

Move Faster & Get More Done in 2024 With These 9 Superior Software Picks

“Most software sucks. This software sucks less.”

MOST SOFTWARE DISAPPOINTS ME or makes me want to gouge my eyes out with a spork because the experience of using it is so miserable. If you've ever run a search for “best [whatever] software” or “best software for [something],” you know the pain, too...the pain of having to sift through dozens to hundreds of options just to find one that seems like it'll do the job, doesn't look like it'll make you want to eat a gun after using it for 30 days, and doesn't have a pricing page telling you to “Contact Sales” instead of coughing up a straight answer on how much it's going to cost.

I, personally, set a high bar for the software I allow into my digital toolbox—if it doesn't meet my standards for speed, reliability, and features, I put it on the chopping block. So I didn't pull any punches in selecting the picks I've laid out below.

None of this software *released* in 2023, because brand-new software fresh off the turnip truck is almost never worth betting any part of your business on. Instead, it's software I've found helpful this year or have had on my radar, and in either case can recommend you pay attention to. As I tell my email list (which you can subscribe to at mksn.co/1BQ0), you can usually do more than you think with mediocre software, but as long as software is the life-blood of every modern business, choosing wisely can make a big difference in your success. And now, for the list...

Missive

Email Client

Missive will forever hold a special place in my heart as the company whose mobile app convinced me it was possible to build a native app which actually *felt* native—or darn close to it—using primarily web technologies. But that's neither here nor there, because the important question is: How good of an email client is Missive? In three words: Quite good indeed.

I signed up for my account many years ago as a “refugee” of Newton Mail (another email client which was shutting down at the time), and even though Missive's marketing was very explicit about their software being intended for use by teams rather than individual users, I

wound up preferring it over other email clients enough to still use it to this day.

As an individual, I don't use anywhere close to the full range of features Missive offers, but even so, I've been pleased with their product, and would happily recommend it to anyone whose workflow involves email and communicating with multiple members of a team. I see it replacing Slack for many small teams with its built-in chat features, and the extensive support for integrations would give you a wealth of opportunities to automate email-related processes. Definitely worth checking out, given email's not going anywhere.

Get Missive at missiveapp.com starting for free.

Superhuman

Email Client

If speed and efficiency in emailing is your game, then Superhuman's the name. I was fortunate enough to be granted access during the exclusive invite-only period years ago, but the software has since been released publicly so you won't have to wait around as I did. It's designed to be the fastest email experience every made, and largely lives up to that ideal—the very well-established, keyboard-focused workflow Superhuman supports is perfect for the kinds of folks who receive multiple hundreds to thousands of emails every day, and have to get through them just as quickly as they arrive in order to reach the mythical “Inbox Zero”.

But there's the question: If Superhuman is so good, why did I eventually switch to Missive? At the time, there were a few features I wanted which the software didn't have: unified inbox, support for non-Google accounts, and an Android app (they've since added the latter two).

Still, if you're crApple-oriented, mostly work out of a single Google- or Outlook-based inbox, and don't mind paying a premium for speed, I'd suggest you take a good, hard look at Superhuman—if you try it out and it works for you, it'll work *well* for you.

Get Superhuman at superhuman.com from \$30/mo.

The Affinity Suite

Photo Editing, Graphic Design & Page Layout Software

Some decades ago, car rental company Avis put out a nice set of ads about how “no one works harder than #2,” where the #1 car rental company at the time was Hertz. In this case, it’s the good folks over at Serif who are playing second fiddle to Adobe’s software with their Affinity suite. Except...they really shouldn’t be looked at that way, because in my humble opinion, Affinity Photo, Designer, and Publisher are superior to Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign on nearly every metric.

It’s worth bearing in mind I don’t spend every waking minute with this software as a photographer or graphic designer might, but every time I use any one of the three, I’ve been very impressed with how smoothly it operates and how well it works with the other two—in fact, I used Affinity Designer to design my “Milian Tag” logo, and the words you’re reading right now were laid out into this PDF using Affinity Publisher. It’s overkill for quick stuff, but it’s my go-to when I’m working on something I need as much control over as I can get. The best part? You can buy the software outright—unlike Adobe’s “ream ‘em for life” model, there are no subscriptions involved.

Get software in the Affinity suite at affinity.serif.com for \$69.99 each, or \$164.99 for all 3.

Whimsical

Diagramming Tool & Visual Workspace

Every once in a while, I stumble across software I’d really like to have built myself. Whimsical’s in the running for that short list, as a very clean, very smooth, very polished tool for creating wireframes and flowcharts, fleshing out mind maps, managing digital sticky notes, and authoring documents which elegantly combine all of those things.

I started using it years ago for flowcharts and quickly came to appreciate it for client work, where I’d use it to visually document systems and automations, in addition to creating mockups of webpages and apps. It’s not a tool which gives you total control over every detail, but in this case, that’s a good thing—it keeps my recovering perfectionist mind focused on what matters.

One last thing: I’ve only used Whimsical as an individual, but it can handle entire teams collaborating in real-time just as well as it can a single person. So regardless of the size of your company, this is absolutely a tool worth checking out for planning, documentation and beyond.

Get Whimsical at whimsical.com starting for free.

Craft CMS

Content Management System (CMS)

There are no silver bullets...except Craft. Seriously, it’s unreal how a single piece of software can cover as many website-related use cases as Craft can and does, with customers ranging from SEO giant Moz (so you know it’s got great SEO capabilities) to Segway, Netflix, Volkswagen, and IKEA.

I personally got on board with Craft early on, in an unusual way: Many years ago when I was still in high school, I’d pull out my laptop while riding the bus to cross-country ski meets and tinker around with a website I built (but never launched) for a somewhat imaginary movie production company named Perfect Toast Films. (Yes, I am 100% serious—I made a logo for it and everything.) Anyway...it wasn’t until years later I actually got around to working with Craft seriously after more than two run-ins with the pit of despair that is WordPress, and it’s now what I use to power my own website.

Completely custom content models, user registration, and even an entire e-commerce platform—Craft’s got it all, plus a smorgasbord of excellent plugins. So why haven’t you heard of it? Probably because it’s not a good fit for the 99% of copy-paste code monkeys who dare call themselves web developers these days, since Craft sites *must* be hand-written from scratch—there are no drag-and-drop page builders here, nor are there thousands of flaky, dime-a-dozen freelancers lurking on Fiverr and Upwork waiting to take on your project for whatever the minimum wage is in Guatemala. This is software for professionals—you might say *craftsmen*. Who’d’a thunk? For me, that’s a feature; for you, it may not be. But if you’ve got the budget for the premium, do-everything pick of the web world and the services of the professionals who work with it, it’s the only software I legitimately feel I could blindly jump into *any* web project with to emerge unscathed and victorious on the other side.

Get Craft at craftcms.com starting for free.

ClassicPress

Content Management System (CMS)

If you’ve been using WordPress for a while, you might remember the infamous 5.0 “Gutenberg” update—that’s the one which replaced the nice, simple What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get (WYSIWYG) editor with the chunky, block-based monstrosity we have now. A lot of folks wanted that old editor back, to the tune of over 5 million downloads of the *Classic Editor* plugin which promises to do exactly that. But if I had my way, I’d tell anyone considering downloading that plugin to skip it—along with the rest of the bloated 10th circle of Dante’s inferno that is WordPress—and check out ClassicPress instead.

It's a fork of WordPress (meaning they legally copied the source code with the intention of changing it) designed to "knock out the fat," as George Foreman would say. Compared to WordPress's core, it weighs in at half the size while bringing back the classic editor, and managing to stay compatible with many plugins, in particular those from the pre-Gutenberg era. It even removes that silly "Howdy, [firstname]!" greeting from the upper-right corner of the admin dashboard which is displayed while you're logged in.

Full disclosure: I haven't used ClassicPress personally (Craft is still my preference), but because it's an improvement over WordPress and WordPress is near the bottom of my list of recommended software, I feel I can safely suggest you check it out—even if only for the security benefits, given WordPress's poor reputation in that department (fun fact: my understanding is a vulnerability in a WordPress plugin was what ultimately led to the massive Panama Papers leak a while back). It's not Craft, but as a trimmed-down alternative intended to be leaner, meaner, and more secure than its ancestor, given the choice, I'd much sooner consider using ClassicPress than I would WordPress.

Get ClassicPress at www.classicpress.net for free.

Bitwarden

Password Manager

One of the strategies I use to mitigate the risk of my being deplatformed when selecting business software is simple: I pick software I could feasibly run on my own servers if the company which would otherwise host it on my behalf were to give me the boot. Password manager Bitwarden is a great example of this strategy in action, as the core product is available in SaaS form and as an open source offering you could host yourself.

That's not the only reason I use it, though: Compared to LastPass, which has been breached a total of 7 times—yes, that's 7 with a "7"—Bitwarden, to my knowledge, has yet to suffer any major breaches. It's become my preference by being a secure, functional, and "boring" choice for password management, and trust me when I say: That's exactly what you want out of any software designed to store, protect, and retrieve your most valuable digital data.

The web application leaves a lot to be desired design-wise—if I wanted something better looking and was willing to give up the option of potentially self-hosting the software, I'd probably take a look at 1Password—but after jumping around between close to a half dozen password managers in the span of a few years, it's the only one of the bunch I feel I can trust for the long term.

Get Bitwarden at bitwarden.com starting for free.

Descript

Audio/Video Editor

Here's an idea: What if it were as easy to edit an audio or video recording as it is to edit text in a Word document or Google Doc? That's the big idea behind Descript (pronounced as in "descriptive"), and I can say from experience: Using it is just straight-up cool.

After you import your video or audio file—or create one using the built-in screen recorder—Descript will use AI to transcribe it, after which it'll hand you the keys to a powerful set of tools: A "smart" text editor which replicates the edits you make to the transcript to the underlying video or audio recording; a more traditional timeline-based editor at the bottom of the screen, which you can use to fine-tune cuts, pauses, and pacing; and (coolest of all) a feature which allows you to generate *entirely new words and sentences* using AI trained on the voice(s) in the recording. Oh, and the software can remove filler words like "um" and "uh" in just a few clicks.

The best part? By using Descript, you can export a clean transcript and fully-edited recording in as little as half the time it would take to edit the two separately.

It's pretty wild as a technical feat alone, and a piece of software anyone working with "talking head" style recordings would do very well to check out—I don't use it often, but when I do, it's a big time-saver. And compared to all the other flash-in-the-pan AI tools based on OpenAI's GPT-4 and similar, Descript's been around for several years—so according to Lindy's Law, it's likely to stick around for a good while longer.

Get Descript at www.descript.com starting for free.

Memberful

Membership Management Software

When I first looked at Memberful next to a handful of similar alternatives I dug up from around the interwebz as part of a client project, I didn't expect it to become as significant a player in my arsenal as it has.

I'll be up front in saying the Memberful team sends me referrals every now and again. But even if they didn't, their software would still be easy to recommend: It reliably does what it says it'll do on the tin, and thanks to an extensive API and solid Zapier support, I haven't yet run into any hard limits creating deep integrations between Memberful and other software despite Memberful's simple, staff-friendly interface (which, in other software, often suggests flexibility and extensibility is being traded for simplicity—not always a good thing). Speaking of which, the experience on the member side is equally clean and straightforward, good for dialing back

the amount of time your team spends responding to customer support requests and a stand-out benefit next to the other membership software options I evaluated way back when.

So when *wouldn't* I recommend Memberful? Easy: When you're operating in a high-risk industry. Memberful's biggest weakness is a tight coupling with Stripe, which isn't necessarily a bad thing until you realize it's a risky thing—Stripe is the only payment processor Memberful supports, so getting deplatformed by either service provider could very quickly disrupt a significant source of your business's MRR.

But as long as you're operating in a relatively safe industry and don't mind paying a premium for the best support in the biz (Lauren Gilbert is the heart and soul of the company as far as I'm concerned, and provides such good support I occasionally wonder if she ever sleeps), I'd go so far as to call Memberful the current king when it comes to membership software—able to scale with ease from a small business's first memberships, to 7-8 figures in revenue at a more established company.

Get Memberful at memberful.com starting for free, plus 10% transaction fees

When should I upgrade my software?

The answer is cliché, but true: It depends. And the reason why it depends is because you could be bottlenecked in one or more of a handful of ways.

When you aren't working as efficiently with what you *already* have as you could be, you've got a **process** bottleneck. In other words, you're not using what you have to its full potential. And it's possible to get into this position because of the popular (but wrong) idea which suggests software is *all* you need to reach your goals. Sure, software is important—but if you don't have processes in place to use what you have to the fullest, work on fixing that first by matching low-level procedures and documentation with your high-level strategy.

Now, a **debt** bottleneck is a bit different—and I'm not talking about monetary debt, like a loan or a maxed-out credit card. I'm talking about what programmers call "technical" debt, which in this case means you've got software and processes which *could* work fine and very likely *did* work fine in the past, but they're now being choked by baggage which needs to get cleaned out. (Think hundreds of old tags you can't make head nor tail of in your email marketing software, which only serve to dilute your reports and create confusion while you search for the specific tag you're looking for.) Basically, even if your processes are good *now*, that doesn't mean you don't have old stuff cluttering up the works—if you do, cleaning it out is the next step.

Finally, we have **software** bottlenecks. They can be trickier to diagnose, so I'll give you an example: Let's say you're not pleased with your email marketing platform. It just seems overcomplicated, takes too many clicks to get anything done, and when you're done, you're not 100% confident it's done the thing you wanted it to do. You *may* have a software bottleneck, but depending on your level of experience with the software, it's more likely you have a process bottleneck which could be unstuck with a set of documented procedures (or at least a checklist). On the other hand, if you've been following a set procedure for some time (or recently instituted a new one) and are finding it difficult to continue moving forward at your usual pace, you may have a debt bottleneck and some spring cleaning is in order.

Either way, you'll know you have a software bottleneck when your business-level *needs* (not nice-to-haves) cannot be met by the software you're using. And in that case, you *definitely* should upgrade your software before it starts holding your business back. So does it ever make sense to upgrade sooner? Sometimes. Here are some good reasons to act now, not later:

You need to mitigate risk – When you run on SaaS platforms, you can get booted at any moment—I've seen it personally, so don't think it won't happen to you. Whether you operate in a high-risk industry or simply want to cover your arse, mitigating risk is a good reason to jump ship to software you have more control over.

Your costs are increasing – It happens, and more frequently than we'd all like: Companies up their prices, and depending on how firmly locked-in you are, you're going to decide to either stay and absorb the increase, or bail to save some smackers. I'm all for paying a premium for good software, but when most software out there ain't worth the bits it's written on, it's an understandable reason to move on.

Your roadmap doesn't match theirs – Even though the software you use might fit your needs *now*, software providers pivot all the time. If you're using new software and see your company's plans are at odds with your software provider's—maybe you'd benefit from more advanced features, but they want to add support for their early-stage customers—you may want to exit early.

You expect significant growth – Paraphrasing Wayne Gretsky, "skate to where the puck will be, not where it is." If your growth estimates suggest your current software won't support your near-future needs, go ahead and upgrade. But don't fool yourself into dropping a big wad of cash before your software starts to feel the strain.

If you want help, architecting business systems is my specialty. To subscribe to my daily email list or apply to work with me, go to mksn.co/1BQ1. – Max

