GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche

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If I Had a Hammer…

Psychologist Abraham Maslow once said that, "if you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail." Though this quote has been used frequently in all kinds of contexts, I love it because it is so applicable to us and the way we use a computer.

I still remember back in the dark ages when I was using WordPerfect on a DOS system. I was truly confounded as to why there needed to be so many different computer applications when it seemed you could do everything with your word processor. Now you might think my perspective was just a little simple-minded (and I won't argue!), but I am hazarding a guess that many of us have not moved very far from that same concept. Yes, we know that we need an Internet browser and an e-mail client and, maybe, Excel for accounting, but many of us think that otherwise we are just fine with the capabilities offered by MS Windows and MS Word. And that is no surprise. After all, both Windows (on a file management level) and Word (on a file level) pretend to do (almost) everything. You want to zip a file, burn a CD, search for some content, rename a file, or backup your computer? Windows can do that for you! You need to count words, sort a text, edit an HTML file, or extract keywords from a text? Word can do all that and much more for you! The problem is that any of these things can be done better by applications that are specialized in doing those functions.

You can always hammer a screw into a wall, but it would be much better for the wall, the screw, and the picture you are going to hang if you drill a hole, insert a screw anchor, and use a screwdriver. In fact—and this is what Maslow was referring to—you cannot even decorate your house with only a hammer because you cannot begin to envision all of the amazing things you can do with the right tools.

Now imagine your computer as the house you need to decorate (or, in this case, to make more functional). Just as in the "real tool world," there are thousands of tools that are good for specific things and are much better than the proverbial hammer (i.e., Word and/or Windows). But unlike the increasingly expensive world of physical tools, the majority of our tools come in the category of freeware and do not cost anything! And as a rule of thumb, the more specific a problem is, the more likely it is that you will find some freeware that can help you solve it. Even if it is not freeware, it may be inexpensive shareware, donationware, or (here is a cool new term) postcardware.

The only challenge that is left for you is to go out and find your (software) tools and then learn how to use them appropriately.

Well, there is one more challenge. Just like your physical toolbox, it is helpful when your software toolbox (i.e., your computer) contains tools that make sense to your specific needs and that are located where you can find them again. (Yes, I admit to NEVER finding the right screwdriver when I need to!)

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