

# Nick's Software Picks

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Our team has had the privilege of serving many hundreds of ministries nationwide as network engineers and consultants. In those roles we have found that some software works better in church and ministry offices than others. We have also found that some software seems to be more trouble-free than others. It is with that perspective that we make the following recommendations.

Software comes in three basic categories: operating systems, applications, and games. Although games are the most fun, in this article we will only look at operating systems and applications.

## Operating Systems

Operating system software (often called the OS) is what helps computers know what to do with the commands they receive from users and programs. The most prevalent is Microsoft Windows.

Thanks to Apple and Microsoft, the 1980's saw a significant reduction of operating system choices. PCs and Macs became very popular, and with them custom-written operating systems nearly disappeared. From that point on OSs came from one of only a few providers, compared to hundreds previously. Computer standardization began, and everyone benefited.

Today we're seeing a slight reversal of that trend we enjoyed in the 1980s. And although the choices have become more complex, the operating system decision can still be fairly simple.

## Workstation Operating Systems

Desktop and notebook OSs today are mostly from Apple or Microsoft. Some OSs, such as Linux, are gaining momentum and support. As OS competition heats up, the general public wins. Each OS provider will be driven to improve their features and reduce cost; and quality and stability will improve.

Our current PC OS of choice is Windows XP Pro, but it looks like that may change this Fall to Windows 7 (the soon-to-be-released successor to Vista). To run XP Pro well, we recommend buying the fastest processor you can afford with at least 1Gb of RAM. We recommend avoiding Windows XP Home in office environments, and Microsoft agrees. We also recommend avoiding Windows Vista, and almost all of corporate America agrees with that.

We've been testing the beta and the release candidate for Windows 7, however, and unless Microsoft breaks it before shipping it, it looks like a winner. Similar to XP Pro,

we recommend running it on the fastest processor you can afford, but with at least 2Gb of RAM. We think we'll also be recommending the 64-bit version of this new OS.

## Network Operating Systems

The discussion of Linux vs Novell NetWare vs Microsoft Windows Server has been clouded with a lot of emotion and marketing hype, but finally is mostly settled. Because Microsoft Outlook has become a must-have application— with interfaces being written by many church management database systems— it has driven the Network OS (NOS) choice. Outlook runs best when connected to Microsoft Exchange, and Exchange depends on the Microsoft network database *Active Directory* (AD). Running multiple network databases, like AD, introduces a level of complexity few churches and ministries will want to support. Thus, we believe Microsoft Windows has won the NOS wars.

## Hypervisors

This is a new software category that I've written about a few times over the last couple of years (free PDFs of all my articles are available at [www.mbsinc.com](http://www.mbsinc.com)). It allows us to turn the computer we historically referred to as a server into a *host* for many *virtual* servers. Though it sounds complex, it's actually simple once seen.

Some of the reasons this new category of software has gained so much acceptance in corporate America are:

- The computer's processor chip is the most expensive component in the computer. Most servers' processors are only used 5% - 10% of their processing capacity after they've been started, and so this very expensive component goes mostly unused. By installing a hypervisor and then hosting virtual servers on top of it, you are able to get more use out of your *physical* server

computers, achieving a much higher return on your investment.

- Windows NOSs function best— most reliably— when they only run one service, like Exchange, for instance. That means in a Windows network you're best to have many servers, which can be expensive. Using hypervisor technology reduces your cost significantly because you're able to run many servers on one host, and the only additional cost to configuring a host is that it may need more RAM and should have two power supplies and two network interface cards.
- In most networks, the level of hypervisor software needed is completely free!

Hypervisor software is heating up to be the next battle frontier for IT domination, which is good for consumers of the technology. The company that invented the technology for the PC platform is VMware, and their software is currently the best— no contest. Microsoft, Cisco, and others are also in the market recently, so that may change. But for now, VMware is the software to go with. You can download it for free at [www.vmware.com](http://www.vmware.com).

## Network Utilities

The best tool for distributing standardized workstations across a network is Symantec's Ghost (I hate that name!). It allows you to create an image of a workstation hard drive to be stored and then distributed to other workstations; in effect, cloning them.

Our favorite network back-up software is Symantec's Backup Exec. There's no better protection available today to help protect the valuable data on a Windows network.

And speaking of protection, we recommend purchasing uninterruptible power supplies (UPS) with software that communicates with the server for each server. This kind of protection keeps the server and those

logged in to it aware of any power changes that could impact the network. The best is PowerChute, which ships with American Power Conversion's *Smart* UPSs.

### **Applications**

The programs we use to get our work done (I refer to this category as productivity software) can come in separate pieces or in suites.

### **Word Processor**

Church word processing is highly layout and mail-merge oriented, as opposed to simple document processing. If your team uses Microsoft Word, then you probably augment the layout function with a light desktop publisher like Microsoft Publisher.

### **Spreadsheet**

The best spreadsheet program available is Microsoft Excel. The formula, charting, pivot table, and diagnostic functions are powerful and easy to use. And Excel spreadsheets and charts paste easily into Word documents. Excel can also link to many databases (using pivot tables), providing real-time diagnostic charting to help make good management decisions.

### **Graphic Presentation**

This software lets you put together lessons, sermons, classes, and more in outline form. Those outlines can be presented as attractive slide shows that can be projected through monitors or projectors with attention-getting graphics and animation.

The two greatest benefits we've found are:

1. Reduced preparation time since the software works in outline form; and
2. Enhanced delivery of your message because it involves more senses and can be graphically memorable.

The best software in this area is Microsoft's PowerPoint.

### **Email, Calendars, & Task Management**

Outlook and Exchange are the combination of choice for this category. Exchange is the email server, and Outlook is the client that presents Exchange's contents to the user. Outlook 2007 also has the ability to receive RSS feeds (blog updates, etc), keeping the user in one simple-to-use program.

### **Database**

Most ministries are best to buy a ministry or church management system (CMS) that is designed to serve the needs of ministries rather than to buy a database and develop a database of their own. There are many good CMS providers listed in this journal.

But don't try to buy a database and develop your own; it takes too much time and is too hard on the staff.

### **Documents That Are Portable**

Portable Document Format (pdf) files are a great way to send documents of all types to others via the Internet while maintaining fonts and layout. Acrobat Reader is free for all, but until recently you had to buy the full Acrobat product or a PDF-creating utility to create pdf files. Microsoft Office 2007 has the ability to save files as PDFs, saving the extra expense of purchasing another product.

### **Internet Browser**

There is a growing number of people using Mozilla's Firefox internet browser. It can be downloaded for free from [www.mozilla.com](http://www.mozilla.com), and is easy to install. Firefox is easy to use and has some features that don't exist in Internet Explorer. It does a great job at securely remembering website IDs and passwords, and is safer to use than other browsers.

### **Internet Porn Protection**

Our favorite utility to stop the Internet porn problem is Covenant Eyes. It adds unavoidable accountability to browsing, and its benefits far outweigh its cost.

### **Bible Study Tools & Libraries**

There are many good tools to help in this area. My favorite is the Logos Scholar's Library. One that many like to run on their SmartPhone is simply called Bible (see [www.youversion.com](http://www.youversion.com)).

### **Brainstorming / Note Taking Tool**

A great tool for brainstorming and note taking is Mindjet's MindManager Pro. It is terrific for meetings, workshops, sermon preparation, and more. Free twenty-one day trial downloads are available at [www.mindjet.com](http://www.mindjet.com).

### **Remote Communication**

If you have a Windows 2000, 2003, or 2008 Server in your network server cluster, you already have a great tool available to make your network available to those who need access from other locations. These NOSs ship with a service called Terminal Services. Enabling and configuring Terminal Services can allow authorized users to work on your network from any computer with an internet connection. This is also a great way to keep network support costs low because many network issues can be resolved through Terminal Services.

### **Happy Shopping!**

For ministries, these software products can be purchased for their best price from Consistent Computer Bargains, also known as CCB (800/342-4222). CCB only sells to not-for-profit organizations, and as a result is able to negotiate great prices on your behalf. But shop around, there are plenty of good bargains out there to help maximize your team's productivity!

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