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STANDARDS BLOG:

A new Voice for Open Source in Government

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I'm pleased to report this morning on the formation of a new advocacy group for the use of free and open source software in the U.S. Government. I'm also pleased to have been asked to serve on its Board of Advisors, along with other proponents of free and open source software, such as Roger Burkhard, Dawn Meyerriecks, Eben Moglen, Tim O'Reilly, Simon Phipps, Mark Shuttleworth, Michael Tiemann, Bill Vass, and Jim Zemlin.

The new organization is called Open Source for America (OSA), and you can find its Web site here. Tim O'Reilly will officially announce OSA at OSCON later today, and you can find the launch press release here, as well as pasted in at the end of this blog post for archival purposes. I'm sure that you'll also see quite a few articles blossom across the Web today relating to its announcement, but having been in on the planning, here's what it's all about.

The immediate goal of the organization will be to raise awareness about free and open source software (FOSS) in government. Or, as stated in the lede to the press release, to provide, "a unified voice for the promotion of open source software in the U.S. Federal Government arena." The full version of the OSA mission can be found in the Charter document, and reads as follow:

> The mission of OSA is to educate decision makers in the U.S. Federal government about the advantages of using free and open source software; to encourage the Federal agencies to give equal priority to procuring free and open source software in all of their procurement decisions; and generally provide an effective voice to the U.S. Federal government on behalf of the open source software community, private industry, academia, and other non-profits.

Achieving that high level goal will in some ways be a pushover, in that every Federal agency already uses open source, in most cases very extensively. As noted in the press release:

> With the U.S. Federal Government increasingly focused on utilizing and adopting technologies to better serve citizens, there is growing recognition of the freedoms that open source software and open technology solutions can provide – an open, transparent and cost-effective option – for government agencies. Gartner recently estimated by 2011 more than 25 percent of government vertical, domain-specific applications will either be open source, contain open source application components or be developed as community source.

But promoting the pervasive and effective use of open source software in government is still an important and worthwhile mission to support, in that the spread of open source software in the public sector has been organic and initiated at the CTO level rather than considered and favored by policy-makers for the cost containment and other benefits it can bring. While there are many organizations in existence already that promote free and open source software in the marketplace to some extent, none of them has been formed to provide a focal point for promoting FOSS to government. OSA should therefore be able to provide great value not only through its own efforts, but by providing a rallying point for coordinating and leveraging the efforts of these many organizations already in existence.

That role is important, because as in private industry, many in government are not as conversant with the advantages of free and open source software as they might be. They are also, of course, just as vulnerable to having misconceptions about FOSS as those in private industry, and perhaps more so, as a result of the efforts of lobbyists. The bottom line is that all citizens will benefit from both a cost, as well as a quality, perspective if free and open source software is given equal consideration with proprietary options whenever government procurement decisions are made.

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Tactically, the goals of the organization are summarized in the Charter as follows:

> The mission incorporates three goals: (1) to effectuate changes in U.S. Federal government policies and practices so that all the government may more fully benefit from and utilize free and open source software; (2) to help coordinate these communities to collaborate with the Federal government on technology requirements; and (3) to raise awareness and create understanding among federal government leaders in the executive and legislative branches about the values and implications of open source software. OSA may also participate in standards development and other activities that may support its open source mission.

From what might be called a "techno-political" perspective, and after much discussion among the founders, OSA might be thought of as being "left of center," as signaled by the introduction to the "Founding Principles" to be found in the Charter. That section begins as follows:

1. While respecting the right of every developer to choose the license that it believes best reflects its desires and needs, we support the four freedoms in the Free Software Definition.

For those of you not already familiar with the Four Freedoms, as originally propounded by Richard Stallman, they are:

The freedom to run the program, for any purpose (freedom 0);

The freedom to study how the program works, and adapt it to your needs (freedom 1). Access to the source code is a precondition for this;

The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor (freedom 2); and

The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements (and modified versions in general) to the public, so that the whole community benefits (freedom 3). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

Thus, OAS does not seek to override the right of any developer and any user to select the license terms that it believes are best aligned to its own goals and philosophy, but it does support those licensing models that are intended to lead to the creation of the greatest value for the community.

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The Founding Principles continue as follows:

2. We applaud the commitment of the Administration to make the U.S. Federal government more transparent, participatory, secure, and efficient, and urge the U.S. Federal government to pursue this goal by leveraging the advantages of free and open source software.

3. We believe that the community can drive collaborative innovation in the U.S. government space, resulting in greater efficiencies and national competitiveness.

4. We believe the decision to use software should be driven solely by the requirements of the user, and not by a mandate for a particular brand, vendor, or development model.

The timing for the initiative's launch is hardly a coincidence, in light of the stated goals of the Obama administration. As I have written about at length in the past (examples can be found here and here), President Obama's commitment to open government must be implemented at the technical as well as the policy level in order to be effective. Only through the use of both free and open source software as well as open standards can government sites become accessible to all, and provide the level of interactivity required to truly realize the vision of allowing Americans to participate in their own government.

In structure and other aspects, Open Source for America will have much in common with the ODF Alliance (although, as you will see, it already has a much more credible Web site). The similarities include free participation, a broadly representative founding membership drawn from academia, non-profits, and for profit organizations, and the strong support of leading IT companies that have already made a firm commitment to open source software and open standards. In this case, those companies include Red Hat, Google, Oracle and Sun. The full list of over 70 founding members appears in the press release, but here is a representative sampling:

> Alfresco Software; Advanced Micro Devices, Inc.; Black Duck Software, Inc.; Canonical; CodeWeavers; CollabNet; Debian; Democracy in Action; Electronic Frontier Foundation; GNOME Foundation; ibiblio.org; Ingres Corporation; Mitch Kapor, The Linux Foundation; Mozilla; North Carolina State University Center for Open Software Engineering; Novell; Open Solutions Alliance; Open Source Initiative; Open Source Institute; O'Reilly Publishing; Oregon State University Open Source Lab; Open Source Software Institute; Institute for Software Research at UC Irvine; Software Freedom Law Center; SugarCRM; Sunlight Labs; School of Engineering, University of California, Merced; University of Southern Mississippi; Center for Open Source Investigation, Carnegie Mellon Silicon Valley; and Zimbra.

As was the case with the ODF Alliance, I expect that you will see this list grow rapidly. Membership is free and open to all, and I'd encourage you to add your, or your organization's, name to the list, as there is important work to be done. An FAQ can be found here, and the registration form here. Why not join us?

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