

# Overcoming Social Inertia

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GNU philosophy

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## Overcoming Social Inertia

Almost two decades have passed since the combination of GNU and Linux first made it possible to use a PC in freedom. We have come a long way since then. Now you can even buy a laptop with GNU/Linux preinstalled from more than one hardware vendor—although the systems they ship are not entirely free software. So what holds us back from total success?

The main obstacle to the triumph of software freedom is social inertia. It exists in many forms, and you have surely seen some of them. Examples include devices that only work on Windows and commercial web sites accessible only with Windows. If you value short-term convenience instead of freedom, you might consider these reason enough to use Windows. Most companies currently run Windows, so students who think short-term want to learn how to use it and ask their schools to teach it. Schools teach Windows, produce graduates that are used to using Windows, and this encourages businesses to use Windows.

Microsoft actively nurtures this inertia: it encourages schools to inculcate dependency on Windows, and contracts to set up web sites that then turn out to work only with Internet Explorer.

A few years ago, Microsoft ads argued that Windows was cheaper to run than GNU/Linux. Their comparisons were debunked, but it is worth noting the deeper flaw in their argument, the implicit premise which cites a form of social inertia: “Currently, more technical people know Windows than GNU/Linux.” People who value their freedom would not give it up to save money, but many business executives believe ideologically that everything they possess, even their freedom, should be for sale.

Social inertia consists of people who have given in to social inertia. When you surrender to social inertia, you become part of the pressure it exerts on others; when you resist it, you reduce it. We conquer social inertia by identifying it, and resolving not to be part of it.

Here a weakness holds our community back: most GNU/Linux users have never even heard the ideas of freedom that motivated the development of GNU, so they still judge matters based on short-term convenience rather than on their freedom. This makes them vulnerable to being led by the nose by social inertia, so that they become part of the inertia.

To build our community’s strength to resist, we need to talk about free software and freedom—not merely about the practical benefits that open source supporters cite. As more people recognize what they need to do to overcome the inertia, we will make more progress.