this article, let’s just be happy that they do.

So how can you start using open-source software? Let’s examine a few alternatives that can potentially save you real money.

OpenOffice.org: This software suite is basically a clone of Microsoft Office. There are open source alternatives to Word, Powerpoint, Excel and several others. Just head over to OpenOffice.org and download the suite.

There’s a small learning curve if you already know how to work the Microsoft versions. The best part is that the OpenOffice.org software is compatible with their closed source counterparts. You can save text documents as .doc files, spreadsheets as .xls files, etc. Just go to “save as” in the file menu and you’re good to go.

Mozilla Thunderbird: Now that Microsoft is charging for Outlook, you may want to find a free e-mail program. While Gmail is still my number one choice, Mozilla Thunderbird behaves almost exactly like MS Outlook for those people who don’t want to switch to a web-based e-mail program.

Sure, Microsoft offers Windows Live Mail for free with their new operating systems, but I still prefer the open-source version. Head over to getthunderbird.com for this one.

PDFCreator: Want to create PDFs without having to buy Adobe software or other

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third-party applications? PDFCreator is an open-source program that integrates itself into your printer setup and allows you to create PDFs from just about anywhere. You can visit pdfforge.org for this one.

There are literally hundreds of other alternatives out there. GIMP can replace Photoshop, Audacity is a free audio editor, Filezilla is a great FTP program — the list goes on and on.

You can even ditch your operating system in favor of free, open-source alternatives. Linux can accomplish the majority of what Microsoft Windows or Apple’s OSX can. However, the learning curve on this switch can be a lot higher than the examples I’ve already stated.

Detractors of open-source software cite instability, poor support and other issues as reasons to be leery of these alternatives, but aren’t these issues that we have on a regular basis with paid software, too?

I always recommend a healthy dose of cynicism when something sounds too good to be true, but open-source software can provide real, legitimate alternatives to their expensive counterparts.

Cost savings can vary, but an office that can replace Microsoft Office on multiple computers can stand to save thousands of dollars a year. Isn’t that worth exploring?

For those who still aren’t convinced, please know I wrote this article using OpenOffice.org. I think it got the job done, and the price was right, too.

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It is all about the policies

Your information systems (IS) are made up of your information technology (IT) along with the 3 P’s — processes, people and policies.



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If there is a problem with your IS, we usually focus on the IT. New IS will fix it. IT usually doesn’t. IT might have a new fancier

interface or IT might make it faster, but you usually still have the same problems.

If we have good systems, we usually have good embedded processes and well-educated and trained people.

If we have both good processes and good people and we still have problems with the systems, don’t upgrade the IT until you look at your policies.

The problems with most systems and the solutions to most systems is usually in the 3 P’s. In honor of our new president here at Georgia Southern — who is going to put in place a fresh review of all of our policies — let’s look at the last P (policies) today.

Have you ever stood in

line at the security check-in the airport terminal for a long wait and thought it has to get better than this?

It could get better, but it is not the processes. The process of checking passengers and bags is a necessary evil in the world we live in today.

It is not the technology either. The IT works just fine.

It is not the people (even if that is what we say or hear). The people are just doing their job as designed.

It is the policies or, more precisely, the lack of knowledge about how, when and to whom to apply the policies (in IS we call it standardization) that is the real problem.

Do I take off my shoes and jacket? Where do I place my cell phone, and should it be off already? Can I bring my unloaded handgun through the checkpoint and on board? Why not? What is the policy? Why are we doing this?

If people knew why we were checking things the way they do, we would be more likely to comply and would be ready when we got to the head of the line. The line and the process would — and should — go

much faster. It is all about the policies.

Our IT and systems work the same way as the security checkpoints in airports.

What policy do we have for what websites we use and access at work? What e-mail can we send or open? What devices can we connect to our networks and why? When organizations educate, train and inform people about the proper policies and the reasoning behind the policies, the systems work better and more efficiently.

It is all about the policies. Some policies are outdated and should not apply anymore. Some policies nobody has followed in years and no one knows why. Some policies are applied in an incorrect manner, and no one dares to question it.

Our IT and systems need a thorough policy review periodically to ensure we are getting the most out of them. IT is all about the policies.

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