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EDITORIAL

OPEN SOURCE GETS SERIOUS

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Adolescence is a heady period of life, as well as a turbulent and confusing one. All at the same time, there is boundless opportunity, impatience with external authority, the freedom to experiment, and the potential to fall flat on one's face. It is also a time of transition, when old freedoms give way to new rules and responsibilities.

Open source has entered its adolescence. Most famously, Linux is gathering momentum, as evidenced by an ever-growing number of major customers, vendors and service providers that have committed to the cause. In fact, some less visible software has been even more widely adopted: the Apache Web server, for example, is estimated to enjoy a 64% market share.

But while open source is clearly flexing its muscles, those who develop and use open source software will have to grapple with the types of challenges as well as the opportunities that broader market opportunities entail.

The most obvious example of such growing pains is the assertion by SCO that Linux infringes upon its proprietary rights. Whether or not one gives credence to SCO's allegations, the very public campaign conducted in the press by SCO has made potential open source customers focus closely on the open source process. Can a global, virtual web of individual developers create a complex software product without risk of accidental -- or deliberate -- infringement of intellectual property rights (IPR)? If so, are there changes that need to be made to the process to ensure that result?

IPR concerns are not the only issues that open source proponents need to address. In order for the open source model to continue to make inroads into the corporate and government markets, a high degree of trust will be needed in the reliability, security, longevity, completeness, ease of use, service availability and rationality of open source products. Can such concerns be adequately addressed within an open source process? If so, again, what changes are needed to achieve the necessary results?

To date, the open source community has charted its own course from concept to code with a refreshing and creative variety of approaches. Existing standard setting organizations might well learn from these new models. Indeed, some consortia (such as the W3C) have already incorporated open source projects into their work program. Still, open source projects are most often run by individuals, and not companies. Indeed, in the case of the Apache Web server, it is the individual developers themselves that indirectly own the software, through membership in the Apache Software Foundation. Will the largest IT companies continue to be willing to commit their strategic direction to platforms over which they can have so little influence?

While vendor control can, of course, have its bad side, the participation of support providers is a precondition to broad implementation of many types of open source software. Commercial vendors and service providers are also more in touch with customer needs, and more interested in satisfying their demands. Before open source software can supplant installed, proprietary solutions, potential customers need to be convinced that open source-based products will rapidly evolve to meet real-world functional needs and concerns, rather than simply be "look alikes" of yesterday's proprietary software.

In order for trust in open source software to be earned, we believe that the process by which open source software is created will need to become further institutionalized. In other words, some of the rebelliousness and free form approach of the open source movement may need to be tamed. While thousands of projects can (and should) continue to be launched in an impromptu fashion, more ambitious, business-critical projects will sometimes require a carefully conceived, funded and staffed structure in which to be conducted. At the same time, the creativity and the passion that has distinguished the emergence of the open source model to date must be preserved.

Already, this evolution is in evidence. While SourceForge continues to host thousands of projects that have only as much discipline as the participants desire, more formal efforts have been in operation for years, such as those underlying Linux, Apache, Eclipse, Mozilla, and OpenOffice, each of which has produced useful, respected and, in some cases, broadly implemented software. Other models have also been tested, such as the well-funded Open Source Development Labs.

In the years ahead, introspection and cooperation will be needed in order for all constituencies to create similarly useful software that is broadly adopted. Sometimes difficult compromises may be needed, as time to market concerns require new discipline, and those that provide funding attach expectations to those funds that may be new to the development process.

Successfully surviving adolescence brings depth, wisdom, greater perspective, and expanded potential – but it also requires the patience of all concerned. The challenge today is to guide the open source process through its teen-age years with as little angst, and as much fulfilled promise, as possible. Pragmatism, mutual respect and cooperation on all sides will help ensure a successful result.

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