

Stepping Stones Farm

Ubuntu Pilot Project – Case Study

The farm, run entirely by volunteers on a shoestring budget, devotes its resources to feeding and caring for the animals, leaving precious little for IT and administrative tools. We made do for several months using a very slow, very old computer donated as a cast-off while we waited on CrossRail's promise of four, newer computers. Unfortunately, these computers were to arrive without operating systems on them and we didn't have the money to go ahead and buy Windows, rendering them useless.



Tower Hamlets Voluntary Centre then put us in touch with Paula at Fossbox, who described a system that could be installed at no cost and offer identical (if not better) quality to Windows. After reading about Ubuntu and learning a little more about the world of open-source software, we decided to go ahead with it and experiment with FOSS.

Paula arrived to install the OS (along with Open-Office and GnuCash, an accounting program) on two computers so that we could at least begin logging the bank of invoices and pieces of financial information that were accruing in ever-thickening files. I am yet to learn even the basics of GnuCash (I am not naturally numerate), however, all of us have found the OS interface itself to be highly intuitive. There have been no issues as far as user-training is concerned and it has been a great relief to be able to get on with admin work without hassle.

The biggest difficulty we have had so far has been getting our Ricoh printer to talk to Ubuntu – there appears to be a fairly tenacious bug in the system which Paula has been working hard to resolve. Apart from this, we have found no trouble with it. I honestly cannot tell where having Microsoft would bring extra benefit and, given that Ubuntu is open-source, we have no expensive upgrade trajectory to worry about. This is incredibly liberating! Most importantly, we are pushing down our running costs and therefore spending can be directed into our primary objects, our *raison d'être*.

For us, Ubuntu has been a solution which avoided months of difficulty and work to secure IT funding. It, and the rest of the software, has side-stepped significant costs, got us up and running and not been bothersome to learn. We are in contact with other small charitable groups throughout the borough and I feel that open-source is under-used in relation to the kind of benefits and immediate slashes in IT development costs that it brings.

The system's near-zero costs has allowed us to raise our sights to planning an IT education project teaching environmental sustainability and also helping children with core school subjects (English and Maths to begin with), along with forming a local internet cafe to shore up farm funds. These are ideas I would have expected to be contemplating within two years, not two months!

All in all, Stepping Stones has benefited enormously from open-source. We strongly advocate its use in other charitable organisations and feel it is essential to spread the word.

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