

10 things you must teach new Linux users

Takeaway: Sharing a few key facts about Linux can mean the difference between a stress-free transition and a user meltdown.

During Live Event, I said that I could hand a Linux machine to new users and give them the information necessary to make sure their transition to Linux was successful — and they wouldn't be hounding me constantly on how X is done or asking, "What is Y?" I could tell by the faces of the audience members that some of them wanted to know how I could make such a bold statement. With that in mind, here are 10 pieces of information to pass on to new Linux users that will ensure a successful transition.

1: It's just an operating system

Only two years ago, this issue wouldn't even have been mentioned. The thing is, the vast majority of work now is done through a Web browser. This makes the operating system almost irrelevant. So long as the operating system can run a browser, it will most likely live in the background, working away without so much as being noticed. Of course, this should be the case anyway, as an operating system is nothing more than a layer between user applications and hardware.

2: It's not Windows

Many new users aren't exactly aware that there is a difference between Windows, Linux, and Mac. But they need to know that they shouldn't always expect Windows-like behavior. When a user expects an operating system to behave like another operating system, trouble will most certainly ensue. Does this mean you need to give them the rundown on every difference between the operating systems? No. They just need to be prepared to encounter different behaviors from what they expect.

3: There is no "C"

Windows users are accustomed to a file system structure that never really made sense. Linux, on the other hand, has a perfectly logical directory hierarchy. This is one issue users will need to understand. However, there really is only one main directory they need to know about: `/home/USERNAME` (Where *USERNAME* is their name). Most modern distributions create the following directories within the user's home directory: Documents, Pictures, Music, and Video. Those subdirectories speak for themselves, and new users only need know where they are located to function properly. They also need to know that their home directory is the only place on the file system where they can save files.

4: Installing software is a different process

This one can trip up the new user more than anything. PC users are accustomed to searching for software on the 'net, downloading the .exe file, double-clicking it, and waiting for the software installation to complete. So they need to understand that Linux distributions come complete with their own special tool that will do all of that for them. All they have to do is open the Add/Remove Software tool (such as the Ubuntu Software Center, PackageKit, or Synaptic), search for a piece of software, and install it. New users tend to love the sheer amount of software that's available to install. Naturally some of it is useless, but the majority of those titles are good pieces of software that serve their purpose.

5: The command line is not necessary

When new users are handed a Linux box, one of the first things to come out of their mouths is often, "Am I going to have to learn a bunch of commands?" The answer is no. In fact, modern Linux distributions are created in such a way that users could live their entire Linux lives and never touch the command line. This is now a non-issue. The command line is there (and always will be), but only those who want to use it need ever open up a terminal window. Outside of that, users can rest assured that they will not have to grep, ls, mkdir, chmod, or chown. Nearly every action in Linux can be handled through a GUI.

6: There's no need to worry about infection

We're no longer dealing with Windows — so all that concern for viruses and malware is a thing of the past. You don't see AVG or SEP in the notification tray? That's normal. Your machine will not be at risk without them. But it's still important to make sure users know that their colleagues may still be using Windows, so they shouldn't be cavalier about forwarding email attachments to them. Just because that attachment won't harm the Linux box doesn't mean they won't harm the Windows box.

7: It's free

I'm always shocked at how much trouble users have understanding the concept of open source and the fact that most open source software has no cost attached. "Well then it must not be any good!" is most often the reaction. Not so. Of course, a consumerist society would have trouble with the idea that "free can be good," but it's one we should get used to. In many cases, open source software is not only better for society, it's better for your computer.

8: If you don't like it, you can change it

This is another strange concept for new users, but one they should understand. Unlike Windows and Mac, if you don't like a Linux desktop, you can change it. Granted, this isn't something a new user is going to just automatically do. But knowing that it is a possibility helps new users understand just how much flexibility they have. Besides, working with a desktop you don't like can make for a frustrating experience. I prefer to demonstrate for new users the types of desktops available for them and let them choose. Most times, they will go with what they're somewhat

familiar with (KDE being a good choice for most), but on occasion a new user will go with something completely different just for the experience.

9: Not all hardware is created equal

That's right — not every piece of shiny new hardware will actually function properly with the Linux operating system. This is not nearly the issue it once was, but for some pieces of hardware (such as multi-function printers, some wireless cards, and laptop displays,) the problems still persist. For those pieces of hardware, it is sometimes as simple as downloading proprietary drivers (something new users won't mind, but you will want to take care of). Other times, it may be as involved as switching to a different distribution all together. The good news is that Linux has come a long, long way in this area and continues to expand and improve.

10: Google is your friend

The single most important thing you can do for yourself and your new users is to ensure that they understand just how helpful Google can be. When there is a problem or an aspect of Linux they don't understand, they should know that someone else has probably documented this issue, and helpful info is just a search away. Show new users how to make the most out of a Google search so they are not inundated with worthless results. In the end, they might come to you with fewer requests, and even more important — they'll be learning along the way.

Easing the transition

People fear change. And it's become clear that the more things do change, the more people react. (Just watch Facebook long enough and you'll see this in action.) But change doesn't have to be avoided or handled improperly. With just a little preparation on your part, the new Linux user will have a positive experience and will most likely not look back.