9-1-2011

Technology in Practice. Open Source, Open Mind

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Citation Details

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Evaluating open source and proprietary software

by Meredith Farkas

I've been a big advocate of open source software since I learned about the model of software licensing and development 10 years ago. I am a big believer that many minds produce great things, so the idea that a community of users would develop and improve software to the benefit of the community really appealed to me. Open source is often a great solution for cash-strapped libraries that can adopt tools like Open Office for free instead of paying for Microsoft Office licenses on all of their computers.

When I was asked to be on a task force at my new place of work that would be evaluating platforms for creating course and subject guides, I wanted to look at every open source option available, including systems like Drupal that are not specifically designed for guide creation. I would never have predicted that, at the end of our evaluation phase, I would be strongly advocating software that was proprietary and would cost the library money for an annual subscription. It wasn't that I'd changed my mind about open source software, but that this was clearly the best fit for our library.

Here were some of the elements that figured into my decision and are worth considering any time you are evaluating open source options:

■ **How robust is the open source project?** Some open source projects, like Koha, have a strong community of open source developers who are improving the code for their libraries and are then contributing that code back to the community. Other open source projects are solely developed by one library or even one person. It's important to consider what would happen if you adopted a piece of software that was later abandoned by the person or library developing it. Do you have the in-house expertise to continue developing it as technologies change?

■ **What is the support like?** I remember trying to install a piece of open source software built by another library years ago and ending up abandoning the project because the documentation was so scarce and I didn't have the technological expertise to figure it out myself. Does the software you are looking to install have robust documentation? Is there a community of users online who are happy to answer questions and help when things just aren't working for you? This isn't to say that support is not also a concern with proprietary software; plenty of software companies provide really terrible tech support.

■ **Do you have the expertise and time on-staff to make the software work for your library?** Some open source tools, like Open Office, work right out of the box so

> There are elements worth considering any time you weigh whether to choose an open source option.

this is not an issue and others will meet your needs in their native form and so won't require any customization. However, if the software will not meet your needs out of the box, do you have staff with both the expertise and the time to customize it? This may also be a concern with proprietary software, as some options may require more customization.

■ **What are your time constraints?** If you are trying to launch something within a pretty tight time frame, you need to choose a piece of software that will not require a lot of development or customization. Depending on which is the less work-intensive option, that could mean either open source or proprietary software.

I'm still a big believer in open source software, but I don't want to see libraries choosing software solely for philosophical reasons. Given the investment of time that some technology projects require, it's imperative that libraries choose the best tool for the job, based on their specific requirements and limitations. ■

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