

MIMO: a working group of French ministries to certify a LibreOffice release

A community-based governance model

A working group at France's main ministries is introducing certified office applications based on free and open source software. This working group, called MIMO (Mutualisation Interministérielle pour une Bureautique Ouverte, or Inter-ministry Mutualisation for an Open Productivity Suite) shows that large and complex public administration organisations can use and adapt open source for their business critical desktop applications.

A second lesson taught by MIMO is how a group of public administration organisations can engage communities of open source developers. The ministries at the same time pool their activities and resources, experiences and deployment projects. The result is a tested, certified, sustainable and interoperable software solution that meets the needs of the public administration.

Since 2005, the main French government ministries have pooled their internal projects on open desktop productivity suites into a single working group, called MIMO (Mutualisation Interministérielle pour une Bureautique Ouverte, or Inter-ministry Mutualisation for an Open Productivity Suite). The objective of this working group is to share skills and resources to define and recommend an interoperable standards-based productivity suite for French public administrations. Pushing free software to replace proprietary software in the French public sector is the primary goal of MIMO, but the group members make a point of doing this properly, by aligning the productivity suite to critical business processes. Initially based on OpenOffice, MIMO has now switched to LibreOffice after Oracle gave the OpenOffice code to the Apache Foundation.

The MIMO working group was created by the Agency for Digital Development in Administration (ADAE) – now DGME (Direction Générale de la Modernisation de l'État) – in 2005, under the governance of the Prime Minister. This agency was in charge of the modernisation of IT in public administrations. Since 2011, MIMO has been controlled by a department, DISIC (Direction Interministérielle des Systèmes d'Information et de Communication), whose mission is to coordinate IT policy in French administrations. DISIC has launched working groups on cloud computing, the organisation and planning of IT systems, and Open Source; each is managed and organised by a single ministry. MIMO and the Open Source working group are managed by the CIO of the Ministry of Culture (Ministère de la Culture). Other Open Source working groups are MIMDB (databases), MIMOS (operating systems) and MIMOG (inventory and deployment).

At its creation, only a small group of ministries were active in the working group, says Christophe Cazin, MIMO representative for the Interior Ministry (Ministère de l'Intérieur). But the project rapidly extended to other departments, since mutualisation and cost reduction were the bases of French public IT policy. Today, nine ministries compose the core of the working group: Energy (Ecologie), Defence (Défense), [Interior](#) (Intérieur), Justice, Agriculture, Culture and Communication, Education and [Finance](#). MIMO's open source office tools can potentially be deployed on 500 000 desktops, where OpenOffice is already installed. The Interior Ministry is responsible for the largest deployment project, with 240 000 desktops.

The primary goal of MIMO was to give the ministries' CIOs and their IT technicians a way to share experience on productivity suites, operating systems and openness in order to speed up desktop modernisation. But MIMO also offered a way to lower IT costs, Cazin explains: "Although MIMO played a political role, CIOs wanted to put pressure on cost as proprietary software installed in

ministries (essentially Microsoft) was too expensive.” He adds: “CIOs also needed to break down the ‘silo approach’ under which each ministry had its own IT policy but never shared this with the others.” MIMO was selected as the place where technicians, CIOs and project managers could share best practices and discuss how to succeed with free software.

“At the beginning the working group was composed of CIOs,” Cazin says, “but some technicians and people responsible for desktop management in each ministry quickly joined MIMO. They brought new experiences and a much larger diversity of topics: governance, technical issues (add-ons, plugins) and change management – which was a key priority. Now the MIMO working group has shifted towards a more collaborative structure and is thus fuelled by projects from other departments and ministries.” Initially focused on ministries at a national level, MIMO is open to local and regional entities to deal with a much broader set of topics and better promote the use of MIMO and free software in every administration.

Christophe Cazin details the Interior Ministry’s first contribution to MIMO: “Within the Ministry, we didn’t have the budget to install Microsoft software on all 240 000 desktops. The Police requested an open solution, so we gave technical approval for StarOffice, which was a good match for their systems. We shared this first experience with others at MIMO – it was our first contribution”.

A compliant LibreOffice snapshot

MIMO has now standardised on the LibreOffice Open Source productivity suite, an alternative to OpenOffice developed by the [Document Foundation](#). The role of MIMO is to validate successive versions of LibreOffice and make them compatible with the IT infrastructure and processes of every member ministry. A single, standard LibreOffice version is validated and approved every six months, according to the roadmap planned by Christophe Cazin and the other MIMO members.

“This is a recommended version, not a mandatory one,” he notes. The ministries can choose to install it or not, since MIMO is not a rule-maker but rather a technical consultant who certifies the software. “MIMO defines a software kit that CIOs are free to use. They can recommend it internally or impose it,” Cazin explains.

To be approved, a version of LibreOffice is submitted to a qualification process operating at ministry level. The software is tested and its compatibility with existing business applications is analysed. If the LibreOffice version passes the tests, it becomes a certified MIMO version. The Interior Ministry has a ten-step qualification process, with tests including compatibility with business applications, macros necessary for the core business, and compatibility with deployment tools. But the whole set of functionalities is not tested at this point, he explains: “The problem is that each ministry has its own qualification process based on different indicators. The version must pass the tests of at least three ministries.”

Final approval is given after the ministries which are members of MIMO agree. The process is slow, because MIMO versions need to be approved unanimously, according to Christophe Cazin, but he cannot remember a serious disagreement that could have prevented a release from being certified. “This process requires considerable caution, as each MIMO version has hundreds of thousands of users. We also have to be careful because the whole Open Source policy could be called into question if software approved by us crashes during critical operations”.

While this method can pinpoint some issues or bugs – which is a real benefit – it can also slow down the implementation. If a single ministry cannot switch to a more recent release because of a compatibility issue, then all the other MIMO members are blocked. It could even happen that the LibreOffice version supported by MIMO, as the only one that suits every ministry, becomes no longer supported by the Document Foundation, Cazin says.

He mentions an issue with the RTF filter in LibreOffice. RTF import is a key process for the Energy Ministry, and as long as the bug exists, MIMO must use an older version of LibreOffice. To get around this, the Finance Ministry has signed a contract to develop a patch for the RTF filter. As with every patch developed by MIMO, this will be contributed to the LibreOffice community.

Deployed at a local level

IT staffers at the ministries are in charge of deploying the MIMO-approved productivity suite, Christophe Cazin says. The ministries are mostly not equipped with centralised automatic software servers, so much of the installation is still done by hand. Each ministry is responsible for deploying the MIMO software, or not, to suit its internal processes.

At the Interior Ministry, for instance, MIMO's open source tools are installed on 98% of the desktops, Cazin says, but some cabinet and local entities still use a Microsoft productivity suite or an older release of OpenOffice.

The working group tries to help local IT agents by providing a kit with documentation and information about MIMO. Agents are also free to join MIMO meetings to meet to share experience with their counterparts in other ministries and to meet technicians and CIOs. The Interior Ministry is currently working on an e-learning platform to train local agents.

A community-based governance model

Although the Ministry of Culture manages the Open Source core group, the MIMO working group is autonomous. “It’s a bottom-up approach,” says Christophe Cazin, “different from the traditional top-down approach in the public sector.”

Any public institution can be involved in MIMO; the only condition is to become an active participant. Each member must agree to stay up to date with a set of basic duties:

- Updates available via website and DVD
- Institutional communication support (Wikipedia, marketing support, logo)
- Patch testing
- Application of security patches
- Links between internal projects that need to interoperate.

Members meet twice a year at least, Christophe Cazin adds, but meetings can be more frequent as new members such as regional entities join the group. Future MIMO meetings will be matched with those of the [contractors](#) in charge of support for Open Source software in French ministries. This €2 million contract, awarded to Capgemini, Alterway and Zenika, covers the support of 350 free and Open Source applications in 15 ministries.

The position of secretary rotates through the group to ease the administrative burden of organising meetings: finding a meeting room, drawing up a schedule and publishing an agenda. This frees up

members to focus on the critical job of examining software. Members communicate through a mailing list.

As MIMO is fuelled by projects, each new participant must identify a key issue, bring it to MIMO and share it with the other members, Christophe Cazin explains.

“Each new participant strengthens the group by bringing an issue, and in return benefits from the group’s work – a win-win relationship. So the number of members is related to the issues addressed in the working group. When a project is finalised and the new deployment of MIMO is being made ready, the member who brought up the issue can still participate, but their commitment tends to be a bit low. What is interesting with MIMO is to work on new issues to relaunch the dynamic process and accelerate the update of the release”. The working group needs real projects to live. “Releasing a new certified MIMO version is our priority, since this is what the members need. They are reluctant to deploy a version that is too old”, he explains.

Relationship with vendors and community

Being responsible for the technical validation of the MIMO version of LibreOffice, the MIMO group has to maintain relations with software vendors, integrators, service providers and community members. Representatives of these groups are often invited to MIMO meetings to provide clarification, to learn about the software development cycle or to see at first hand the richness of an Open Source community. The group serves as a collaborative hub where ministry CIOs and people from Open Source businesses can meet and discuss how to solve MIMO problems. For example, LibreOffice experts including StarXpert, Linagora (two French service providers), Atos (a company providing support to the Finance Ministry), Suse and the Document Foundation were invited to MIMO meetings to learn about the intricacies of the development process and the known interoperability issues. This is the first challenge: collecting information and maintaining relationships.

A second challenge is to create an impact on vendors and community members. Here MIMO can urge the development of patches or the addition of new functions that might improve the software and its interoperability with ministries’ business applications. In this way MIMO can be considered a lobby group – the voice of the main French ministries – which can influence vendors and developers, since it represents the voice of the main French ministries, Christophe Cazin says. “When the Document Foundation developers were too busy to develop a critical patch for our RTF filter – a mission-critical function for many departments – we asked the people in charge of Chorus (the global accounting system based on SAP) to make sure they could work with SAP to patch the global application”.

Since MIMO is autonomous and spread across several ministries it has no separate budget to finance its meetings or development work. This is not necessarily a drawback, Christophe Cazin explains: “Adding money could alter commitments, and vendors would be motivated more by a commercial approach.”

OpenOffice crisis: how to benefit from open communities

The MIMO working group chose to switch to LibreOffice when the OpenOffice community split into two branches:

- one branch, OpenOffice, is supported by Oracle, which inherited OpenOffice when it

acquired Sun. Oracle donated the OpenOffice code and brand to the Apache Foundation, an independent Open Source institution;

- the other branch, LibreOffice, is supported by the Document Foundation.

The OpenOffice community split because of a disagreement with Oracle over the management of the project. Some of the people who criticised Oracle's lack of commitment to OpenOffice development went on to found the Document Foundation. Oracle, however, still owned the OpenOffice name and brand, creating a big headache for MIMO members.

So MIMO met the three parties. "We invited the Document Foundation, Oracle and their respective community, and the Apache Foundation to our meetings," Christophe Cazin says. "It took a year, but we made an informed choice. Although there were still some uncertainties with the Document Foundation, they provided us with a roadmap of LibreOffice whereas Oracle's strategy was very blurry. Their OpenOffice community manager came to see us but was not supported by the company. Apache is a very active community, but doesn't deliver installable software (binaries). And they didn't know how to tackle the problem. We chose LibreOffice because we lacked visibility into the OpenOffice product and its roadmap", he says.

Building on what they had learned from these meetings, some MIMO members also took their own steps to evaluate the sustainability of the new Document Foundation. "We found that in France the OpenOffice community had followed the Document Foundation – but we couldn't have anticipated this", Christophe Cazin explains. "We use social networks like Twitter and Facebook to see what is being said about the products, what the community members are doing. The community is key, because it is the foundation of an Open Source product like LibreOffice. When we saw that the OpenOffice community was not so active and had not released a milestone for a year and a half, no update, we took the final decision to go with LibreOffice."

Extra links

- [An RTF patch contributed to the LibreOffice Community](#)
- [A Windows patch in which the MIMO working group was involved](#)