



Moving towards open source

by Richard Bray

Open source software (OSS) is changing the way individuals, companies and governments around the world pay for computing power. When one company, Microsoft, can so thoroughly dominate a market like office software, for example, making Corel and IBM's suites so rare as to be almost extinct, it is only reasonable to expect a backlash.

Today, on at least two fronts, Microsoft is facing a serious challenge to its frontrunner position. Linux, the free software that has grown in ten years to capture a substantial share of the Internet server market, is challenging the Windows operating system. In the office, another free offering called OpenOffice offers much the same functionality as Microsoft's suite of programs, with none of the upfront expense. It is available for download and immediate use at www.openoffice.org.

In Germany, IBM, a big supporter of the Linux operating system, has announced a deal with the German Ministry of the Interior to help make Linux a standard and open source model at every level of government.

In the United Kingdom, a government draft policy calls on all departments to make sure that OSS gets evaluated equally and fairly with proprietary software in any purchase.

In Taiwan, the government has long been concerned about the Microsoft stranglehold on computer operating systems and applications, so plans are going ahead to develop Linux programs locally.

In Spain, the underdeveloped Autonomous Community of Extremadura made Linux the operating system for all public schools and offices, saving about \$7 million and making it the first school system in Europe to mandate open source software. The Debian Linux system and standard software was put on CD, sent to schools and distributed in newspapers.

In Canada's public sector, OSS is already running on many Internet servers and steadily moving elsewhere in the office environment. A quick and informal survey at Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC), for example, revealed that open source software is being used in that department for system modelling (ArgoUML), version management (CVS with WebCVS), issue management (Scarab) and team knowledge-sharing (Twiki), and PWGSC's Knowledge Exchange Service actively facilitates collaboration on the use and development of OSS across the federal government.

It is difficult if not impossible to compare proprietary and open source software directly on the basis of costs, because each can offer sharply distinct advantages. With OSS, users are usually allowed to alter the source code, changing the program to meet their particular needs. These efforts are supported by a global, informal, but highly effective group of programmers who are committed to the continual improvement of open source programs.

On the other hand, training and support costs for any software can far outweigh the savings from foregoing license fees. Any organization that hopes to generate big savings by installing OpenOffice instead of Microsoft Office would have to do an extensive analysis of the associated costs before deciding that the benefits were greater than the risks.

Despite the drawbacks, the Government of Canada is "getting into" open source in different ways, such as through a group called GOS-LINGS, which stands for Getting Open Source and Linux INTO GovernmentS. Internationally, Canada is part of the Digital Opportunities Task (DOT) Force initiative, one of whose teams is exploring how OSS can help bridge the information technology gap between rich and poor nations.

Around the world, Forrester Research predicts OSS will displace 20 percent of licensing revenues by 2004. In 2001, IBM spent almost \$1 billion dollars on open source projects, and the Linux operating system is shipping with more and more of its computers. Free software is becoming big business, and Microsoft is definitely not amused.

The Washington Post recently reported that Microsoft had been aggressively lobbying Pentagon officials to stop using open source software, claiming it is a security threat. Unfortunately for Microsoft, a report commissioned by the US Department of Defense and released in May claimed the opposite, saying OSS is not only less expensive, but is often more, not less secure, than commercial products.

Open source software may not be something for nothing, but it does promise to restore some competition to markets that one company has dominated for years. *MB*

Richard Bray is an Ottawa-based freelance writer specializing in the IT sector. He has been published in magazines and newspapers in Australia, the US and Canada. Before freelancing, he worked as a producer, reporter and senior writer for CBC in Toronto.

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