

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 119. Alternatives

- by Stan Kaplan, WB9RQR
105 Martin Drive
Port Washington, WI 53074-9654
(262) 284-9346
skaplan@mcw.edu

I am a believer in alternatives, especially in the computing world, and there are a number of them out there that many may not be aware of, so it is time to devote one column to them.

First, just about everyone is familiar with Adobe Acrobat Reader (the latest version being 6.0), which is a program that you can install to read documents with a .pdf ("portable document format") extension. Adobe provides the reader as a free download (www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html). Many organizations make their documents available in the .pdf format (including most US Government agencies). Documents in this format are not easily modified from the original, and they represent closely the format and "feel" of the original. The Adobe program that creates .pdf files from, for example, Microsoft Word documents, is quite expensive—over \$200. What you may not know is that there are a number of free programs out there that will also create .pdf files. One free one can be found at <http://www.pdf995.com/>. A bit of advertising comes with it which shows each time it is used, but you can get a version without the advertising for \$19.95. There are other free programs out there, too, without any embedded advertising. Let your cursor do the walking through a Google search page.

Now, for a really big alternative. Linux. Linux is a free Windows alternative that you can simply download and install. Why Linux? It is much more stable than any Windows version, which is why the majority of large US firms will have Linux installed as their main operating system for servers AND workstations by 2007. There are stories of Linux-based servers being booted up and running for several years without crashing. That kind of stability is what business demands, and we home users should demand it, too. All current versions of Linux come with a Windows-like Graphical User Interface, presenting a desktop that looks and works very much like a Windows desktop. You'll feel right at home when it first appears. Also, the latest Linux versions sport an impressive database of hardware drivers, so you should have little trouble getting your CD or DVD or soundcard or video card or whatever, to work when you install the operating system. The two versions I will mention also support a dual-boot (and make installation a snap), so you can keep your Windows and choose which operating system you want to use at boot time.

I am familiar with two companies that bundle the Linux operating system and installation programs on CD-ROMs, and charge a fee for that bundling/CD service. Both are excellent versions of Linux. One is SuSe Linux (SuSe is a German firm), and its product now resides on one of my machines in a dual-boot configuration. That is, at boot up, I can choose for Linux to be booted, or Windows 98se. I find it very interesting that if I boot Windows, it cannot see any of the Linux files on the hard drive, while if I boot Linux, it can see all its own files AND all of the Windows 98se files. I can even open a Microsoft Word file with SuSe Linux, edit it, then save the edited copy as a Word file! SuSe Linux is very good, and, of course, it comes in an English version. Version 9 is the latest and greatest, at this writing.

Red Hat Linux is the other brand – I have installed it on a couple of machines. Its look and feel are really very Windows-like, and I like the clean lines of the Desktop a bit better than SuSe. Version 9 is the latest, and you can download it at <http://www.linuxiso.org/distro.php?distro=7>. Alternatively, I purchased for \$16.95 (including shipping!) a 9-CD set that included Red Hat 9, all the source code, all the documentation, a Rescue CD and a copy of OpenOffice (reviewed next) from <http://www.freepctech.com>. Check them out for a similar deal.

Now let me tell you about OpenOffice! This suite is free, free, free (you can download it from <http://www.openoffice.org>). It is a true suite, because it comes with a series of programs that are very

similar to those in Microsoft Office. I am writing this article in it now (!), and one could not tell that the application is not Microsoft Word without looking at the toolbars very closely. Yes, you can create, edit and save documents in the Word format with it, which is what I am doing right now. OpenOffice also comes with programs that are similar to Microsoft PowerPoint and Excel, with a drawing program thrown in. What I am reporting to you here is that you need not spend hundreds of dollars for Microsoft Office – OpenOffice will give you the same functionality, plus the ability to handle Microsoft files as well. Truly, there are alternatives! Happy computing.