

Conference Can't Agree on Open Source's Role in Italy

A conference in Pisa, Italy on open-source software in government attracted many public sector participants. Politicians disagree on the role of open source, and policy decisions will be influenced by local interests.

Core Topic

Government: Government Infrastructure & Applications

Key Issue

What infrastructure and architecture issues will affect the operations of government?

On 14 March 2003, the first National Open Source Software congress was held in Pisa, Italy. In Italy, several parliamentary proposals to compel the use of open-source software in government IT systems are under discussion and a government committee has been set up to issue recommendations for an adequate policy. The event was very well attended, mostly by regional and local government executives and vendors. Panelists included politicians who are proposing laws on open-source software, members of the government committee, and representatives from local government and their associations.

The overwhelming numbers participating in this event proved how vigorous the open-source software debate is, both in Italy and across Europe. Overall, however, there is still substantial confusion between the role of:

- Open standards, which facilitate data exchange between applications and reduce the dependence on proprietary software
- Open source software

Pietro Folena (a member of Parliament) and Fiorello Cortiana (a member of the Senate) argued in favor of forcing government organizations to use open-source software wherever possible, because this would allegedly increase democratic participation and even help close the digital divide (although it is unclear how). Both are proposing laws (respectively, Parliamentary Bill 2544 and Senate Bill 1188) that include a controversial article that would force government organizations to use only software programs for which they can freely access and modify the source code and, preferably, open-source software.

The views of three members of the government committee on open-source software cover a broad spectrum.

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Carlo Batini, chairman of the Authority for IT in Public Administration (an independent body that is about to be folded into the Ministry of Technology and Innovation), supports considering including open-source software in government procurement. Administrations must improve their ability to strike deals with suppliers and open-source software can help them put some price pressure on vendors. It can be seen as a viable alternative to proprietary solutions, provided it is judged against the same criteria, including total cost of ownership. Batini does not advocate positive discrimination, but his position promotes R&D on experimenting, validating and formally reusing open-source components in the public sector. He referred to article 25 of law 340/2000, which encourages government organizations to share any software they fully own with other administrations, free of charge. Interestingly enough, although administrations own the custom applications they develop or commission from external service providers, they seem reluctant to share solutions and applications. Enforcing existing laws would go a long way toward improving cost-effectiveness and reusability.

Professor Angelo Raffaele Meo, chairman of the government committee on open-source software and a long-time supporter of free software in Europe, defended open-source software passionately, repeating some of the arguments made by Folena and Cortiana, but adding an important dimension — the role open-source software can play in building a software industry in a country (and continent) being dominated by U.S. technology suppliers.

Professor Alfonso Fuggetta, the third member of the committee, tried to clarify some of the ambiguities and confusion between open standards and open-source software. Supporting the former does not necessarily lead to selecting the latter.

The differences between the three positions reflect the dynamics within the government committee. Several policy options were discussed during the meeting, ranging from inclusion to compulsion, through resource pooling and direct investment (see "Public Sector Needs Balanced Open-Source Software Policy," SPA-19-1912).

These discussions are duplicated in most countries where policies for the adoption of open-source software in government are being considered, issued or enacted. The debate about the total cost of ownership of open-source software is still raging, and the main reason for discriminating in favor of open-source software remains national interest. Proposed regulatory measures and preferred procurement guidelines do not analyze the implications for government IT organizations, total costs,

software selection, licensing and asset management in enough detail.

In the long term, open-source software in government will help enhance reusability and dramatically reduce the license cost for application packages. But in the short to medium term, the main advantage of open source is its positive impact on nurturing local software development communities.

Governments must not undo all the work that they have done to increase their software development maturity by re-expanding internal software development and overcustomizing their applications. Application development should not return to focusing on uncoordinated, small-scale and experimental projects. In the longer term, governments must strike the right balance between relying on the open-source software applications they maintain and relying on packages run by external service providers following an application service provider model.

Bottom Line: The debate around open-source software policies in Europe is still influenced by the desire to recreate a vibrant software industry and decrease reliance on U.S. vendors. Even if some policy makers push for discrimination in favor of open-source software, government organizations must make informed decisions about the suitability of open-source software solutions on a case-by-case basis, balancing preliminary total cost of ownership information against whether solutions can be easily maintained and reused.