

Open Source in plain English

Much of the debate about Open Source has been in Technical terms, or increasingly in Political Terms.

I'm not criticising either, I strongly suspect that both will continue for some time, but many are left cold by this approach.

What is it about at the fundamental level, in plain English, in simple terms that leave no doubt?

At heart, the argument is simple - it's about cost, and it's about the best way to run IT in an organisation which gives the organisation the freedom and flexibility to run its IT for itself. It's about escaping the world where the tail wags the dog, and reclaiming the agenda to make IT serve your goals.

Look at your own organisation, and you will see that IT systems consist of three things, Hardware, Software and the 'know-how' that makes it all work. It has been said that "IT doesn't matter", and increasingly, that's true. The purpose of IT is to serve the goals of the organisation, not the other way round. We don't create IT systems for their own sake, we create them to communicate internally and externally, to create, manage and store our documents, to help run our organisations, to gain control of our finances and accounts. If we can do all this, whilst figuring out how to do it better and reduce our costs, we are meeting the economic imperative of doing business.

Hardware is now a commodity. You and I don't buy hardware for itself, we buy it to do a job... by running software. The most successful hardware companies are those that figure out how to deliver it for the lowest price.

Software, or should I say, Licence costs, is heading the same way. Open Source represents the logical end-point in this process. Again, you and I don't buy software for itself, we buy it to do a job. In a free market, the most successful software companies are those who figure out how to deliver it for the lowest price. If you can acquire software that is fit for purpose, but without buying it over and over again in Licence fees, why wouldn't you?

The real key to IT in business is the 'know-how' to make it all work, and to make it serve the goals of the organisation. Whether that's user know-how, administration know-how, or external know-how, the system won't achieve your goals until you provide it.

The Open Source formula is simple. Commodity Hardware + Open Source Software + Appropriate know-how = Competitive Advantage.

Open Source is not the best solution in all cases. There are Enterprise Class Open Source projects that are the very best in their field, others that are way behind the state of the art, and many that are simply at parity or rapidly approaching parity with their proprietary alternatives. What is true is that there is an Enterprise Class 'stack' that you can run your organisation on, or include in your mix of software that runs your organisation.

The sheer number of organisations now taking advantage of this stack is overwhelming, and it's time to discard the notion that they do it because they 'can't afford' proprietary software. Take a look at some of the emerging technology giants, (and if you thought of Google, for example, you're probably not the only one) and see that massive usage of Open Source software is a fundamental part of their competitive advantage. Add to the obvious 'bottom-line' advantages this brings the other emerging advantages of Open Source (flexibility, freedom from 'lock-in', regained control of the upgrade cycle, freedom from 'Licence management' headaches, and so on) and you have a compelling business case... a business case you can't ignore.

Two common questions that I get asked about Open Source is "how do we get started, and how do we manage it in our organisation"

There's a simple answer - you get started, and you manage it, in exactly the same way you do with any other software. Open Source software is not a stranger, and it doesn't suspend the laws we've all learnt in bringing new systems into our organisation. Except for a few features (lack of licence fees, lack of administrative burden in tracking licences) you simply apply everything you know about proprietary software. Software either is, or isn't, fit for purpose. You need to manage the process of its introduction. You need to acquire the capability to use it. Approach in the way you approach any IT project in your organisation, but enjoy the unique features that bring long-term benefits with its introduction.

by Mark Taylor, CEO