

Free software wave in the Belgian Region Brussels-Capital

Since 2004, the Region of Brussels Capital has been migrating to free/libre/open source software (FLOSS) on the desktop, from regional and communal administration offices to all secondary schools. A GNU/Linux migration on the server and client is planned for the future.

Overview

Since 2004, the Region Brussels Capital, which includes the city of Brussels and surrounding communes, has been involved in migration to free/libre/open source software (FLOSS). First, the Informatics Centre of Brussels (CIRB) started to migrate to FLOSS systems in March 2004.

The Government of the Brussels Region (GRBC) started migrating from the 1st of January 2005. Moving from proprietary to free/libre software is under way in all of the 140 secondary schools of the Region Brussels-Capital. Starting late January 2005, the migration in schools is planned to finish by the end of June 2005.

Meanwhile, migration in the administration of the St Joss commune of Brussels went rapidly, and was completed last year, in June 2004.

Migration Motives

One major reason for adopting FLOSS solutions for the Brussels administration is the functionality and the stability of OpenOffice, which enables widespread deployments of free software on the desktop. In addition, publication and communication towards citizens is made easier with the use of free software thanks to the use of vendor-independent data formats, an easier management of the technical processes and lower costs of free software, according to Brussels officials.

Taking care of staff concerns

Inadequate attention to staff concerns is a major reason for failure and dissatisfaction with any migration. The Brussels migrations have been careful to take staff concerns into account, and in particular they have planned and executed training sessions for all systems during the migration. Personnel training needed between 3 and 6 months: 20 man-days for CIRB, 40 man-days for GRBC, 140 days for two Local Administrations, and 80 man-days for the schools. Users were motivated by the acquisition of a new technology and we persuaded of the advantages of its flexibility.

Training sessions have been organised and executed and now the CIRB acts as a central competence centre in order to help users.

The Informatics Centre of Brussels Region has fully realized the OpenOffice migration project for the Bureautique on behalf of public organisations at regional, local and para-regional levels.

Evaluation and future plans

For Hervé Feuillien, who is the head of the CIRB, OpenOffice offers better interoperability than Microsoft Office, which was previously the main application within the administration of the Brussels Region. Independence of the supplier, freedom of access to the source code for integration in back office systems, and the conversion function to pdf format are also considerable advantages of OpenOffice, according to Feuillien. However, he notes that it is difficult to standardise back-office files in order to get OpenOffice to be fully compatible with other tools (Microsoft Office). This requires creating two back-office versions.

Furthermore, Feuillien notes that compatibility with other organisations that use Microsoft Office is sometimes incomplete, e.g. for big tables or graphical elements within documents. Finally, he regrets the non-existence of an OpenOffice database comparable to Microsoft Access.

While some functionalities need to be improved, but Hervé Feuillien feels that his own experience as a user, like that of the majority of staff in the Brussels administration, is positive. A migration towards GNU/Linux is now due to be carried out, first on the server, and eventually on the client side.

Further Information:

- Region of Brussels - <http://www.bruxelles.irisnet.be/>

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