

## **The biggest myth**

How do you procure something that's free? This is a conundrum concerning public sector procurement managers. Open source software (OSS) is not free of course, only the licence is free, and this is one of the many myths that have sprung up around open source and which have made it difficult to procure, particularly in education and other public institutional settings.

## **More myths**

There's a general perception that OSS is difficult to implement, involves lots of smaller components being put together, does not scale well and is just not 'enterprise ready'. The assumption is that if OSS really were as good as proprietary software, then surely people would charge for it, wouldn't they?

These myths are simply not true. The Internet quite literally runs on open source software. If that isn't enterprise ready then what is? There are many software suppliers using open source business models. Some companies provide centralized product support similar to those found in the proprietary world, others are based on a third party support industry. The successful ones, from IBM to the Moodle partners, are making money.

## **Real life procurement**

Most IT managers within education will already be operating in a 'mixed environment' of open and closed source software systems, so why is OSS still often overlooked as a mainstream procurement option?

Part of the problem lies in the fact that many of the OSS systems currently in use within education and the wider public sector have been adopted in an ad hoc way rather than formally procured. In fact, the 'how' of procuring OSS is quite different from the standard invitation to tender process used for proprietary software.

## **So how do I approach OSS procurement?**

One way of getting to grips with the different approach needed to procure OSS is to use one of a number of Evaluation Frameworks. These are well documented, formal processes for this kind of decision-making and they facilitate the process of reviewing OSS and its sustainability, assessing against criteria and producing weighted scores. Well known frameworks include: OS Maturity Model (OSMM), QSOS (Qualification and Selection of Open Source software), and the Business Readiness Rating model (BRR). The Open University made use of the BRR when deciding which Virtual Learning Environment they should adopt.

So, this is not an unknown field and it is not a black art, there are structured and co-ordinated approaches available to assist with OSS procurement.

## **Why does this affect me?**

If you have any responsibility for procurement then open source is relevant to you. Firstly, there is the wider strategic and 'political' context: a growing number of governments, educational agencies and public sector bodies are using open source and outlining recommendations and policies which mandate that it should at least be seriously considered. Secondly by encouraging open source companies to enter the market place and engage with your procurement process you automatically increase pressure on those closed source suppliers to be better suppliers, to reduce their costs and to make their solutions more applicable to your individual needs. Thirdly, by considering open source in your procurement process you may well end up with software that is a better fit for your needs. Isn't that what a procurement process is all about?

## **The benefit? Options and flexibility**

Considering open source in your procurement strategy is not just about going through the motions to fulfil obligations set down by public sector policy. Whilst it is true that OSS can potentially deliver a reduced 'whole of life' total cost of ownership this is not the biggest benefit that it can bring.

The furthest reaching and most important benefit that it can bring is that it gives options. It gives you ultimate control and flexibility over how you run your institution's IT department. You can choose a model based on any point of the spectrum that runs from fully self-supporting to fully outsourced. In turn, this allows institutions to avoid lock-in, and, if they wish, to collaborate with other institutions and organizations.

## **Who is OSS Watch?**

OSS Watch provides unbiased advice and guidance on the use, development, and licensing of free and open source software. OSS Watch is funded by the JISC and its services are available free-of-charge to UK higher and further education. If you want to find out more about open source software, we're the people to ask.

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