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The Public Ought to Know: Schools, libraries would benefit from free software

By Corey Bearak

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Government administrators often talk of savings realized when they introduce technology in agency operations. During the 1990s, the city's Police Department faced delays in getting an enhanced 9-1-1 emergency communications system on line. The Fire Department also never progressed on its firehouse siting model (political concerns may play a part here).



Corey Bearak

Few give any attention to New York City's potential waste of millions of dollars on "closed source" (fee-based) software, including Microsoft Word, Windows and Internet Explorer, when it could be taking advantage of free and faster comparable programs. When few libraries, which could provide computer access for those without one at home, open seven days a week, taxpayer dollars that enrich folks like Bill Gates look ill-spent.

I have always enjoyed using the computer. Though I penned or penciled several columns, they got perfected on my Bellerose office PC or on the notebook my daughter uses. I use e-mail often in my practice and in my community work. Through the Net, I have met people who share my passion for music, particularly POCO and John Fogerty: Charlie and Dorothy, Dennis (of lighthouse fame) and Esther and Jon R. frequent POCO concerts; they even share my politics.

Even before I owned a personal computer, an early campaign experience demonstrated how these machines can make life easier. Using very rudimentary Compaqs in 1984 when I coordinated Election Day activities in New York for the presidential primary, a team of college students under my

direction used their PCs to gather and process voter district targeting information we used to tabulate by hand and with calculators. The computers ranked the districts by the criteria I wanted, and what used to take much longer got done rather quickly. The July 22 "annoy" your electeds column covered some of my early exploits using the PC.

My son, who has built Web sites for community groups and some prominent folks, decided to join the group of programmers and others who prefer to use "open source" programs that depend not on the Microsoft monopoly. He learned and installed Linux and programs such as OpenOffice on the computer he uses a few feet from where the one I compose most of my columns (including this) sits in my office. He installed Linux to operate on nine donated computers at his now former Jamaica Estates high school, Summit, and reported that the dinosaur 386 and 486 PCs run faster than some Microsoft Windows-based Pentium machines.

In a memo, he shared, "I have not explained to the students or staff that they are using Linux. Many have commented that they find these machines to be the best in the computer room. They are the fastest and most reliable computers. The hardware is slower than other machines. They are nicer to use and feel faster for one simple reason: the superior quality of open source software."

When some of the core files I maintained in MS Word crashed from being too large, Jonathan convinced me to sample OpenOffice for those files, including my core address contacts list, which last April reached 3.2 megabytes - larger than what two 3 1/2-inch floppy disks (does anyone use them anymore?) hold. The same file in OpenOffice takes up only 273 kilobytes - not even 1 percent of space used by its MS Word version - on my computer. MS Word contains, Jonathan explains, a lot of code that takes up computer space and resources.

Policymakers and would-be policymakers would do well to give these alternatives a chance in our city's agencies, schools and libraries. (After all, next year is a municipal election year.) A software transition plan for running New York City computers on Linux that Jonathan proposed last March includes:

*Mozilla Firefox, a faster Web browser than Internet Explorer and which includes built-in smart pop-up blocking.

*GAIM, which supports a wide variety of instant messaging, including AOL, Yahoo and MSN.

*OpenOffice.org, a powerful office suite application that offers great compatibility with Microsoft's proprietary and secret Word file formats.

The benefits of open source over closed source software include securing the city's information into the future when the next generation of software takes hold. Free software is peer-reviewed (to work out any glitches) - in the open source community. Closed, virus-plagued Microsoft Word cannot make that guarantee.

Imagine open source expanding into education. With the mentioned free software, kids can learn to program with the ability to look inside code. Terminals replace desktops at schools, providing more computers per student. CUNY students (such as Jonathan) could get involved in open source projects to display their talent.

If you need more info, he is busy with school at our city's great public university's Honors College program, which he attends via Queens College. Send an e-mail to him c/o the address below.

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