

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

WINDOWS GOT YOU DOWN? TRY UBUNTU

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Microsoft's Vista operating system has not been a big success, with many companies and individual users preferring to stay with the older Windows XP. Complaints about Vista include that it has too many pop-up warnings and messages, it is slow, it requires a lot of computer resources to run, it is incompatible with other software, it is confusing, and it has too many different versions (Pegoraro, 2009; Pogue, 2009). Last October Microsoft announced the next version of its operating system, Windows 7, dropping the brand name Vista from the Windows product (Markoff, 2008). Although reviews of the beta version of Windows 7 have been positive, many users and companies are reluctant to spend money on a new operating system (Pogue, 2009). A survey of 300 business chief information officers revealed that spending on desktop operating systems would be among the first expenditures to be put off in an economic downturn (Lohr, 2008).

Cash-strapped businesses and educators have an alternative to get the features of modern operating systems like Windows 7 or Apple's OS X without spending a lot of money for new hardware or software: open-source operating systems such as Ubuntu. First released in 2004, Ubuntu is a user-friendly version of the Linux operating system. Ubuntu has a graphical user interface similar to Windows or Apple's OS X. It requires much fewer computer resources such as disk space and memory than these systems, however.

With more than 10 million users worldwide, Ubuntu is among the most popular of the Linux-based desktop operating systems. It can be downloaded and installed free of charge. Its low price and ease of use have led to its adoption in a number of schools, businesses, and government agencies. The school system in Spain has installed it on 195,000 systems, and the French National Assembly and military police use it on

80,000 personal computers. About half of Google's 20,000 employees use a version of Ubuntu (Vance, 2009).

Ubuntu (pronounced oo-BOON-too), is a Zulu word meaning "humanity to others" or "I am what I am because of who we all are" ("What is Ubuntu?," n.d.). It was created by Mark Shuttleworth, a South African billionaire entrepreneur and ex-cosmonaut who also created Thawte Consulting, the Internet digital certificate company (Vance, 2009).

Ubuntu is a product of Canonical Ltd., Shuttleworth's London-based software company, but it relies on volunteer software developers from around the world for many of its improvements. A new version of Ubuntu is released every six months. For those users who are not comfortable upgrading their operating systems that frequently, Canonical provides long-term support versions that are not revamped as often ("The Ubuntu Release Cycle," n.d.). Each release is supported for at least 18 months, but the long-term releases are supported for 5 years. The current version, 9.04, is called Jaunty Jackalope; the next release will be version 9.10, Karmic Koala, appearing in October 2009.

Each version of Ubuntu has its own desktop background, although users can modify the background to be any digital picture. The default desktop interface is based on the GNOME version of Linux, but other Linux user interfaces such as KDE can be substituted. In contrast to Windows, the GNOME interface for Ubuntu has its menus and application dock at the top of the screen. There are only three menus: Applications, Places,

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and Systems. The Applications menu includes Accessories, Games, Graphics, Internet, Office, Sound & Video, and Universal Access. This last category contains the Orca screen reader and magnifier to make the interface usable by the visually impaired.

The Places menu contains shortcuts to commonly used file folders such as Documents, Music, and Pictures. It also links to the search program and to recently opened documents. The System menu contains the Preferences and Administration menus, as well as the Help and About menus. Shortcuts to the web browser, the e-mail client, and the help system are also located on the main menu bar. The top right of the menu bar is the location for icons showing the laptop battery status, the time and date, and other information similar to the Windows system tray. The bottom line for most users will be that the user interface, while different from OS X and Windows, has enough similarity so that they can quickly become productive.

Ubuntu comes with a number of popular open-source programs. The Open Office productivity suite, which consists of a word processing program, a drawing program, a spreadsheet, and a presentation program is included, as is the Firefox web browser. Applications for playing music and movies are incorporated, and there is an Internet messaging program, an e-mail program, and a graphics editor similar to Adobe's Photoshop. A comprehensive suite of games is also provided.

A key difference between an open-source system like Ubuntu and proprietary products such as Windows or OS X is the user's ability to customize Ubuntu. Hundreds of add-on programs and features are available to tailor the interface to the user's needs. The system comes with 80 different screen savers, for example. Many users will appreciate the freedom they have to manipulate the Ubuntu user interface.

Users who rely on specific Windows or Apple programs may have a problem with Ubuntu, however, as it does not run popular applications like Microsoft Access or Quickbooks. Users experiencing problems may have difficulty finding technical support, but answers to most technical

questions can be found on the large and active user community on the Internet.

In these days of budget cuts, educators and businesses looking to save money on software should give Ubuntu their consideration. Computer users who spend the majority of their time working with web browsers, word processors, and spreadsheet programs will find Ubuntu a reasonable alternative to expensive operating system and productivity software from Apple and Microsoft.

IN THIS ISSUE

Two of the articles in this issue present spreadsheet applications that enhance teaching. Bee Yew of Fayetteville State University describes a program that helps faculty members with assessment and assists students in managing their workloads. The assessment system allows flexible weighting of assessments in determining course grades. The workload management features allow students to estimate the scores they will need to achieve on assignments and tests in order to earn the course grades they desire.

Ahmet Ozkul, of the State University of New York Oneonta, introduces a system to simplify the construction of quizzes and exams. In many courses, part of student assessment is based on the completion of assigned problems. From semester to semester, or even from section to section of the same course, the same problems could be assigned with minor changes in the values of the variables. The system Ozkul describes automates the process of creating these problem sets by integrating a spreadsheet containing problem data and a word processing program containing problem text.

The research paper by Rose Mary Wentling, of the National Center for Supercomputer Applications at the University of Illinois, and Steven Thomas, of Lockheed Martin Corporation, examines the effects of workplace culture on the career development of women in information technology. The information technology workplace has often been described as dominated by individualistic, competitive, White males with attitudes that might inhibit the career growth of women. Wentling and Thomas find companies

that promote a collaborative environment that emphasizes teamwork will enhance the career development of women in information technology.

The final paper in this issue, by Margaret Lohman of Penn State University-Harrisburg, reports a study of the ways information technology professionals learn in the workplace. She finds they rely heavily on the Internet as their first stop for new information, interacting with colleagues mainly when they cannot satisfy their needs on the Web. Lohman identifies workplace and personal characteristics that influence the learning styles of information technology professionals. The OSRA panels at the Americas Conference on Information Systems in San Francisco this August included a report on the results of further research on workplace learning styles.

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