My Chromebook Setup

I just want to document what I have done with my Chromebook. A little bit about me, first.

I am an ex computer programmer who migrated to systems administration about 2000. I still program a bit, but mainly I'm fixing/maintaining/creating servers and networks for small businesses through the company we started in 1996, Daily Data.

I used to carry a laptop with me at all times, but have recently migrated to a Chromebook as it is lighter weight with a longer battery life. Mainly, I use it to make VPN connections to our company LAN, then use VNC or RDP to connect to one of our servers.

I am “professionally paranoid” in that I worry about sensitive information being unsecured, so I do not like the idea of anyone like Google having access to what I do, so I do everything I can to keep any information off of their server. But, I have found that for about $100 USD and a little bit of time, I can use the Chromebook to do a lot of my work when I'm out of the office.

The System

I chose a 10“ ASUS Chromebook to begin with. While ASUS has had some security concerns in the past, they appear to have learned from it and are building machines that are inexpensive but reliable. I purchased the Chromebook from Best Buy in the US for $140, but I was able to get an “open box” machine for $115. Open Box means the machine has been purchased and returned, so it can not be sold as new.

I then bought a USB-C hub ($75 from Best Buy) which has 2 USB-A outlets, and HDMI and a wired network interface on it. It also has a USB-C port for the charging block that came with the ASUS so I can charge the machine while using the hub.

Finally, I hate laptop keyboards, so I got a Microsoft Bluetooth keyboard ($50 from Microcenter). I had a carry bag, an HP Bluetooth mouse, an HDMI cable, a 64G Micro-SD and network cable already. All told, I spent around $250, half of which were accessories.

Now, whenever I leave the office, I put the Chromebook into the carry bag along with a Hotspot. I can be at a coffee shop, on the road, or even visiting a friend and do emergency work with the Chromebook. Or, if taking a longer trip, I bring the rest of the stuff and have a setup in my hotel room (using the TV as my monitor via HDMI).

Software

For Work

For work, I need to make a VPN connection, then either RDP into a Windows machine or VNC into a Linux terminal server. From there, I can get to whichever machine I need to work on. So, I have the following software installed. I have the Chromebook in Developer mode so I can install f-droid and use

it as a primary app manager:

- From the Google Play Store
  - OpenVPN Connect - Good OpenVPN manager
  - Microsoft Remote Desktop - For connecting to Windows machines via RDP
  - Chrome Remote Desktop - Control arbitrary remote machines via Chrome web browser
- From f-droid
  - AVNC - Decent VNC client
  - Monocles - XMPP chat, for communication with the rest of the employees
  - Jitsi Meet - Excellent video chat program with screen share for clients/employees

I also turn on the Linux subsystem so I can directly use ssh to log into remote machines from the command line, and also use a Serial Terminal to access network hardware.

Note that if I did not have access to remote machines, I would also install

- K-9 Mail - best Android e-mail client
- DAVx5 - sync Webdav contacts and calendar (from Nextcloud)
- Nextcloud - access files stored on Nextcloud server.
- Nextcloud Notes - access quick notes from Nextcloud
- Nextcloud Passwords - securely store/retrieve passwords from Nextcloud

With that additional software, my Chromebook now becomes a workstation where I can create/edit documents, check e-mail, access my calendar and contact list, manage passwords and share notes with various devices.

For Pleasure

I don't work all the time, so I do carry some leisure items with me on the Chromebook. I store movies, music and books on the MicroSD that I put in the Chromebook (one slot). I can then read, listen to music (via bluetooth headset) and watch movies (via bluetooth headset and, if available, TV connected via HDMI). For this I install the following:

- From f-droid
  - VLC - the absolute best cross platform media player
- From Play Store
  - FBReader - a nice ebook reader, but it has problems on ChromeOS
  - Calibre Companion - Sync e-books from my workstation

Now, my Chromebook can be used for work or play. I just make sure I can secure it down, and also ensure I can do a remote wipe, though all sensitive information is on the other side of a VPN connection.

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