

Coalition to Lobby U.S. Government to Promote Open Source

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A large group of vendors and U.S. universities organizes to boost awareness and advocate more governmental use of open-source software to save money on application development.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 22 July 2009, a group of more than 70 IT vendors and academic organizations announced the creation of a coalition, Open Source for America (OSA), to promote the adoption of open-source software (OSS) by the U.S. federal government. OSA includes vendors deeply involved with OSS, such as Oracle, Red Hat, SugarCRM and Sun Microsystems, and universities with significant OSS curricula (including North Carolina State University and Oregon State University). OSA aims to:

- Help change policies and practices to allow the federal government to better use open source
- Coordinate communities to collaborate with the federal government on technology requirements
- Raise awareness and create understanding among federal government leaders about the values and implications of OSS

Analysis

This coalition is the first, large-scale initiative to lobby the federal government to promote use of OSS. Previous efforts to promote open-source applications, primarily at the state government level — for example, the Government Open Code Collaborative — failed due to lack of common interest and unclear vendor participation.

To date, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has adopted a neutral attitude toward open source (see memorandum M-04-16 on software acquisition at http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/memoranda_fy04_m04-16/). However, OSA aims to exploit the federal government's intensified focus on greater transparency and cost optimization in the implementation of the federal economic stimulus plan, which will create fertile ground for OSS.

The coalition also offers OSS vendors an opportunity to influence how federal and federally influenced resources will be spent on IT. OSS has been widely adopted by the federal government, but only at the lower levels of the technology stack. Therefore, the challenge for OSA is to gain a broader foothold for open source in the application arena.

Recommendations

IT Leaders at federal government agencies, the OMB and the U.S. General Services Administration:

- Continue to consider open-source alternatives while pursuing best-value procurement strategies.
- Adopt open standards to reduce costs and vendor lock-in; however, go slow in mandating any particular solution — open source or otherwise.
- Pay particular attention to the use of open-source development approaches, including community source, to modernize legacy applications that serve many agencies; consider such an approach as a complement to other consolidation and shared-service initiatives.

Providers of OSS:

- Look at state and local government as an additional, even-more-viable target market. Given the financial constraints that state and local governments face during this recession, make a strong case for sustainable cost savings with OSS.

RECOMMENDED READING

- "Panel Debates Community Source Pros and Cons" — Open-source and community-source software can solve a problem that is not genuine enough to require a commercial product or unique enough to deserve custom development. **By Andrea Di Maio**
- "Open Source in Government Worldwide, 2008" — Government IT leaders should develop an enterprise OSS policy as a matter of urgency, one that ensures OSS to be considered at any level of the technology stack. **By Andrea Di Maio**

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This research is part of a set of related research pieces. See "Roundup of Government Research, 4Q09" for an overview.

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