TECHNICAL GUIDE

COMPUTER BASICS

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR SOFTWARE

Second Edition

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Getting The Most Out Of Your Software

Very little can be achieved with a computer that has no software installed. In fact the operating system (OS) is itself software that acts as a bridge between the hardware components inside the computer, and devices attached to it, such as monitors, scanners, printers and so on. As with all software, the OS will have to be updated now and then, and sometimes completely replaced with another option, better suited to the task at hand. It's an ongoing job for the IT department, or whoever is responsible for your company's digital infrastructure. And it can be a pain and so it's better avoided, following the old rule of thumb: "if it isn't broken, don't fix it".

But there of course comes a point when an application is so old that you will have problems opening new files saved in later versions, or see that later versions can do things that you would like do, but simply can't, because you sit on a much too old version of the software.

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If many people are affected by a software upgrade, or when installing a completely new system, make sure to test out the procedure on a test computer, to iron out any unexpected problems. Unfortunately it's not uncommon that you will run into some compatibility issues between the new software, devices and drivers installed on the computer, and/or with the OS itself. It's not uncommon that a very new version of a certain software demands the very latest operating system in order to work correctly. Test this out on a small scale, before rolling out the upgrade across the whole company.

Don't underestimate the training needed

While those responsible for upgrades to the OS, software and hardware typically believe (or hope) that the upgrade path should be quite easy and straightforward, it is often a steep learning curve for the people who suddenly have to get used to perhaps a completely new user interface, and often also many new functions. The problem here is that the IT department people have had time to test out the software, and are familiar with the new functions in the applications, but for their colleagues, who are the ones expected to use all this, it's completely new. Plan for enough time and resources to train your staff on the new system, or you won't get the full benefit of the upgrade or new version of the apps.

It's a sad truth that most software is only used to a fraction of its full potential, and the main reason for this is the lack of proper training. Make sure the training has been effective by including formal tests after all sessions, where the pupils have to show that they know how to perform all the tasks that have been demonstrated in the training. If you run a quality management system compliant to ISO 9001, this training should of course be documented and recorded as part of the ongoing management of resources, which includes staff competence.

Automation through macros and scripting

A function that is included in most software, but seldom used to it's potential, is short cuts and macros. Some of those short cuts are fairly well known, like Command-C to copy something to short term memory, the operating system's digital clipboard, and then pasting it elsewhere using Command-V.

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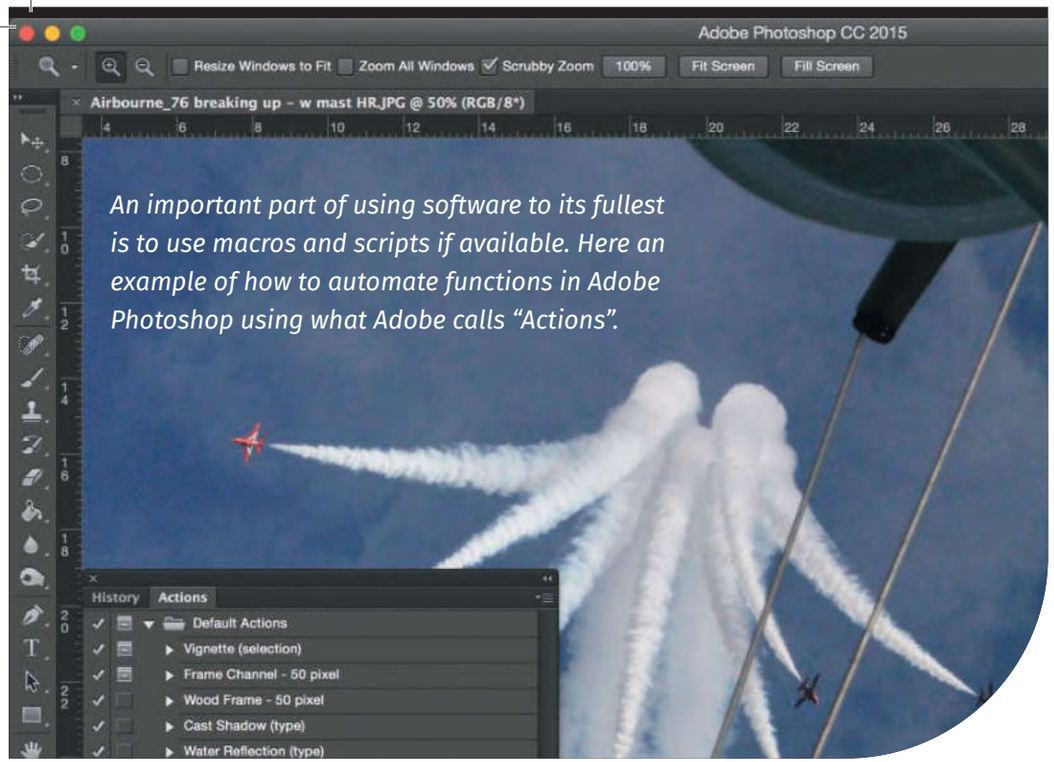

An important part of using software to its fullest is to use macros and scripts if available. Here an example of how to automate functions in Adobe Photoshop using what Adobe calls "Actions".

But there are many more of these nifty commands to explore, sometimes unique to the specific software, and also across software, through the operating system. Don't take for granted that newly employed staff know more than the basics on how to use a computer, and instead make sure they are trained in how to use the most common tricks and tools in the suite of software deployed in the company.

More computer savvy users go beyond the ready-to-use short cuts and macros, and explore the benefits of scripting. When you create scripts in a certain software application, you are on the edge of real programming.

But it's really quite logical and straightforward once you have got your head around how it works. Such scripts can save a lot of time on repetitive tasks and also avoid manual errors if there are complicated steps involved. Once a script has been tested to perform exactly as is expected, it should be safe to use by all operators. And it sets you on the path to greater process automation.

Some software has built-in scripting capabilities, others need to be scripted using outside applications, such as Visual Basic. Once again you are bordering full on programming, but without the need of a degree in computer science.

Can I trust the Cloud?

More and more software vendors offer what is generally called cloud based software solutions. The term was introduced some ten years ago, and there are already draft versions of ISO standards available to better define both terms and requirements for such systems. Among the benefits often listed for cloud based solutions is that the app is always up to date, since the vendor hosts the master software, and ensures that all new functions and features are instantly available. Cloud based solutions typically support many different types

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of devices, so they are less dependent on which OS is used for the desktop computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone. Because of this you can work from anywhere in the world, assuming you have a decent internet connection. By nature the cloud model supports sharing data over the internet, so business information is available all the time to both staff and customers, through interconnected databases. The cloud makes it easy to offer flexible and modular system solutions, where you only pay for the functionality and features you really need, when you need them, for a certain number of staff logged in and active in the system.

For software vendors there are special benefits, like more centralised management of licenses and subscriptions to the different software modules. In theory this should help them fight piracy, since every copy of the software can be tracked and blocked if fraud is suspected.

So what are the possible drawbacks with cloud computing, if any? It's really not that different from old style computing using central servers, and dumb, simple and cheap terminals. As with a client/server solution the user might be left stranded and unable to work if the server is down. Vendors of cloud based solutions are of course aware of

Cloud computing is rapidly becoming the norm in our industry. It can be used both for file storage and distribution of apps when using a subscription model for this. Image courtesy of IBM.

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this problem, and try to offer solutions where the software is actually transferred to the user and works even if the internet connection is lost. Any new data produced offline is transferred (synchronized) to the cloud based server once the internet connection is back; software updates will also take place then.

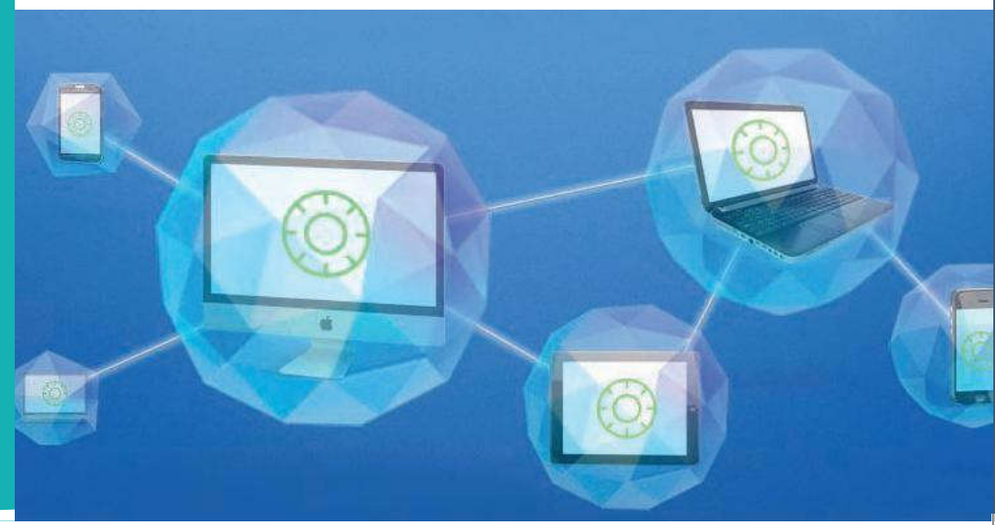
Another concern for users of cloud based solutions should be file format compatibility. What happens if a software subscription is cancelled? Will it be possible to open files with other software?

The benefits of cloud based computing are many, and there is a steady move towards this type of software deployment. But it is wise to think through how a big move in this direction will affect strategic and key business operations in your company. The integration of MIS, workflow systems and web-to-print systems are examples of such key business solutions, and they need to be constantly developed and updated to support you in your daily work. It's a delicate balance to strike, between costs and estimating the return on investment. But the costs incurred of postponing or delaying much needed updates or investments in software and IT infrastructure, can't be ignored either. Digital print production is less and less about printing alone, and more and more about data and efficient use of IT and communication tools, in marketing, sales and print procurement.

Virus, hackers and malware

Unfortunately, with global connectivity and a 24/7 service model, comes a constant threat from hackers and infection by computer viruses. While Mac OSX for a long time seemed immune to virus attacks, of late Macs are also vulnerable to malicious files entering the network especially through web browsers and mail software. A constant security awareness must be in place, and efficient antivirus software deployed to tackle attacks quickly and efficiently.

Unfortunately computer viruses and malware are part of everyday life and you need to protect computers and networks. This illustration is from Sophos, providers of anti-virus solutions for both Macs, PCs and mobile devices.



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Sometimes you will need to deploy multiple antivirus solutions to catch the latest types of threats, since there is a delay between when a certain antivirus software identifies a new virus and the programmers for this software find a way to stop it. If you have several antivirus solutions at work in parallel, there is a better chance to block attacks early. Proper training of staff is key; don't take for granted that staff know how to identify malicious emails and attachments, or strange behaviour on a web site. It's a Health and Safety issue for your computers and network, so take prompt action. Like it or not, these types of threats will not go away, but rather get worse over time. The fight is like the struggle to achieve high and even quality on press: it depends on daily, small improvements, not big or sudden spectacular achievements.

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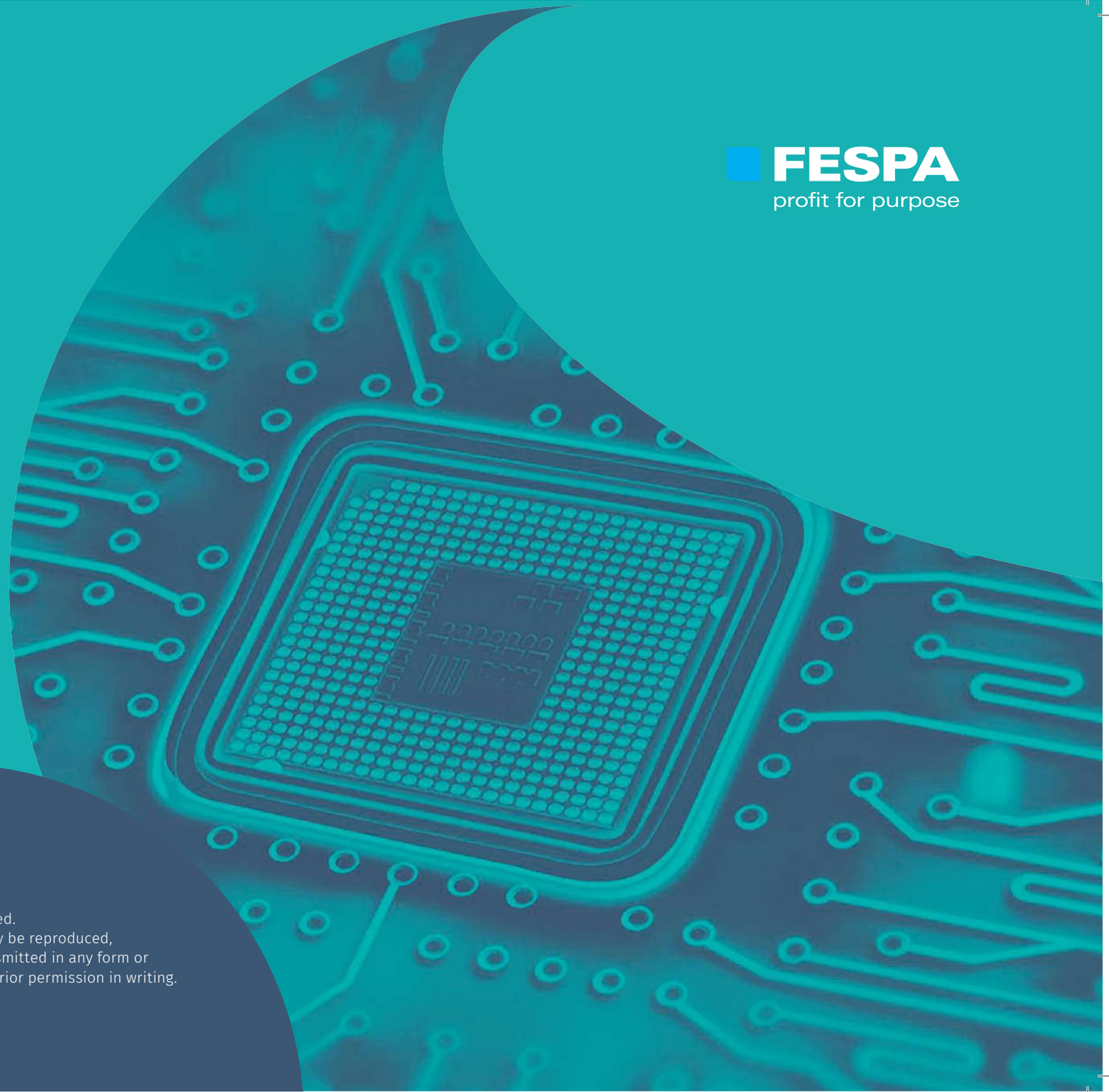

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