

## Tips, Tricks and Advice from your local “IT Guru”

This month I want to talk to you about free stuff. Specifically, I want to talk about free applications for your computer that allow you to do more with it. Both Windows and Mac PCs come with the basics, so you will be able to browse the Internet and manage your emails straight out of the box. You'll also get software to manage music and video and a very basic way of creating letters and documents. If you're really lucky you will get something like the Microsofts Works suite, which will handle simple spreadsheets, formatted documents and presentations. All of these are fine, but if you want to do more than a wander around your local PC superstore will soon make you realise that it could become very expensive, very quickly! This is where the aforementioned free stuff comes in. First, a word of warning: your shiny new system may have come with lots of software installed (Microsoft Office, Norton or McAfee security, etc.) but there's a good chance all of these are just trials. Their cunning plan here is to get you hooked using these trials, and then after an indeterminate amount of time pop up a message saying that your trial is over, pay up or stop using it! Microsoft is quite good, you might get 60 days of use before it expires, but I have seen trial periods as short as 14 days!

If you have any intention of typing anything more than a very simple letter, then the first thing to do is get some sort of Word Processing and Spreadsheet software. Use your browser to go to [www.openoffice.org](http://www.openoffice.org) and download the OpenOffice suite. It's completely free, does everything Microsoft office does and can open any Microsoft Office document (as well as lots of other document types). It's more than enough for home use and lots of businesses are switching to it as well. Next, you'll probably want some photo editing software. You could spend 50 or sixty pounds on Photoshop, or you could download Picasa from Google for nothing. Hmm, tricky one! If you're not happy with Picasa then have a look at the CD's that came with your printer, as there's a good chance that you got some pretty good software with it. If you are into playing media then VLC from [www.videolan.org](http://www.videolan.org) seems to play videos and music that iTunes and Windows Media Player balk at and will even play DVDs

If you are after something a bit more specialised, then it's always worth going to vendors websites and seeing if they do a free or “Lite” version. Often companies will have a slightly older version for free! A good example here is disk recovery or partitioning software. If you visit [www.partition-tool.com](http://www.partition-tool.com) it will allow you to download the previous version of Easeus Partition Manager for free, hoping you will upgrade to the newest.

The most obvious example of brilliant free software is antivirus and anti spyware programs. There is absolutely no point in paying for these when there are such good free offerings available. Microsoft Security Essentials and MalwareBytes are my two choices here, which can be found from a simple search in Google.

Another way of getting good software is by buying a monthly PC magazine, as most give away a free DVD with absolutely tons of software on. These are mostly free and all by reputable suppliers, and you get a magazine to read as well! Check out PCPro in a local newsagent for a good example.

Another excellent source of software is through something called shareware. This is where individuals and small companies release software for a small registration fee, usually around 20-30 pounds. Once again, it's usually more specialised titles but because it is distributed through the internet the prices can be kept low. There is normally some incentive to pay the registration fee, such as the promise of regular upgrades that add extra features. As an ex-programmer, can I ask that you do actually register and pay for any shareware you use? It's tempting to keep using the trial version, but the developers depend on your donations to keep working on the software. Too many have had to give up because they don't make enough to keep supplying good quality low cost software.

Finally, there are some programs you just don't need, even if they are free. Steer clear of “Tune up” programs and “Registry Cleaners” and even the tons of stuff you are sent with your broadband connection equipment. The first two are a complete waste of time and the broadband stuff just gets in the way. For instance, if you want to hook a new laptop up to your existing network you don't need to install anything from your broadband supplier as Windows or Mac OS will work fine without any help.

If you have any questions or anything you would like me to cover in this column, email me at [look@4-11consultants.co.uk](mailto:look@4-11consultants.co.uk)

*David runs 4-11 Consultants, a local company specialising in home and small business computer problems and can be contacted on 01206736161*