5 Minute Guide ...

Open source software

What is open source?

Open Source software is software whose source code is made freely available to anyone who wants to access it and can then be modified and distributed without infringing on any copyright. This means that people all over the world can modify, change, repair, and improve that source code. This collaborative innovation means that the source code, and therefore the software, undergoes much faster development and improvement than it would otherwise.

You can compare Open Source software to a chocolate chip cookie. You could buy a brand-name bag of chocolate chip cookies from the store; each cookie from that brand will be the same, and you can't make the cookie itself be any different because it's already baked. Or, you could go the "open source" route, and search different sources to find hundreds of chocolate chip cookie recipes, each with their own twist and improvements. You can pick which recipe sounds best and bake the cookies yourself, or even try altering the recipe to come up with a better cookie.

Do I have to know to program software code?

No - Open Source software is generally packaged with the tools that non-programmers need to use it. People can take advantage of the contributions to the software offered by keen Open Source programmers without ever even looking at the software code.

What are the disadvantages?

The biggest disadvantage to Open Source software is the lack of technical support. Because of the speed with which Open Source software undergoes change and the scores of versions available, technical support is almost impossible. However, some companies sell access to technical support, and you can find lots of support from the online community.

Is it always free?

Just because a product has been created with Open Source software doesn't mean it has to be free. There are lots of companies that use Open Source software to create "packaged" products that average consumers can buy and use right away. Companies such as Red Hat sell subscriptions for updates and technical support to their Open Source linux software, but they always make their source code freely available. To use the cookie analogy again, a company can modify someone else's recipe and sell pre-made cookies to the public. If they print their complete recipe and baking instructions on the package and allow anyone to modify and share the new recipe, it can be considered "Open Source."

Who uses open source software?

Lots of people use Open Source software, and many users don't even realize it! Major products that are open source include the Mozilla (Firefox) web browser, Open Office document/word processing software, and Moodle e-learning platforms. An Open Source software present in hundreds of libraries is the Evergreen ILS, and there are several other Open Source ILS programs available for libraries.

Explore More

The Open Source Initiative – education and advocacy for the benefits of open source.
http://www.opensource.org/

Free Software Foundation – promoting computer user freedom and defending rights of all free software users.
http://www.fsf.org/

How Stuff Works: What does Open Source mean?
http://www.howstuffworks.com/question435.htm

Do More

Evergreen - Open Source ILS
http://www.open-ils.org/

GNU - Open Source operating system
http://www.gnu.org/

Source Forge - find and develop open source software
http://sourceforge.net/