

Open source software in Estonia: a long-term policy

The Estonian public sector first adopted free/libre/open source software (FLOSS) in 1995 to save costs. Now, it has grown to appreciate the many freedoms such software provides, and all common projects in the Estonian public sector are oriented towards FLOSS, following a policy that is described below.

Overview

When the Estonian public sector decided to adopt Open Source solutions in 1995, it was essentially for reducing the public sector IT expenses: saving costs thanks to zero licence fees. The public sector now runs open source on both server and client. Free/Libre/Open Source Software (FLOSS) is widely used for name and mail servers and for common middleware applications. Today, all common projects in the Estonian public sector are oriented to use Open Source technology.

Policy of promotion

Because it is a major software user, Estonian public sector considers that it has a key role in promoting FLOSS. Thus, the basic software used for the modules of the data exchange layer of national databases (X-Road) is Linux. Besides this, all the software components developed for public access of the X-Road system are based on FLOSS and are available as free software for public sector organisations.

Furthermore, components of the Estonian PKI application software are freely downloadable for all users. Meanwhile, central and local government institutions are encouraged to follow the recommendations issued by the Estonian Informatics Centre (see link below) as well as EU guidelines set out in the "IDA Open Source Migration Guidelines" (see link below). For the Estonian Public Sector, the adoption of Open Standards must follow some criteria, such as:

- the costs of using the standard are low and do not pose an obstacle for its usage;
- the standard has been published;
- the standard has been adopted on the basis of an open decision-making procedure;
- the intellectual property rights to the standard are vested in a non-profit organisation which operates a completely free access policy;
- there are no constraints on the re-use of the standard.

Finally, the advantages of the open source software are to be considered by all central and local government agencies alongside proprietary alternatives.

The example of Tallinn

The Open Source Observatory previously interviewed Mr. Väino Olev, Information and Technology Director, City of Tallinn about the open source policy in the Estonian capital. While being interested in open source issues, the city administration has so far taken a cautious approach to open source applications on desktop PCs. According to Mr. Olev, Tallinn has long outsourced the largest part of IT policy, namely applications and software development. However, Tallinn has been evaluating the adoption of open source software on client PCs through several initiatives.

In particular, in spring 2004 the city of Tallinn launched a pilot project to assess the impact and the possible advantages of migration to OpenOffice. Users were asked to utilise OpenOffice applications for their daily work, as well as to assess the user-friendliness of OpenOffice and its compatibility with Microsoft products already installed on the machines. In order to minimise the need for additional training for users and the inconvenience of switching to new applications, only experienced IT users were involved in this project during pilot phase.

As reported by Väino Olev, the preliminary findings show that users experienced some system compatibility problems, as well as problems with letter templates created with proprietary word processing software. The pilot phase will continue until 2007 when the city administration will take a decision on software licences: either they renew existing licences or they decide to fully migrate to open source platforms.

In addition, the City of Tallinn has close links with the Finnish City of Turku, which in spring 2003 ran a survey to analyse the current infrastructure, including the LAN servers, workstations, peripherals and software, with

a view to establishing a controlled, integrated and cost-efficient open-source-based IT environment for the City of Turku. In December 2003 the City of Turku organised a visit to Tallinn to share with their colleagues lessons learned from Turku experience.

Further Information:

- Estonian Informatics Centre recommendations (Estonian) - <http://www.ria.ee/atp/index.html?id=460>
- IDA Open Source Migration Guidelines - <http://europa.eu.int/idabc/en/document/2623#migration>
- City of Tallinn Government - http://www.tallinn.ee/eng/linna_juhtimine/city_government

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