Information Sheet

Foundation for Community Dance • January 2011

Low-cost IT tools

Spending money on professional software is often seen as the only option available to voluntary arts groups and organisations. This may have been true in the past, but the proliferation of the web has resulted in a huge number of free and low-cost alternatives becoming available. This briefing looks at some alternatives to standard software, and some other tools that you might find useful. The final section of the briefing describes 'open source', the process by which many of these free and low-cost IT tools are produced, and suggests some ways in which the open source ethos can be applied to your other activities.

If after reading this briefing you are unsure about what software is right for you, get advice from an IT expert. These can be found through voluntary sector ICT bodies listed in the Further Resources section at the end of the briefing.

Note: due to space constraints, this briefing focuses mainly on PCs rather than Macs, although many of the tools featured work on Macs or have Mac versions available.

A. The tools

Listed below is just a selection of the thousands of IT tools available. Others can be found through search engines or through sites such as CNET's Download.com – www.download.com. Download.com features reviews of each of the applications featured on its site – it is important to look at these, as they will highlight any potential bugs or compatibility problems with your system. There is always a danger that computer viruses might be present in downloaded software, but you can mitigate against this risk by reading previous user reviews on sites such as Download.com and making sure that your virus software is up-to-date.

Downloading software

Most of the tools listed below are available to download for free from websites. To do this:

– Visit the website in question and find the link that says 'download' and download now';

– Click the link and you will be asked where on your computer you would like to install the file to be saved;

– Once the fie has been downloaded, double click on it and follow the on-screen instructions; and

– When the installation is complete you will be able to launch the programme from your Start menu.

If you already have a similar programme on your computer (e.g. you are downloading OpenOffice.org and you already have Microsoft office), there is no need to uninstall the existing software – you can have both installed on your computer at the same time, and choose which you want to use as you see fit.

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1. Virus protection

Free programmes include:

- Avira AntiVir Personal – www.free-av.com – a popular anti-virus programme that monitors every action and reacts promptly when a malicious program is detected;
- Ad-Aware 2008 Free – www.lavasoft.com/products/ad_aware_free.php – a popular anti-spyware programme;
- Malwarebytes – www.malwarebytes.org – identifies and removes malicious software

from your computer and is good for correcting things after your system has been affected. It is free for non-commercial use.

The companies that provide these free programmes also offer paid-for options, providing a higher level of protection, but still often cheaper than some of the more well-known high-street brands. Check their websites for more details, and get advice from an IT expert if you are unsure about the level of protection you require.

2. Office applications

OpenOffice.org is a group of free open source (see Part B) office applications, which aims to emulate the look and feel of Microsoft Office. It can open and create most of the file formats you may already be familiar with (e.g. .doc, .xls, and .ppt).

Some computers come with Microsoft Office already installed, in which case you will probably not need an alternative such as OpenOffice.org. If however, Microsoft Office is sold separately, or if for some reason Microsoft Office doesn't work on your computer, you might like to consider OpenOffice.org as a free alternative. The applications that make up OpenOffice.org include:

- OpenOffice Writer – a word processor similar to Microsoft Word or WordPerfect. A great advantage of OpenOffice Writer is that it can create Portable Document Format – PDF (see Section 3) files with no additional software;
- OpenOffice Calc – a spreadsheet with similar features to Microsoft Excel or Lotus 1-2-3. Calc can also create spreadsheets in PDF format;
- OpenOffice Impress – a presentation program similar to Microsoft PowerPoint. It can export presentations to Adobe Flash (SWF) files, allowing them to be played on any computer with a Flash player installed. It also includes the ability to create PDF files;
- OpenOffice Base – a database program similar to Microsoft Access. Base allows the development of databases, and the building of forms and reports to provide easy access to data for users.

To download OpenOffice.org visit the website at www.openoffice.org. For more information on the suitability of OpenOffice.org for not-for-profit organisations, visit http://why.openoffice.org/why_nfp.html.

Glossary

Applications – also known as 'programmes', the things that run on your computer to enable you to do particular tasks, e.g. word processor, Internet browser, etc.

Backing up – saving copies of your files or emails somewhere else (e.g. on a CD, memory stick, another computer or online) in case anything should go wrong with your computer.

Browser – the application you use to access the Internet, e.g. Internet Explorer.

Bugs – things that might cause your computer to go wrong, such as an incompatible application or a virus.

Byte – a unit of computer memory. A kilobyte (Kb) is one thousand bytes, a megabyte (Mb) is one million bytes, and a gigabyte (Gb) is one billion bytes. An average document might be around 50Kb. Most new computers come with over 100Gb of storage space.

Compatibility – the extent to which software applications and computers speak to each other successfully. Sometimes new software is incompatible with an old computer, or vice versa, and therefore won't work.

Download – to get something from the Internet onto your computer (see 'upload').

Hardware – the physical computer, including the processor, hard drive, monitor, mouse, keyboard and other accessories.

Open source – term used to refer to software created and distributed on a copyright-free basis (see Section B for more details).

Programmes – also known as 'applications'. The process of creating applications is called 'programming'.

Software – all the programming that runs on the computer, including the operating system (e.g. Windows) and the applications.

Spam – unsolicited emails.

Spyware – a type of virus that can gather information about you without your knowledge or consent.

System – a term used to describe your whole computer, including both hardware and software.

Upload – to get something from your computer onto the Internet (see 'download').

Virus – a malicious programme that can infect your computer, causing damage or loss of information. Viruses can be caught through email or websites.

Webcam – video camera that attaches to your computer to allow people to see you during Internet phone calls or chat.

GoogleDocs is a free service that lets you to share office files with colleagues. You can use it to create documents, spreadsheets and presentations without having to download any software onto your computer. You can also upload your existing Microsoft Office or OpenOffice.org files. Once created or uploaded, you and your colleagues can access your files securely from any computer with an Internet connection and browser.
To find out more and to sign up, visit www.google.com/docs

3. PDF creation
The advantage of Portable Document Format (PDF) files is that they:
- ⟲ cannot be altered by the recipient;
- ⟲ often take up less space than the original file; and
- ⟲ are compatible with the majority of computers, thanks to the free Adobe Reader software that can be downloaded from www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html

PDF files can be created from most types of files, including documents, spreadsheets and presentations, using the full version of Adobe Acrobat (which isn't free). Free alternatives include OpenOffice.org's integral PDF creator or any one of the free PDF creators now available.

An example is:
- ⟲ PDFCreator is free to download from www.pdfforge.org/products/pdfcreator and can be used even for commercial purposes. It will convert most types of file into a PDF file. Note:Not all PDF creators available for free download remain free; some are commercial products with a 30-day trial period, after which you have to pay to continue to use them.

4. Internet telephony
Skype is a free software application that allows you to make phone calls from your computer. Calls to other people who are using Skype are free, but you have to pay for calls to landlines and mobiles, either on a 'pay-as-you-go' or subscription basis (prices at www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/prices).

The only hardware you will need is a pair of earphones and a microphone. These can be combined in the form of a headset, which can be picked up for under £10 (€13) from most computer or electronics suppliers, or a special Internet telephony phone, which plugs into the USB port of your computer, and can cost from around £20 (€25). If you have a webcam you can also make video calls so the person you are calling can see you as well as hear you. You can download Skype for free from www.skype.com

5. Conferencing and collaboration
There are many ways you can use the latest free and low-cost IT tools to collaborate with colleagues anywhere in the world. GoogleDocs (see Section 2) allows you to share office files and Skype allows you to set up telephone conferencing.
Other tools include:
- ⟲ Huddle is a secure online environment where you and your colleagues can come together to work on files, plan projects and collaborate on ideas. Huddle is free to selected registered charities, thanks to the Huddle Foundation. It provides ten gigabytes of space, the capacity for an unlimited number of users and online support. If you are a registered charity, you can find out if you are eligible by visiting www.huddle.net/about/charity-criteria. If you aren't eligible, you can still set up a more basic Huddle account absolutely free at www.huddle.net;
- ⟲ Meet-O-Matic (www.meetomatic.com) is a free and simple way to schedule meetings. Just visit the site, add the details of your proposed meeting and who you would like to invite, and Meet-O-Matic will email the invitees and monitor their responses about whether or not they are available. Unlike Huddle, Meet-O-Matic doesn't provide online spaces for collaboration, but is useful for setting up real-life meetings when you are unsure whether or not everyone will be available;
- ⟲ Eventbrite (www.eventbrite.com) is an online event registration service that is free to use for free events (it charges 2.5 per cent commission for paid events). Unlike Huddle and Meet-O-Matic, Eventbrite is more suited to setting up public or membership events, rather than just staff or volunteer meetings. Once you have set up an account, you can add details of your events and Eventbrite will provide you with a link you can send to people and publish on your website, allowing anyone to book (and, if applicable, pay) online.

6. Website building

Some free website-building tools that are relatively simple to use include:

- Conventional websites – one of the easiest websitebuilding tools on the Internet is Freewebs. Register online and within minutes you can have a simple site up and running, without any knowledge of web programming. Freewebs funds its free version by placing adverts on your website, but you can remove these if you wish by paying a subscription of $1.66 (around £1.10) per month. To set up your site, register at www.freewebs.com;

- Blogging sites – a blog is like an online diary, mostly created by individuals about their lives in general, or about a specific aspect such as their work, projects or interests. VAN Briefing 114 – The latest developments in web technology explains the uses of blogs in more detail. Two free blogging utilities are Blogger, which is more basic but quick to set up (www.blogger.com), and Wordpress, which is more versatile in terms of design and options (http://wordpress.org);

- Wikis – the most famous wiki is Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia that anyone can contribute to and edit. Wikis are great for compiling and consolidating the expertise of a large number of people. VAN Briefing 114 explains the uses of wikis more detail. Wikispaces is a free wiki provider you can register with at www.wikispaces.com. Like Freewebs, its sites feature advertising which can be removed for a small monthly subscription.

B. Open source

Some of the free software applications listed above, such as OpenOffice.org, are examples of what is termed 'open source' software. This is software that has been developed by programming enthusiasts using source code (the building blocks of computer software) that is freely available in the public domain.

More recently, the term 'open source' has been used in other areas. 'Open source culture', for example, is one in which cultural works that might otherwise be entitled to copyright protection are made freely available so that participants can access them, modify them and/or redistribute them back into the community.

Licenses, such as the Creative Commons and the GNU General Public License, allow artists to specify and fine-tune how a work can be used, modified and redistributed, and under what circumstances.

Creative Commons

Creative Commons is a non-profit organisation devoted to expanding the range of creative works available for others to build upon legally and to share. The organisation has released several copyright licenses known as Creative Commons licenses.

These licenses allow creators to communicate which rights they reserve and which rights they waive for the benefit of other creators. http://creativecommons.org

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Open source culture and the voluntary arts

Unlike some parts of the professional arts sector, the voluntary and amateur arts are more interested in increasing participation and sharing human experiences than in generating money through intellectual property. So what better place to trial some of the ideas of open source culture? Giving up your exclusive rights to the art work you produce can be a daunting prospect.

However, it might be worth looking in more detail at the various licenses on the Creative Commons website and deciding which of them might be appropriate to trial for different aspects of your work.

You could, for example:

- Publish some dances you or your members have choreographed under one of the Creative Commons licenses. You could invite other members to use these steps as a basis for their own dances, which they in turn will agree to publish under the same license. You could post the results on a video hosting site like YouTube (www.youtube.com) and see how the project grows;

- Run a workshop where the group is encouraged to collaborate on a piece of music the participants create together. Stress the importance of the idea (for this

project at least) that no-one owns the piece and that people need not feel aggrieved if their contributions are changed. Use recording technology to record the piece of music at each stage of development and discuss how the changes relate to the evolutionary process of music composition in general. You could run this project over a number of weeks and log its progress in a blog, encouraging people to submit their comments;

- Create a wiki detailing the history of your group or art form and add your own research and/or archives under one of the Creative Commons licenses. Encourage others to add their own perspectives and change the content you have added if they believe it to be incomplete or incorrect. If more people become involved and the wiki grows, people will begin to feel a joint ownership over the information resource and the group or art form it represents, bringing them together as a community.

Further Resources

VAN briefings
These are available to download from the VAN website for free at www.voluntaryarts.org. The final three are older briefings that have been superceded by newer technology, but may still be useful for general information purposes.

- 114 – The latest developments in web technology
- 97 – What do I need to know about copyright?
- 86 – Making your website for everyone
- 73 – Writing for the web
- 71 – Help! I've been invaded – how to deal with computer viruses

ICT information providers
- ICT Hub – www.icthub.org.uk
- ICTpoint – www.ictpoint.ie
- Lasa Knowledgebase – www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk

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