

Tech Savvy: Ubuntu

Last time we covered Microsoft's new operating system, Windows 7. In the interest of fairness, we will cover other new operating systems as well. The first is one you can't buy... because it is free. Ubuntu is a form of the Linux operating system.

Ubuntu is an African word meaning 'Humanity to others'. Canonical, the company which produces Ubuntu, is the brainchild of computer genius turned billionaire Mark Shuttleworth. Tired of the way Microsoft failed to innovate and secure their products, he took Linux and improved the integration, look and feel, as well as the ease of use. He made the fruits of his labor (and funding) available to the world. The name of the product explains much about his motives.

The latest version is Ubuntu 9.10. Having run Ubuntu of various types since the first one, I have to admit that I am impressed. The only complaint I have is the version number. It seem trivial, but the evolution between 9.04 (the last version) and 9.10 is more substantial than the numbering would indicate. I was expecting some general improvements, not the critter I got. I don't like surprises, but I must admit I liked this one.

The first thing you'll notice is that the menu bar is at the top like a Mac instead of the bottom like Windows. The look and feel is intuitive, with menus and buttons where you'd expect them. All the bits do what you think they should. The learning curve is gentle. The thing to bear in mind is that the underlying technology is UNIX, a more secure and mature operating platform than Windows. You can't access one person's data from another's account. You can with default a Windows install.

There are several aspects where Ubuntu 9.10 is superior to other operating systems. The first is software. If you remember the Prego spaghetti sauce commercials "...it's in there!", you get the idea. Ubuntu comes with Open Office, Evolution for email (like Outlook), Gimp (like Photoshop) and many more. Even better, Ubuntu 9.10 comes with the Ubuntu Software Center. This feature is under the Applications and has thousands of software titles free for the clicking.

Then there's the integration with cloud computing. Briefly, cloud computing is many computers sharing data, acting as one. Ubuntu 9.10 is able to store your Internet favorites, contact list, notes, and any file you wish on the Ubuntu One cloud, keeping them current as they change on your computer. Items stored on the cloud are available anywhere on any computer. It is the ultimate backup system. Two gigabytes of storage for free, 50 gigabytes costs only \$10.00 per month.

People talk about total cost of ownership. If you bought Windows 7, Office 2007, Adobe Photoshop and more, you'd spend over \$1300.00 on software, and still wouldn't match all the features Ubuntu 9.10 has straight from the box. You can buy three years of business hour (9 hours per day, 5 days a week) telephone and unlimited email support from Canonical for around \$400.00.

Where can you get Ubuntu? Go to www.ubuntu.com, click on the Download button. All the directions are right there. The CDs are available for purchase for around \$15.00 on www.amazon.com. If you can't afford this, go to <https://shipit.ubuntu.com> and request a CD. Canonical will mail one to you, but may take as long as ten weeks to arrive. As you can imagine, they have quite a backlog.