

The future is open source

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Like many developments in the IT sector, open source seemed to come out of nowhere. Linux was first developed in 1991, and since it began to be taken seriously as a commercial product a few years later, the industry has been caught up in a whirlwind that saw developing business models threaten established ones and philosophical wars break out.

People who thought the whole thing was a storm in a teacup began to realise otherwise when they heard Microsoft's CEO Steve Ballmer call open source "a cancer" in 2001.

Given the volatile nature of the concept over the past 10 years, what can we expect to see from it in the next five? Is the firestorm over open source likely to abate? Not according to Bill Welty, a mySQL customer who works at the California Air Resources Board. A convert to open source, Welty believes the recent industry shakeup is only just beginning.

"The force for California that is going to drive some of the decision making down that path is probably the same decision that's driving some third world countries, which is money," he says. If anything, he expects the use of open source to grow for this reason, and also because it offers more flexibility. "There's the flexibility that you have to prototype - if you don't like it you can throw it away. It doesn't have to cost anything."

The figures bear him out, at least for web servers. Statistics from web monitoring company Netcraft show that 70 per cent of web servers on the internet use the open source Apache compared to a share of roughly 25 per cent for Microsoft's Internet Information Server.

California last year recommended the use of open source in its performance review, following national governments across Europe who are developing a public sector love affair with open source.

This could have a cumulative effect, argues Brian Hanley, director of agile development consultancy Exoftware. "First, companies who want to do business with governments will need to embrace open source. Second, as governments continue to show support of open source, we should see a knock on effect on the private sector," he says. "Third, government systems are complex, which will force the open source community to innovate in line with more complex needs of government."

And the biggest public sector player of all is China, a quasi-Communist country with a large element of state control and a billion people. China has already embraced open source, creating the China Standard Software Company (CSSC), a collective of state companies licensing Linux-based software stacks in large volumes from companies such as Sun Microsystems. The China Open Source Software Promotion Alliance is another group working with western vendors like HP and IBM, already big open source shops.

Developments such as these are bound to leave Microsoft worried in the coming years. Rampant software theft in China is keeping proprietary vendors from a huge market opportunity, leaving open source players like Red Hat preparing to clean up on service revenue as the Chinese market matures.

How are these proprietary vendors fighting back? "Microsoft is going to have to get into the service business, and I would say they had better ramp up," says California Air Resources Board's Welty. "And it has to build a reputation around that." However, this will also require a move towards service models that don't lock the user in, he warns.

The alternative is to pummel open source users with threats of lawsuits, as SCO has done with Linux users. Malcolm Cartledge, managing director of Linux security consultancy Kyzo, thinks that others may follow suit. "It has long been a commercial reality that where there's money and profit, the lawyers will soon follow, and IP is the political landscape of commerce nowadays, so yes, there will be more IP disputes but probably on a smaller scale than SCO," he argues.

If the open source model does continue to grow as much as its advocates suggest, its underlying development methodologies could change, says Cartledge. Open source projects will adopt more structured traditional methodologies as its development matures, he hopes. "In the future more OSS [open source software] projects will employ traditional methodologies to code, control and coordinate the software development tree, and this will most likely be at an increasing rate as open source software projects become bigger."

He says bigger, because in the future, size really will be everything. At present, many projects on Sourceforge, a directory of open source endeavors, involve one or two people and are largely unstructured and undisciplined.

As the concept matures, these sorts of projects are unlikely to die but Cartledge hopes they will be outshone by a growing number of meatier open source initiatives. "The number of significant and important OSS projects will have grown significantly in five years' time," he says. If true, this would reflect a maturing of the open source concept as it gains respectability, thanks not only to its adoption within the private sector but also its popularity among governments.

In 1995, at an IDC conference in Europe, Bill Gates said his biggest enemy was the unknown. Business challenges in the IT sector can come from left field in a very short time, he said. Ten years on, his enemy may now be known.

By Danny Bradbury

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