## Tech Tips for a Down Economy



By David Bonebrake, Matthew Burnett, Rachel Medina and Glenn Rawdon

he prolonged recession has forced many nonprofit legal services organizations to make cuts in their technology budgets. Fortunately, reducing technology spending does not always mean sacrificing the productivity gains that come through adopting new services and applications. This article summarizes some of the many popular free and low-cost technologies for cost-conscious advocates and organizations. For a full PowerPoint presentation on this topic that was delivered at the 2009 Equal Justice Conference in May, please visit http://www.lsntap.org/tm111.

## Google Apps

Google Apps provides organizations with a powerful email system (Gmail), an easy-to-use group calendaring program (GCal) and a suite of office productivity applications that simplify online collaboration (Google Docs). Google Apps can also significantly reduce the overhead costs of owning and operating local servers by moving those services to Google-maintained servers on the Web. Programs that have moved to Google Apps report substantial savings thanks to Google's policy of charging no license or maintenance fees to nonprofits. Although Google offers impressive cost savings, some organizations are uncomfortable with private data being stored on Google's servers and recommend that prospective adopters closely evaluate Google Apps' terms of service before signing up.

## Free and Open Source Software

Free and open source software (FOSS) is not a new concept, but the recent emphasis on cost-cutting has brought more attention to these solutions. Unlike traditional proprietary software, which usually requires users to pay for the right to use an application, FOSS is often released under a license that permits free use and modification. Open source applications are generally developed by communities of programmers who volunteer their time to collaborate on an application. In many cases, the results are tools that are not only free, but also powerful, usable and well-supported.

OpenOffice Suite (www.openoffice.org) is a free set of office tools that, like Microsoft Office, includes a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation program, database, drawing program and math tool. It will run under Windows, Linux OS/2 and other operating systems.

Portable Apps (www.portableapps.com) is a free software platform that allows you to run programs from a USB flash drive or other external memory device. It does so without making any changes to the host computer. It comes with many applications, including Firefox, OpenOffice Suite, a media player, a personal accounting program, a PDF reader and many others.

VMware Virtual Server (http://www.vmware.com/ products/server/) is a free (though not open source) virtual server program that allows you to run multiple servers on one hardware box. This can be a very cost-effective method to consolidate your existing server array, to build out a new box for disaster preparedness, or to set up a testing environment to try new software or configurations before they are rolled out program-wide.

Other popular FOSS solutions include Audacity for audio editing (audacity.sourceforge.net), 7-Zip for file compression (www.7-zip.org), GIMP for image manipulation (www.gimp.org) and Movica for movie editing (sourceforge.net/projects/movica/).

## Web Applications

There are also many free Web-based services than can benefit both advocates and nonprofit legal services organizations.

Drop.io (www.drop.io) enables you to create simple password-protected exchange points called "drops." By uploading files (images, documents, etc.) and providing a name (drop.io/name), password and expiration date, you can securely share files in seconds. This is especially helpful for files that are too large to send as email attachments. Drop.io's enhanced features allow it to also be used as a project management and group collaboration tool.

Zamzar (www.zamzar.com) is a helpful Web-based service that converts multimedia, documents and PDFs into different file formats. It also allows you to convert PowerPoint presentations into YouTube friendly Flash videos.

Evernote (www.evernote.com) is a virtual notebook that allows you to capture, search and retrieve information on your desktop, through the Web, or on your mobile device.

Technology moves fast and keeping up with innovations isn't easy. Although there are many good tech news sites and blogs, we suggest LifeHacker (http://www.lifehacker.com), which mixes helpful tech information with other interesting productivity tips. In the legal services community, both LSNTAP.org (www.lsntap.org/) and Technola (www.techno.la) provide technology news, information and tips from the legal aid perspective. \*\*

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