

FREE OR FALSE ECONOMY?

Is open source software the route to low-cost application integration, asks Graham Oakes.



Graham Oakes: costs accumulate more evenly over time

Free. There's a word that grabs the attention. In an era of cost cutting, should we all be adopting free and open source software (FOSS)?

There are certainly credible open source options available for application integration: several enterprise service buses, for example, and a variety of other tools. But cheaper than their proprietary equivalents? There's the rub.

My experience is that open source tools aren't necessarily so cheap. Licence costs are only a small part of any project. You have to select the right product, install and configure it, train people to use it, create adaptors onto your existing systems, and manage the organisational change necessary to deliver benefits. These tasks are almost certainly going to cost a lot more than the original licence fees.

And some of those additional costs can be substantial with open source software. For a start, the people who sell open source have to pay their mortgages somehow – the money they don't make on licence fees has to be reflected in the day rates they charge for configuration and support. Over the full ownership lifecycle, open source may be just as expensive as proprietary tools.

But another interesting trend starts to become apparent as you examine that lifecycle. With open source software, the profile of expenditure over time is often very different to that for proprietary software.

For proprietary tools, the licence cost generally comes as a large, upfront payment. Even if the vendor lets you spread this cost through leasing or Software as a Service (SaaS) options, you make a substantial initial commitment.

Open source is different. Costs accumulate more evenly over time. You can start out with low commitment on a pilot. If that works, you can ramp up. If it doesn't work, you can back out. How many organisations have proprietary software that they've paid large licence fees for, yet no longer use? It's scary.

And there's a psychological twist that can make things even worse. Because you're making a big commitment, there's a temptation to beef up the project to justify the cost. To create a business case for this substantial investment, you start to look for additional benefits. Scope creeps.

Yet if there's one thing we know for sure about integration projects, it's this: big projects are far more likely to fail than small ones. Open source software reduces the temptation to fall into this trap.

This is the bottom line: if you choose open source software in order to save licence costs, you're probably making a false economy. But if you choose it in order to support phased implementation and hence reduced risk, there's every chance that significant cost savings will follow.

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