OPEN SOURCE SOFTWARE

USE WITHIN
UK GOVERNMENT

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Use of OSS within UK Government

Introduction

Open Source Software (OSS) is software whose source code is openly published, is usually available at no charge, and which is often developed by voluntary efforts. It has leapt to prominence by starting to take a significant market share in some specific parts of the software infrastructure market.

The software industry is very fast moving, and frequently throws up new developments that initially promise to make great changes in the marketplace, but which ultimately fail to live up to their initial press hype. OSS is indeed the start of a fundamental change in the software infrastructure marketplace, but it is not a hype bubble that will burst and UK Government must take cognisance of that fact. (See QinetiQ report "Analysis of the Impact of Open Source Software" dated October 2001.)

The European Commission's initiative "eEurope – An Information Society for all" is supported by an Action Plan dated June 2000. One entry within the plan addresses the topic of Open Source Software (OSS) and sets the target that

> "during 2001 the European Commission and Member States will promote the use of open source software in the public sector and e-government best practice through exchange of experiences across the Union (through the IST and IDA programmes)".

The UK's response to this action to date has been through mandating open standards and specifications in its e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF) and allowing market driven products to support these. It is now considered necessary to have a wider, more embracing policy on the use of OSS within UK Government and this paper sets out that wider view.

UK Government in this context includes central government departments and their agencies, local government, the devolved administrations as voluntary partners, and the wider public sector, e.g. non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) and the National Health Service.

The Policy

The key decisions of this policy are as follows:

- UK Government will consider OSS solutions alongside proprietary ones in IT procurements. Contracts will be awarded on a value for money basis.

- UK Government will only use products for interoperability that support open standards and specifications in all future IT developments.

- UK Government will seek to avoid lock-in to proprietary IT products and services.

- UK Government will obtain full rights to bespoke software code that it procures and all customisations of COTS (Commercial Off The Shelf) packages that it uses wherever this achieves value for money.

- UK Government will explore further the possibilities of using OSS as the default exploitation route for Government funded R&D software by academic research institutes.

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Justification

The justification for adopting this policy is as follows:

- There is a need to always procure a solution that gives value for money. This may be an OSS solution, or proprietary one, or a mixture of both. Decisions should be made on a case by case basis

- There is a need to ensure that interoperability of systems is provided and maintained. The e-GIF is mandated across the public sector and compliance with that is essential to the provision of e-services and joined-up government.

- Every effort should be made to reduce the cost and risk to government systems. Adopting this policy helps achieve that by:
    - purchasing best value for money solutions
    - removing the reliance on individual IT suppliers
    - providing more flexibility in the development, enhancement and integration of systems
    - vesting the ownership of bespoke and tailored software code with Government

- Security of government systems is vital. Properly configured OSS can be at least as secure as proprietary systems, and OSS is currently subject to fewer Internet attacks. A balance needs to be struck between the availability of security administration skills and the advantages of many diverse systems. In some cases mainstream proprietary products may be significantly less secure than open source alternatives (see Gartner report "Nimda Worm shows you can't always patch fast enough" dated 19/9/01 by John Pescatore).

Next Steps

The following actions will be taken to implement this policy:

- Office of e-Envoy (OeE) and Office of Government Commerce (OGC) will jointly publish this policy on behalf of UK Government

- OGC will update all their Procurement Guidelines to reflect this policy

- Advice will be made available to all those involved in procurement exercises on areas of the software infrastructure and application marketplace where OSS has strengths and weaknesses

- Advice will also be made available to all those involved in procurement exercises on how to assess the merits of OSS v proprietary solutions in all procurements

- OeE will discuss with academic research institutions the possibilities of future R&D work.

References

1. The eEurope Action Plan is available at
   http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/documentation/index_en.htm

2. The e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF) is available at
   http://www.govtalk.gov.uk/library

3. QinetiQ Report "Analysis of the Impact of Open Source Software" is available at
   http://www.govtalk.gov.uk/library

4. Further information on OSS is available at http://www.opensource.org/

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