Tools and Groups for Startups

“A successful tool is one that was used to do something undreamt of by its author.”
—Stephen C. Johnson (programmer who wrote the Portable C compiler)

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”
—Margaret Mead (American cultural anthropologist)

Back in the Day . . .

In this chapter we’re going to stock up your startup toolkit with a few power tools to get the job done faster and more easily and have a look at startup groups, gatherings, and events, online and off.

Now, this is not a book about programming tools—given the number of platforms we just covered in Chapter 3; that would be a six-volume set. Instead, by tools for startups I mean the services, sites, and programs that exist today to make it easier for you to start a small software company. Some of these items are on offer from large IT companies who want you to build on what they’ve done; some are from startups themselves who are solving problems whose solutions you need. A few have been around for over a decade, helping developers become founders; several are so new (fair warning—including one of my own) that the paint is barely dry.

Open Source libraries and tools are something we as developers use in one fashion or another every workday, but the rules change when you start talking about incorporating Open Source code in your startup’s DNA. We’ll talk with someone who really understands the ins and outs of this: Gene Landy, author of IT/Digital Legal Companion, about some of the do’s and don’ts of using Open Source code.
Having loaded up with tools and services that help your startup, it’s time to get you out from behind your monitors and out mingling, meeting, learning from, and even having fun with people who are facing many of the same challenges you are—the Startup Community, both in the analog world and online. I think you’ll be surprised as to just how many people share and want to share entrepreneurism and the startup mindset with you.

Finally, we’ll swing back to take a look at two big IT evangelism companies that have programs that merit your serious consideration: Microsoft BizSpark and Sun Startup Essentials.

One interesting thing about the tools and applications mentioned in this chapter is that few of them existed two or three years ago. The tools and services and, above all, the social groups of and by startups you’ll find here are part of the explosive growth of what I like to call the Startup Community. Only a few years ago, being a startup was much more of a lonely calling.

Tools for Startups

One of the nice things about doing a startup today as opposed to, say three years ago is the number of other startups and small software vendors who offer great tools you can buy or subscribe to instead of build. In this section, we’ll take a look at 16 of them, starting with three tools for keeping your most valuable startup asset—your codebase—safe and secure.

Version Control for Your Startup

Solid, offsite, robust code version control is a must-have for a startup. Whether or not you know and love what version control can do for you, this is simply something that needs to be done right.

GitHub

What it is: A combination Git-centric version control system for both Open Source and proprietary projects and a growing social network for programmers (80,000 as of May 2009).

URL: http://github.com (Figure 4-1)

What it costs: Free to $200/month; the Small ($12/month) and Medium ($22/month) plans should fit the needs of most startups in terms of private repositories (10 or 20) and private collaborators (5 or 10).