

Open Source Software

Benefits and Problems

Introduction

Open source software is generally free software that you can use with little or no restrictions. Open source developers choose to make the source code of their software publicly available for the good of the community and publish their software with an open source license, meaning that anyone can see how it works and modify it as per their needs.

Many times, open-source software is developed with the collaborative efforts of a group of programmers under the belief that collective intellect leads to better, more stable product development. The term 'open source' is a play on the software's source code, while normally proprietary or 'closed', is 'open' and available for anyone to customize or improve to suit their needs. Historically, open source software was a labor of love for hobbyists and hackers. Today, open source is a multi-billion dollar industry and many companies opt to use open-source software as their primary software platforms.

Examples of Popular Open Source software and their Proprietary Counterparts

Let's take a good look at some well known examples from both the worlds.

Paid software might not always be the best choice for your. This is where Open Source comes in.

ful.

Although it is the best option for anyone to use MS Office suite for any of their needs when it comes to documents, spreadsheets or presentations, it does come with a price tag that not everyone, especially a small business owner or an individual, is willing to pay.

Microsoft Office is the de-facto Document creation suite utilized by millions across the globe. It is a mature product that has faced the test of time and it has been very successful.

This is where the free alternative from OSS world comes in. The most successful competitor to MS Office is called OpenOffice.org and comes with most of the features of its paid counterpart and is the preferred choice for those who don't want to shell out on MS Office.

Other examples (Proprietary > Open Source):

- Adobe Photoshop, CorelDraw > GIMP
- Windows 7 > Linux
- Maya, 3DS Max > Blender
- Internet Explorer > Mozilla Firefox



Benefits of using Open Source Software

1. It is hard to think of a better example of the superior security of open source software than the recent discovery of a number of defects in the Android kernel. What's so educating about this discovery is that the only reason it was possible to detect it is that the kernel code is open to public view. On the other hand, a proprietary system with such a flaw will hardly ever be discovered by the limited set of people who have access to this code.

It also means that OSS gets patches and bug fixes way too quickly when compared to closed source code, as in the case of the Linux kernel exploit uncovered not long ago. On the other hand, it takes Microsoft weeks, if not months, to issue patches, as in the case of the Internet Explorer Zero-Day flaw.

2. Most of it is free. It has been estimated that open source software saves businesses \$60 billion a year. An open source alternative is readily available for every paid for proprietary software these days. For businesses that want more assurance, there are paid support options on open source packages at prices that fall far below what most proprietary vendors charge. Commercial support for open source software tends to be more responsive, too, since support is where their revenue is focused.
3. **Which is more likely to be better:** a software package created by a handful of developers, or a software package created by thousands of developers? Open Source software is continually evolving as developers keep modifying it. Because open-source software is developed in a collaborative fashion, there are literally thousands of pairs of eyes available to catch most of the bugs before the latest versions are released.

In general, open source software gets closest to what users want because those users can have a hand in making it so. At least one recent study has shown, in fact, that technical superiority is typically

the primary reason enterprises choose open source software.

4. The competitive edge. A business is only as good as its ability to retrieve and process information efficiently, effectively and strategically. Many times open-source software eliminates common annoyances and limitations that main-

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stream software presents, and thus allows for better usability and a faster-moving company overall. Using open source software also means you are not locked into using a particular vendor's system that only works with their other systems.

5. Most importantly, you can modify and adapt open source software for your own business requirements, something that is not possible with proprietary systems. Business users can take a piece of open source software and tweak it to suit their needs. Since the code is open, it's simply a matter of modifying it to add the functionality they want. No legal courtroom battles involved!
6. Open source software is much better at adhering to open standards than proprietary software is. If you value interoperability with other businesses, computers and users, and don't want to be limited by proprietary data formats, open source software is definitely the way to go.
7. When your business uses proprietary software such as Microsoft Windows and Office, you are on a treadmill that requires you to keep upgrading both software and hardware ad infinitum. Open source software, on the other hand, is typically much less resource-intensive, meaning that you can run it well even on older hardware. It's up to you--not some vendor--to decide when it's time to upgrade.



Problems with Open Source Software

1. Of course, there are disadvantages of using the open source programs as well. The most obvious one is that an open source product can tend to evolve in line with developers' wishes than the needs of the end users. If they aren't familiar with the product they will have to spend time learning it or pay money to get support. When the costs of training, support or maintaining the open-source application would outweigh the costs for traditional software licensing, Open Source might not be the best bet. Free software licensing often means no telephone or e-mail support.
2. Sensitive data or critical applications are better off not using OSS. Mission critical software is usually implemented through proprietary software instead.
3. OSS might not always be easier for unskilled users to work with, in which case the popular proprietary software is the better choice. This is mainly because of the learning curve of such programs since the user interface is far less polished than the proprietary counterparts.
4. Sometimes it might not be feasible to use OSS because all your other clients or collaborators are using proprietary software that might be the industry de-facto. In such cases also, OSS, although may be better at the task, is not feasible to use.
5. OSS on the cloud is not really open source. As a general rule, you don't get access to the source code, even if the software is built on open platforms. The benefits of using "pay for what you use" software as a service model may outweigh the disadvantage of not having access to the source code.
6. On closed systems, such as Mac, proprietary software often tends to work better than OSS due to the requirement of specialized closed source drivers for the hardware, which are not available to OSS vendors.

When the costs of training, support or maintaining the open-source application would outweigh the costs for traditional software

Conclusion

While open source software may often — and even usually — be a better choice than functionally similar proprietary offerings, it doesn't make sense to use it always. It may be useful in a certain situation and impractical in others.

The best thing to do when trying to decide if open source is for your company is to go through a checklist and figure out the answer.

- What are the requirements that the software has to meet?
- What must the software be able to do in order to play an effective role in your business' technology infrastructure?
- What level of support do you need?
- What's the trade-off of using an open-source solution?
- What's the trade-off of not going with open source?





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