

DEFENSE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

If you haven't gotten the word, the White House just moved its website over to Drupal, which is great news for open source watchers – and great news for the White House if they are interested in a free and versatile CMS. Of course, the White House is the front door to the government, so this new configuration has received lots of attention.

Perhaps even more important for the evolution of open source in government is the recent appearance

of a memo titled “Clarifying Guidance Regarding Open Source Software (OSS),” which recently went out under the seal of the US Department of Defense Deputy Chief information Officer David M. Wennergren on October 16.

The memo, which clarifies the position of the US Defense Department (DoD) on the use and development of open source software, states that “There are positive aspects of OSS that should be considered when conducting market research on software for DoD use ...,” then it lists a series of advantages that encapsulates what many of us have been saying for some time:

- The continuous and broad peer-review enabled by publicly available source code supports software reliability and security efforts ...
- The unrestricted ability to modify software source code enables the Department to respond more rapidly to changing situations, missions, and future threats.
- Reliance on a particular software developer of vendor due to proprietary restrictions may be reduced by the use of OSS ...
- Since OSS typically does not have a per-seat licensing cost, it can provide a cost advantage in situations where many copies of the software may be required ...
- By sharing the responsibility for maintenance of OSS with other users, the Department can benefit by reducing the total cost of ownership for software ...
- OSS is particularly suitable for rapid prototyping and experimentation where the ability to “test drive” the software with minimal costs and administrative delays can be important.

All this is strong talk for the government, and lest you think it is a stone thrown from a single side of the divide, I should add that this memo has been in the works longer than the current commander has looked out from his chair of destiny. It is simply an idea that has percolated for years through the ranks of the people who are actually using the software.

The memo goes on to clarify that, although these advantages of open source software are relevant to the conversation, they

might not be the overriding consideration (which most open source users could live with). This document will do a lot to level the battleground for government software acquisition. It isn't a ban on proprietary software, but it is a ban on FUD. Beyond the symbolic importance of open source getting included in such a big (and presumably security-conscious) organization are some other considerations that make this news really exciting.

One important benefit of this move is that it eliminates a barrier that has kept the software industry out of competitive equilibrium. Proprietary software solutions have previously enjoyed a privileged position when bidding for government contracts on the basis of misconceptions that this memo puts to rest.

Another exciting benefit is the new influx of talent on the open source scene. You would be amazed at the number of system administrators who learn their trade in the military. The US military is a gigantic operation, with networks all over the world, and it makes a huge investment in professional development for its employees. Most of these employees stay around for a few years, then they return to the private sector and bring their skill sets with them.

With all its high-tech, special purpose operations, the military employs a lot of programmers, and it has been an important incubator of programming ideas since the dawn of the digital era. The legendary Grace Hopper, for instance, who created COBOL, built the first compiler, and popularized the term “debug,” was a career US Naval officer. Even today, the military has a major influence on the programming scene. For a recent issue of Ubuntu User magazine, I had the pleasure of interviewing Ubuntu kernel manager Pete Graner, who got his start as a Linux programmer during a stint with the US Army as part of the Rapid Prototyping Project. More open source in the military will eventually mean more Linux-ready programmers, admins, and users outside of the military.

Joe

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