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Andrea, Fotolia

Find help for your openSUSE system

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Even the most experienced users sometimes have questions. If you need a specific answer to a specific question, the openSUSE community provides help in several places. **BY CARSTEN SCHNOBER**

One of the official goals set by the openSUSE project is to "Make openSUSE the easiest Linux for anyone to obtain and the most widely used Linux distribution." However, you never know when a problem will turn up. In this article, I describe how and where to find solutions for your own openSUSE problems.

The Help Center

When you log in to your openSUSE desktop, you will find a life preserver icon on it. A click on this symbol opens openSUSE Online Help [1] in the desktop environment's default web browser (Figure 1) – Konqueror on KDE or Firefox on Gnome. This destination is the first in your search for help.

The Documentation section leads you to a wiki-based Help Central, which comprises the Support Database (SDB),

the Hardware Compatibility list (HCL), and the official documentation for the openSUSE distro provided by Novell.

Following the wiki principles, the SDB provides articles written by volunteers in the openSUSE community. They keep themselves busy with specific issues and describe, for example, how to configure a special hardware device or how to install certain software. To get an overview of the many entries collected during the past 10 years of SUSE development, browse the SDB either by category (e.g., Hardware or specific version number) or by age: SDB-History lists the most recently edited help pages at the top.

Novell's Documentation

The official openSUSE documentation [2] by Novell describes the installation of an openSUSE desktop and how to do most of your daily work with it. The Get-

ting Started section gives a broad overview about openSUSE and general Linux topics in the Start-Up documentation. The Basics chapter shows commonalities and differences between Linux, Windows, and Mac OS desktops. The Linux file system and the command line also are introduced there. Furthermore, the KDE and Gnome Quick Start documents discuss typical tasks like web browsing, emailing, and using office applications, as well as multimedia topics. Both documents describe solutions for a number of tasks on both desktops, which are equally available in openSUSE

The KDE Quick Start guide covers version 4 of the desktop environment, but openSUSE still contains its predecessor, KDE3. Although the newer version remains similar in many ways, Novell provides detailed KDE3 documentation in the KDE3 User Guide.
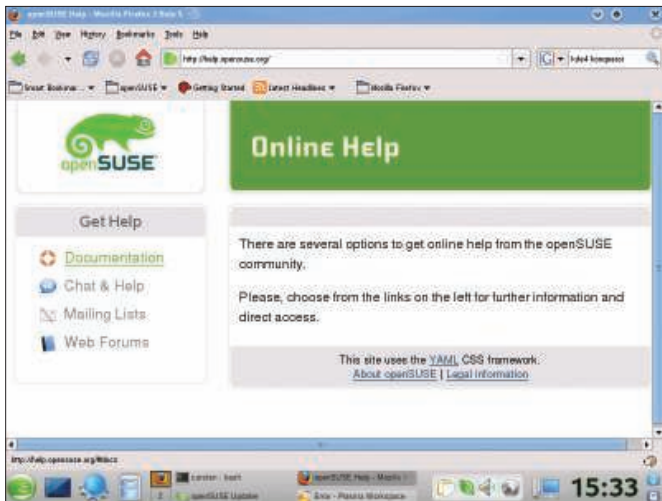
Figure 1: OpenSUSE Online Help is the first address to visit to explore the abilities of your system.
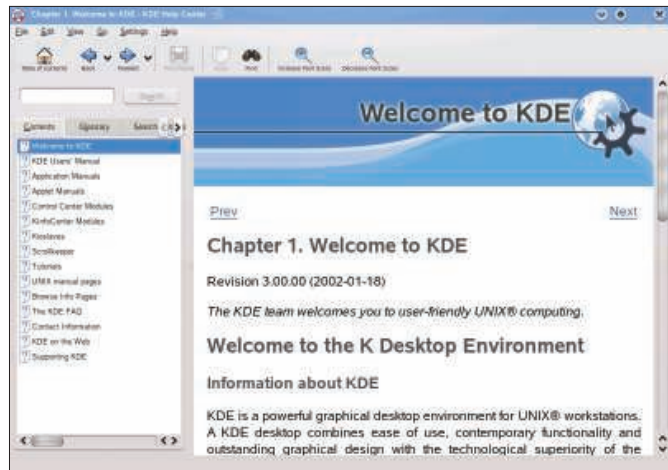

Figure 2: Beyond the openSUSE-specific documentation, the KDE desktop contains handbooks, available in the KDE Help Center, for all KDE applications.

OpenSUSE tries to keep administrative tasks away from desktop users. However, in the Administration section, the openSUSE 11.0 Reference goes into system details. High-end topics like remote installation are covered, as well as in-depth explanations of common tasks like updating online and other system configuration issues. If you want to integrate several operating systems in the bootloader manually or run 32-bit applications on a 64-bit system, this reference will assist you.

Security Explained

OpenSUSE has a security architecture called AppArmor, not only for secure servers but desktop systems, too. If you feel the need to restrict certain or all applications to any extent you like, AppArmor will help you. Because Novell is the main developer, two documents describe AppArmor. The AppArmor Quick Start doc explains the architectural concept and is enough to allow you to apply AppArmor in common cases. Also, the AppArmor Administration Guide describes how to build new profiles and covers other more advanced topics.

Hardware

Although the SDB has many articles about hardware issues, the Hardware Compatibility List (HCL) will be your first point of reference when you run into problems with your equipment. Like SDB, the HCL is available in the Documentation section of the Online Help start page. Especially if you plan to buy a new device, check the HCL for advice on

whether openSUSE supports it and save yourself a lot of trouble with regard to barely or non-functional hardware.

Divided into categories like Laptops, Desktops, and Servers for full systems on the one hand and single components like Network Adapters, All Video Cards, and Main Boards, for example, the HCL lists the hard facts concerning openSUSE support for many devices. In the case of older hardware, especially, you might see no information for the newest version of openSUSE, 11.0. Generally, though, you can assume that a device supported by older editions works with openSUSE 11.0 as well.

Beyond specific device information, the Miscellaneous area provides general guides concerning common issues. At the moment, you can find instructions on how to install drivers for graphic adapters by ATI and nVidia and how to install openSUSE on computers with PowerPC processors. If you need assistance on a buying decision for a new printer, the Printer Buying Guide gives you an overview of available printer types and their Linux compatibility.

The Power Management – Suspend subsection covers different power management issues. Most of the matters discussed here involve graphic card drivers and solutions for typical problems that prevent laptops from cleanly entering and leaving standby mode.

All other hardware issues ought to be covered in the Hardware Troubleshooting subsection. Its goal is to provide users general instructions on how to resolve possible hardware trouble. How-

ever, it mainly discusses specific devices, although the information could be useful for similar devices.

KDE and Gnome

Although openSUSE and Novell provide a lot of distribution-specific documentation, both KDE and Gnome include their own help systems independent of the chosen Linux desktop. The KDE Help Center (Figure 2) is used by every KDE application and so forms a desktop handbook in which the content depends on the installed applications.

The KDE Help Center can be opened in every KDE program from *Help | Handbook*. It immediately opens the chapter containing the handbook to the application in use. In the KDE menu, you can also find a life preserver icon that opens the KDE Help Center. This obviously differs from the desktop's life preserver, which opens the openSUSE Online Help.

Besides the application handbooks, the KDE Help Center gives an overview of the desktop. The screenshots will look a bit different from your desktop because it uses the KDE default settings, whereas openSUSE uses its own theme that gives KDE a different style. Nevertheless, the descriptions work with openSUSE as well.

Like KDE, Gnome also integrates a help system of its own, called Yelp (Figure 3). It is in the main menu at *More Applications | System*. The Gnome Help Browser works like the KDE Help Center, in that it includes handbooks for most Gnome applications. Other than the KDE equivalent, openSUSE has adapted Yelp,
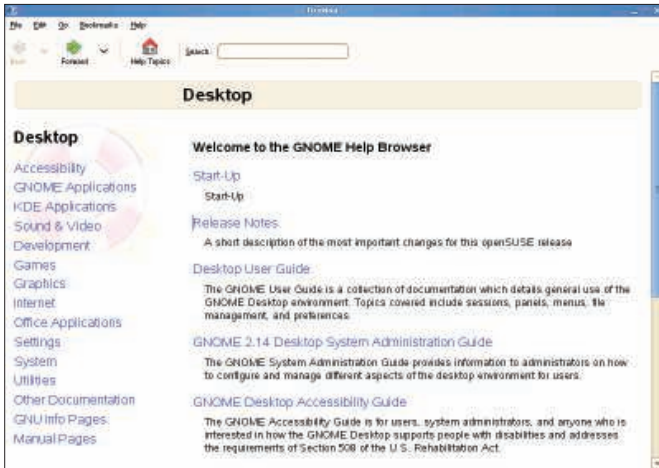
Figure 3: The Gnome desktop contains its own help system called Yelp. The openSUSE version is adapted to the distribution and contains both the Novell openSUSE documentation and the default Gnome handbook.
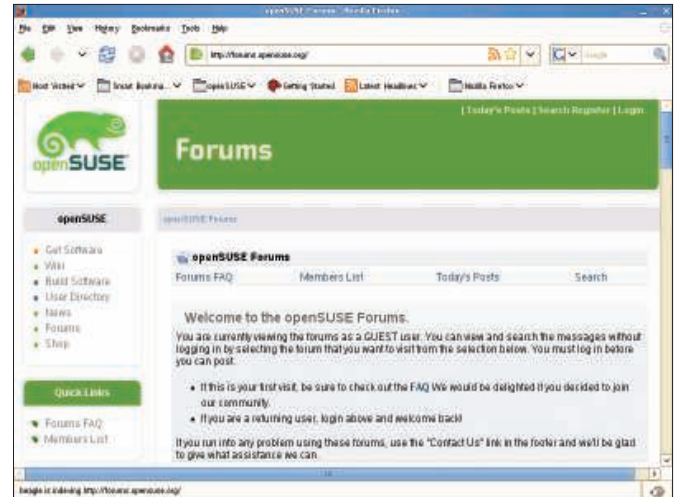

Figure 4: The OpenSUSE forums offer a place for discussions about any issue concerning Linux. The advantage of forums over Chat and the mailing list is that you can access the site with any web browser.

which is why the start window offers a *Start-Up* link that leads directly to the official Novell Gnome Quick Start Guide.

However, openSUSE's Yelp contains the Gnome default handbook in the chapter Desktop User Guide, which gives a more general view of the desktop environment. Although openSUSE integrates Gnome version 2.22, Yelp contains a section called GNOME 2.14 Desktop System Administration Guide, which describes the Gnome method of desktop configuration. Because the underlying GConf system has not changed since Gnome 2.14, this information concerning desktop administration is still applicable. Yelp also contains links to other previously mentioned official Novell documents.

Contact

Sometimes it is more suitable to discuss questions directly with other openSUSE users. Internet Chat is most similar to real-life communication. OpenSUSE therefore provides an IRC (Internet Relay Chat) server at the address *irc.opensuse. org*. Its main channel is named *#open-SUSE,* and this is the place where most discussion takes place. However, many more specific channels exist, like *#open-SUSE-kde*, *#openSUSE-gnome*, and *#yast*. A list of Chat channels is available [3].

Mailing lists are more adequate for lengthy communications. The official openSUSE list can be found on the online help page and requires a subscription before you can participate. Send an email to *opensuse + subscribe@opensuse.*

org and wait for the automatic request confirmation, which contains a randomly generated number. Just reply to complete your registration. From now on, you will receive every email a user sends to the list. To make a contribution of your own, write to *opensuse@open-suse.org*. Many users subscribe to the mailing list and many messages are submitted every day. Try to avoid asking previously answered questions by searching the archive for similar threads before you open a new one.

Besides the communication infrastructures yet to be presented, openSUSE runs a web forum [4] (Figure 4). Its advantage over Chat and the mailing list is that you can access it with any web browser. Either follow other openSUSE user discussions or create your own account to participate.

Problem Unsolved

Perhaps a hardware device is not working in your configuration or you have a software problem for which the net does not seem to offer a solution. If you have searched all the help systems and still not found a solution for a specific issue, many people out there are willing to help. In this case, you can open a new thread in a forum or mailing list, but you should know a couple of rules that will make it easier to find help.

First, try to describe your problem as exactly as possible. Try to locate the source of the problem by excluding possible causes of the error, one after another. If malfunctioning software prints

an error description, try to understand it and write it down so others can examine it further. The system logs most of its activities in the directory */var/log*. In openSUSE, the file *messages* contains the most information, but applications use their own subdirectories to file their activities. Keep in mind that the */var/log* directory is dedicated to administrative tasks, so you will not find logs of your desktop software there. Also, include logfiles and error messages in your post, but, again, try to limit the amount of text to extracts related to your question.

Contribute

When you finally have found a solution, with or without the help of other openSUSE community members, adding the final answer to your own question is considered the polite thing to do. In this way, you help other users who run into similar problems later. Such is the way openSUSE documentation works, and because of that, chances are pretty good that you will find a solution for any problem you might run into. ■

INFO

[1]   openSUSE Online Help: *http://help.opensuse.org*

[2]   Official openSUSE 11.0 documentation: *http://www.novell.com/ documentation/opensuse110*

[3]   openSUSE IRC chat channel list: *http://en.opensuse.org/ Communicate/IRC*

[4]   openSUSE Forums: *http://forums.opensuse.org*