Do I Still Need a Desktop Genealogy Program or is FamilySearch Family Tree Enough?

By Renee Zamora

If you've used FamilySearch Family Tree then you have probably come across this question. "Why do we need a desktop program? Can't we just use the FamilySearch Family Tree instead?"

1. In theory it would be lovely to work only on the web, but Family Tree does not have the power that a desktop program can give you. The same features in a desktop program would be too costly to recreate on the web.

2. People want to keep some things private, especially if it can be embarrassing or hurtful to other family members. They don't want to share certain things until they are ready to do so. Information that is private can be vital in how you come to conclusions in your research. There is more security having your database under your total control on the desktop than the web will ever be. The Family Tree is also not intended as a place to record information on living individuals. Being able to have both the living and the dead in one family database seems to eliminate a potential hassle and security concerns.

3. Custom reporting is a big reason for maintaining your own database with a desktop program. Analytical reporting and queries on the desktop would be very expensive in a web application. The bandwidth needed would be very costly. Online applications will not have the processing power that is available on a PC. They just cannot compete with your computer resources. The reports from a desktop program look more professional than the website versions. You can also save reports made on the desktop as RTF files and massage them exactly the way you want in Word. This gives you a lot of control and a great advantage.

4. In a desktop program you can have more than one database. You can have a database with proven research and another with those that are not. In the research process you can come across individuals that may be part of a family. In the desktop program you can continue to do more research and prove your conclusions before you add them to the Family Tree. If instead you added your assumptions to Family Tree while building your case, others that have access could change your findings. It's also easier to sift, sort and compare electronically people in your database than online.

5. The web vs. the desktop has two different purposes and usually two different audiences. The web is used to attract people to genealogy, to share with others and get them interested. When people really start researching their family history you will find they start using a desktop. They have to because the web is a box and doesn't fit everyone and doesn't have all the power as the desktop computer. The desktop is where the real success and real concrete evidence is finalized for a real researcher.

6. There are a lot of people that still are not online. When you put your family history online you can only share it with family members that are online. There is a need to be able to share in

other ways. You could create Shareable CDs or books with your family history to share with others. These types of options will not be available with online applications.

7. Desktop programs allow you to organize and analyze your data in a particular way. You can create special groups of people based on specific search criteria. For example: finding everyone living during the 1940 US Federal Census. Then you can focus your research efforts on those individuals for that data set.

8. Life gets busy; people tend to work on their family history in little pockets of time. Desktop programs have To-Do Lists and Research Logs that help you manage and track your research efforts. They help you keep records on your thought process and what records you have searched. You can record which records you want to look at in the future as the impressions come to you. These are great tools in breaking down brick walls and furthering your research. You're not spinning you wheels trying to remember where you left off each time you get back to your family history. In the long run this makes a person much more productive with the little time they do have to devote on their genealogy.

9. With a desktop program you can get very comfortable knowing it's not changing on you. With a website the company can change things really quickly and you have no control over that. Everyone that uses the website is forced to change. With a desktop program you can stay with an older version if desired and not be forced to change. The desktop programs interface between New FamilySearch and Family Tree is likely to stay very similar to each other. If you were only using the websites you suddenly experienced a whole new learning curve.

10. One great customizing tool in the desktop program is color-coding. You can select a specific person and color his ancestors. If your 2nd cousin color-coded it would be different lines. A community environment doesn't give you that customization.

11. The desktop programs have internal record numbers (RINs). People get used to memorizing people in their file by record numbers. On the web that would be very hard to wrap your head around the numbering systems.

12. From a web developer KISS is the entire world. Keep it Simple... the most successful websites are the simplest ones. Desktop can go as complex and customizable as desired. The web treats everyone as one person. It's hard to give that customization. The web mimics what the desktop has already done. People will continue to use desktop programs because the developers innovate in the way genealogist care about. Web guys innovate in ways that will bring more users, but not necessarily better research.

13. If you have your data in a desktop program and something happens to you it's still on your computer and someone can find it. If all your data is sitting up on a company's website and that website disappears you don't have your data. Your data is actually safer in your procession because you can make sure you've got backups. You make sure that as media type's change you take your data and migrate it and use different formats. So if one of them happens to go down or disappears you still got the data in a format. To keep your data on a website or in a single cloud it's at your own risk.

14. How many people that only used New FamilySearch have now lost data, with the migration to Family Tree? Not everything has been transferred over. What do they have as a reference to make sure the records are now correct? Do they need to manually retype all the changes in again? Each time you retype data you add the element of human error while doing so. In a desktop program you can compare your data with what is on the Family Tree. Then send an exact copy of what is in your database if changes are needed. Are you confident that Family Tree will not be replaced in the future with something else?

15. As a genealogist I have experienced where I needed to go back several years of research to an old backup to see what it was at that period in time. You can't get that picture in a website, because it is always changing. By making backups routinely you have a historical snapshot of what the state was at that point in time.

16. If you only keep your family history on Family Tree you are missing out on finding potential researchers working on your lines. The more places you share your research on the web the greater potential you have of finding other family members. Desktop programs allow you to create GEDCOMs to share your data on other websites. You can upload your database to Ancestry.com, WorldConnect, Geni, and MyHeritage, to name a few. You can also create your own websites with desktop programs and host them yourself. These in turn can be searchable in Google were other researchers can find you.

17. Maintaining your own database is the only way you can be sure your data or some portion of it has not been lost, corrupted mechanically or merged improperly. Some temple ordinances have been lost or have choked in the pipeline. If you have your own records on what has been done previously you can help FamilySearch find the missing ordinances and restore them. If you are dependent on FamilySearch maintaining those records you have nothing to fall back on.

18. When you use a desktop program to interface with Family Tree you will stay connected as long as you don't close the program. On the Family Tree you will be periodically logged out if you are inactive for even a short period of time. Anyone that does research will need to step away for a few minutes to consult other resources, their research logs, or just analysis their findings. Having to continually log back into Family Tree is very time consuming and frustrating and doesn't make for a good experience.

19. In a Desktop program you can choose colors, fonts, display styles for names, dates and places. You can set up your database to show in the way that will best assist you in your tasks. An online application does not have that ability.

20. Desktop programs provide a variety of "Dashboard" features for tracking your temple submissions and their progress. It's easier to determine who still needs their ordinances done and which have been completed. You can manage your temple cards and record which family members you have assigned them to.

21. Desktop programs can help keep you in touch with living family members that are not interested right now in family history. It can be a great tool in planning family reunions. You can determine very easily all the living descendants of a common ancestor. Most programs include a way to

record contact information. You can also generate calendars showing family members birthdays and other special events.

The Family Tree is a great tool, but it is just not there yet to replace the desktop programs. Maybe in another 10 years the technology, bandwidth and computing power will evolve enough for it to do so. For now, there is still a great need for the desktop programs. Family Tree and the desktop programs actually need each other. The Family Tree helps by getting new people interested in working on their family history. It's a starting point for them. The desktop programs in turn receive new customers when the Family Tree users realize they need more features to help them manage their research efforts. This in turns helps them come to better conclusions in their research that then can be added back to the Family Tree.

FamilySearch is doing a wonderful job by allowing third party affiliates (genealogy software programs) to interact with the Family Tree through their API. It bridges and brings the online experience within the desktop experience. You can have the best of both worlds together.

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