

**Richard Smedley,
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Manager,
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Free Software,
argues that
the Government
needs to increase
its use of free
software...**

The price of freedom

Free, Libre or 'Open Source' Software (hereafter labelled 'FLOSS') has been the big success story of the IT world, taking the enterprise by storm and exposing proprietary software as over-priced, inflexible and insecure. Governments from Brazil¹ to China have rushed to adopt the free GNU/Linux operating system (OS), to benefit from software that can be adapted to local needs. Held back by their cautious procurement policies and procedures, the UK Government and local authorities have so far just dipped the occasional toe in the water, then rushed to embrace the next special deal from proprietary software vendors.

Freedom at any price

Free software is not about price, but about freedom. Cost savings make FLOSS initially appealing to many purchasers – governments included. However, the reason Brazil, Peru and so many others are moving government departments over to FLOSS is as much about getting back control, improving security and promoting the local IT economy – saving the taxpayer several hundred million dollars is a bonus.

Did we say it was not about price? Well, sometimes it is. Last year, the Beaumont Hospital² in Dublin, faced with a shrinking IT budget and increased software licensing costs, moved over to FLOSS at all levels – from administrators to the new x-ray machinery. The result is an estimated saving of €8.4m over the next five years. In the UK, the NHS spends tens of millions of pounds on software licences alone.

For procurement choices between free and proprietary software, the UK has had a theoretical level playing field for some time: in July 2002, the Government published a new policy on the use of FLOSS. The 'Open Source Software Policy Document'³ states that the 'UK Government will consider Open Source Software solutions alongside proprietary ones in IT procurements and award contracts on a value for money basis, seeking to avoid lock-in to proprietary IT products and services.'

Nevertheless, this has borne little fruit in contracts awarded. The announcement last October of nine 'proof of concept' trials of the use of FLOSS in the public sector by the Office of Government Commerce

(OGC) and the Office of the e-Envoy (OeE) looked like a promising 'kick-start' to the process begun the previous July, but what has been the result so far?

On trial

OGC Chief Executive, Peter Gershon, has said: "The trials build on our commitment to create a level playing field between Open Source Software from a range of suppliers and propriety software within government procurement. The trials will operate in a controlled environment, and will enable us to identify when and how best to use the technology to the benefit of departments and the taxpayer alike."

One of the nine trials was at Newham Borough Council – already known to be exploring FLOSS on the server and the desktop. IT Director, Richard Steel, has used the trials as a bargaining chip that first led Microsoft to pay Cap Gemini Ernst & Young to provide the Council with free consultancy about how it could save costs using the American company's products (Microsoft had previously told Newham it could not move from the discounted price structure it had agreed with the Office of Government Commerce and user group, SOCITMiv, in 2002).

Newham withdrew from the OGC trial at the end of December, and in January, announced that its new deal with Microsoft would save it £1m per year on IT spending. "We won't be going ahead with the OGC trials as such. We are interested in exploring the value of Open Source but the sort of trial envisaged was a substantial investment and it was not the sort of scale we were looking for", Steel said, while confirming that the Council would still continue to run its own OSS trials. The discounts are not available to any other local authority, and there is no indication of how much could be saved with FLOSS over the long term: for that we will have to see the outcome of the other OGC trials.

Other trialists include Orkney Council, Powys County Council (which has been using GNU/Linux in some of its infrastructure since 1998, and is now partnering with IBM to bring FLOSS into end-user applications), the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The DWP and OGC have previously collaborated on building a

Linux-based stationery ordering system, called 'Purchase and Pay'.

The Central Scotland Police Force is working on a wide ranging document management and administration processing system, covering workflow, new legislation (including freedom of information), and document collation, all using FLOSS solutions. This trial is nearing completion and the results are awaited with interest. IT Manager, James Jarvie, said the OGC would gain major benefits: "The OGC has a product that's reusable. We are sharing with colleagues in other police forces and councils. It will be a template which other bodies can take and build on."

Previously wary IT managers have welcomed the trials, with three-quarters of local authorities considering FLOSS in some form. SOCITM Chief Executive, Kate Mountain, says: "Open Source systems are already very popular among local authorities. We know they're not free because they need supporting. Overall, they're probably a lower cost solution but we're keen to have the data."

Additionally, as part of a deal between OGC and Sun Microsystems announced last December, the latter are undertaking a series of trials of its Linux-based desktop system with various public sector bodies in 2004, building upon the OGC initiative with IBM. This not entirely free software provides severe competition for the proprietary OS currently found on 500,000 civil service desktops, and for the 800,000 office suites and OSs in the NHS. Where Sun can succeed, so can entirely FLOSS solutions.

Education, education, education

The Free, Libre and Open Source Software in Education ('FLOSSIE') Conference took place in London on 18th February 2004, and was attended by more than 70 professionals from the world of education, including Professor David Hargreaves, Chairman of BECTa. The Conference showed the way forward for cheaper and better education.

The cost arguments for FLOSS are overwhelming, but far more important is the pedagogical argument: FLOSS, with its ethos of sharing and community, and ready access to the source code to modify, adapt and improve the software, fits in well with the high ideals that have led to the provision of free education for all. Free software proponents are unafraid to talk of ethics, but their ideals have also produced one of the best operating systems (GNU/Linux), as well as much of the robust software that powers the internet.

The UK was the birthplace of the computer, and to this day, produces some of the world's finest minds for the global IT industry. Much of the credit for this goes to the quality of our education system, but suit-

ably qualified young people have become harder to find. Early exposure to diverse free software can only help expand the opportunities available for young minds. Meanwhile, the price of Microsoft XP and Office have created a digital divide: free office suites such as OpenOffice.org⁵ can be given to all pupils, enabling them to run the same software at home that they do at school. FLOSS also has good built-in accessibility aids⁶.

BECTa is now looking for schools who are using free software, in order to inform a research project about the total cost of ownership. BECTa, the agency advising the Government's Department for Education on computing, are starting a research project about total cost of ownership of FLOSS solutions in schools. This is long overdue. In fact, BECTa cancelled funding for research into GNU/Linux in schools back in 2000, to be carried out by the International Centre for Digital Content at Liverpool John Moores University.

Conclusion

But what can be done about the £1bn plus spent each year on software by the UK Government – such as the £100m through the e-learning credits initiative – most of which goes overseas on software licence fees? If a fraction of this money were ploughed back into the UK economy, paying local developers to improve and develop FLOSS for government use, it would act as a catalyst to encourage the still fragile UK IT economy, generating jobs, improving skills, and boosting tax receipts.

The UK Government's history on FLOSS has not been good. Nevertheless, the UK's trailing position means that the Government can look to procuring FLOSS in all sectors with the knowledge that it is not an untried methodology in the production of software.

The German Government example – which includes the funding of existing FLOSS projects to add in secure email functionality⁷ – shows what can be done with a small amount of commitment. Now is the time to build on what others have done: some real desktop trials, and seed funding for the small amount of functionality still lacking in some FLOSS solutions. Can the UK match its European partners in a field where it once led?

¹ <http://old.hispalinux.es/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=209>
² <http://www.netproject.com/docs/Beaumont.pdf>
³ <http://www.ogc.gov.uk/index.asp?id=2190>
⁴ <http://www.socitm.gov.uk/>
⁵ <http://www.openoffice.org>
⁶ <http://www.sun.com/access/>
⁷ <http://www.gnupg.org/aegypten/>

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