The World Belongs to Open Source | Open Source Procurement
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Title

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ShortDescription

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Content

What is Open Source Software?

It is the software distributed with source code that anyone can see, modify, and distribute. It is in the public repository for everyone to have access. Source code is the collection of code written in programming language that is hidden from most computer users.

Open Source software (OSS) is becoming a popular choice among computer users. They are trusting OSS for all their computing woes, its market share is steadily increasing, and many proprietary software giants are releasing their OSS projects. Microsoft's Visual Studio Code is an Open Source project. Android, the world's most popular smartphone operating system, is derived from Linux.

There are many factors which make it a popular option.

1. Rapid release cycles make it up-to-date with the latest breakthroughs like Drupal releases a new version every 6 months, whereas proprietary software users have to wait a few years to update to the latest version.
2. Users feel like they have control over the software; they have access to code and are not stuck with one vendor for their support and maintenance services.

3. It can be easily customized according to the needs, therefore reducing the reliance on out-of-the-box solutions.

   Low cost can be mentioned as another advantage of OSS, but it is a tricky subject. Users mistakenly think that Open Source software is free and they can easily set it up themselves. This can cost them more in the long run if they don't hire a specialized vendor for setup and support services. There is a risk attached to doing it all alone. Red Hat, an Open Source company, operates on this business model that enough users will understand this risk and consult it for services.

What makes software open?

The Free Software Foundation gives four essential freedoms namely:

1. (1) to run the program,
2. (2) to study and change the program in source code form,
3. (3) to redistribute exact copies, and
4. (4) to distribute modified versions.

   It just doesn't mean access to the code and free distribution of it and its derivative work. Instead, The Open Source Initiative (OSI) has given a 10-feature definition of Open Source software. It prohibits discrimination against person, technology, and endeavor fields. In addition, the software shouldn't be product or software specific. This is to encourage cooperation and maximum participation from all walks of life. Nobody should be locked out of the process, including people with commercial intentions.

   However, point 4 of the criteria insists that "the license may restrict source-code from being distributed in modified form only if the license allows the distribution of 'patch files' with the source code for the purpose of modifying the program at build time. The license must explicitly permit distribution of software built from modified source code." The restriction placed here is to honor the author of the code. Encouraging others to modify the code base is one thing, but users have a right to know who is responsible for the software they are using. Remembering the original author and giving them due credit is necessary. This way, modifications can be made available but easily separated from the base source.

What's the difference between Open and Proprietary software?

Open Source can be freely shared, altered, and modified by the user with the only condition that the modification or forking will be shared back with the community and released under the same license as the original code.

Proprietary software can only be altered by the original author or by express permission. Other users cannot make any changes to the code as they have accepted the license agreement with the terms that they will not do anything prohibited by the license, namely sharing and distribution. For example, Microsoft Windows makes users accept rules and restrictions when the software is first installed and run.

Proprietary software licenses grant the author copyrights, but Open Source licenses compel users/authors to share their contributions back with the community. OSS promotes collaboration by default.

Naturally, one asks if there is no ownership and no license fee on Open Software, then how does one make money through Open Source software? Money is made by not selling software but by providing support services, i.e., install, run, and troubleshoot. This business model relies on a large number of users. And users also understand that the 'fee' Open Source companies charge is necessary to keep the company afloat.

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1. Lindberg, Van. Intellectual Property and Open Source. A Practical Guide to Protecting Code. O'Reilly Media, 2008.

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Comments

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