



ICT Hub Case Study

Access Space

ICT Hub Case Study – Access Space

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Who are Access Space?

Access Space describe themselves as the UK's first free media lab where participants can learn, create and communicate online.

“The Space” is essentially a big laboratory making use of recycled ICT equipment. Such is the demand from organisations willing to pay others to take ICT equipment for recycling that Access Space finds no shortage of supply from the local area and a ready source of income. Indeed, Access Space don't need to advertise their recycling capabilities at all - if they did they say they would be unable to cope with the demand. The business and education sectors are their biggest contributors.

The Space is free for walk-in use 5 days a week. Visitors are encouraged to be creative with the equipment provided. Skilled helpers are on-hand to help promote self-learning by the visitors.

Access Space also runs a number of free workshops in association with local groups. These are mainly centred around creative use of ICT and digital art. The lab can also be booked by groups and individuals to hold their own events.

How do Access Space use Open Source Software?

All the software in use at Access Space is Open Source. This includes both the back-end infrastructure (responsible for managing the network) and the desktop machines.

On the desktop side, visitors can use any of the machines on the local network, which typically run the Mandriva distribution - a 'distribution' packages the Linux kernel with other software sufficient to make a working system when installed, often with desktop and other applications included to add to the basic operating system.

Because the variety and capability of desktop focussed Linux distributions has experienced significant growth over the past few years, Access Space are currently evaluating other Linux distributions as part of their future development planning.

Access Space also host around 200 web domains for their users - users purchase a domain name from an ISP and Access Space hosts it for them, providing server space on which users can build a publicly-accessible website.

The hardware hosting these websites is also recycled hardware utilising free software. The hosting system is based on a Linux kernel and uses the popular Apache webserver. Apache is the software of choice for many internet service providers - they prefer it's stability, reliability and security to other proprietary webserver solutions.

What Difference has Open Source Software Made?

Put simply, Access Space probably couldn't exist without Open Source Software. The cost of licensing the desktop machines and back-end servers with a proprietary operating system, such as Microsoft Windows, just would not be viable. Open Source Software has helped Access Space be ethical *and* sustainable.

Using Open Source Software has meant that the software visitors use in The Space can be legally downloaded for free from the internet and re-used at home/ work. Furthermore

their learning in The Space goes away with them and is not limited by how much they can afford to pay for a separate personal software license for home or work use.

The versatility and transparency of Open Source software has enabled Access Space to implement a highly customised system for free. This system includes a back-end storage and an authentication system for visitors.

Access Space have shown that you can run an organisation with Open Source.

What was Learnt?

The most important lesson learnt is that the key investment required in effective ICT change is time invested in building skills - not capital investment.

How do people feel about using Open Source? James from Access Space said “Kids don't care [what software they use]”. He also observes that resistance to Open Source often comes from non-technically minded and older management staff – perhaps revealing a lack of confidence in using novel ICTs?

Access Space aims to build skills and confidence by involving people of all ages and backgrounds with technology and giving them a space in which they can try new and exciting things in a safe environment with expert help on-hand.

How to find out more

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