

Information Sheet

MALTA'S GOVERNMENT TESTING 'OPEN SOURCE' SOFTWARE

As technology pervasiveness increases across the public and private sector and organisations seek to optimise their budgets to realise cost-efficiency and offer a better service, open source technologies are increasingly being chosen as an alternative to proprietary software. The terms of use for open source software vary between different companies and projects. However they are generally substantially cheaper than the cost of licensing for proprietary software products.

Open source products are characterised by the free redistribution of the software without royalties or other fees, requiring that the source code to be distributed or otherwise made available on a cost-recovery basis, allowing anyone to modify the software or derive other software from it, and to redistribute the modified software under the same license terms.

At an educational level one of the major reasons for the lack of technology use in schools is the cost of licensing. The lower capital cost for acquiring open source enable new opportunities for schools which often operate on very low budgets. At a business level it is often observed that open source does not offer a 'lock-in' strategy where the company is confined to a particular product often dependent on one vendor through the partner network. Total cost of ownership for open source software, including the customisation to add new functionalities, can be much less expensive than proprietary alternatives. For large consumers, including Government, this can translate to significant cost savings.

The European Commission is keen to encourage public bodies in Europe to examine the viability of using OSS as an alternative to proprietary software, including in the development of e-Government services. The European Commission has announced that it plans to embark on a more pro-active strategy of adopting open source solutions. In this manner, the EC has virtually renounced its neutral position when it comes to the face-off between open source and proprietary software. The Commission promotes the use of products that support open, well-documented standards. Interoperability is a critical issue for the Commission, and usage of well-established open standards is a key factor to achieve and endorse it.

Governments around the world are actively supporting the use of Open Source Software through their purchasing policies, creating a catalytic effect in the business sector. The increased demand for these products by the public sector in a number of countries is encouraging more corporations and independent programmers to embrace Open Source Software methods. The French public sector has widely adopted open source solutions since the beginning of 1999 and continues to move in the direction of complete open-source infrastructure. In fact, several governmental institutions have already switched to open-source software. The Ministry of Culture and Communication has started a massive migration towards Linux.

Interoperability initiatives exist to foster an open engagement mainly between proprietary-software and open source communities. It encompasses a broad range of facilities, events and resources supporting interoperability. Open Source Software which is compatible with proprietary software include StarOffice, OpenOffice.org, Linux, The Grimp, Darwin, Fink and Apache.

Malta's 'Smart Island Strategy' includes a number of initiatives which will be deployed by Government in order to propagate the use of open source at community, economic and societal level.

As part of its e-Inclusion programme a number of the new centres to be opened as part of the Community Technology Learning Centres network (which already includes 12 Centres) will be based on open source software. The availability of such centres to be used by the public will actively contribute towards fostering an open-source culture, as people will have the opportunity to experience desktop applications based on open source and standards.

Furthermore, the Ministry for IT is preparing to engage in a public consultation on the use of OSS in terms of social opportunities they provide. To date OSS discussions have been largely technical. There is a greater need for practicality and application in terms of improving Malta's information society. In this regard, the MITC is preparing to pilot the use of a number of OSS Desktops and office productivity applications in a school environment. The pilot will seek to prove the opportunities OSS provide whilst instilling the concept that there exist alternatives to traditional desktop software.

However there still exist a number of misconceptions on the use of OSS versus vendor-specific technologies. There is a pervasive impression that the two are not compatible. This is not the case and the two can co-exist. This is why the Ministry's first job will be to test and prove the compatibility with existing vendor-specific applications and their ability to co-exist with OSS.

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