



# Source of freedom

AS WELL AS BEING COST-EFFECTIVE, OPEN SOURCE SOFTWARE CAN GIVE END USERS MORE CONTROL OVER THEIR INFORMATION

BY CHARLES WRIGHT

As Bill Robertson talks about data mining, modelling and business intelligence systems, you can't help but think that he's surely in the wrong place to be trading expensive acronyms of the enterprise computing world.

You don't need that high-tech geographic information system he's also working on to show that Griffith, in the NSW Riverina where he works as IT manager for large private company De Bortoli Wines, which is less than a global giant, is somewhat peripheral to the IT world. His entire IT department amounts to seven people, serving 200 users spread around Australia.

Yet Robertson rattles on about multidimensional databases and operational risk-management software – applications generally associated with larger corporations. “Oh yes,” he remembers, as he counts them off. “We're also seed-funding a MOLAP application called Palo. It's like pivot tables on steroids.” MOLAP stands for “multidimensional online analytical processing” – a handy capability, but surely not a cheap one.

De Bortoli's managing director is beginning to wish that Robertson wouldn't talk like this. Not because it tends to make you giddy, but because he's beginning to regard these projects as a substantial competitive advantage.

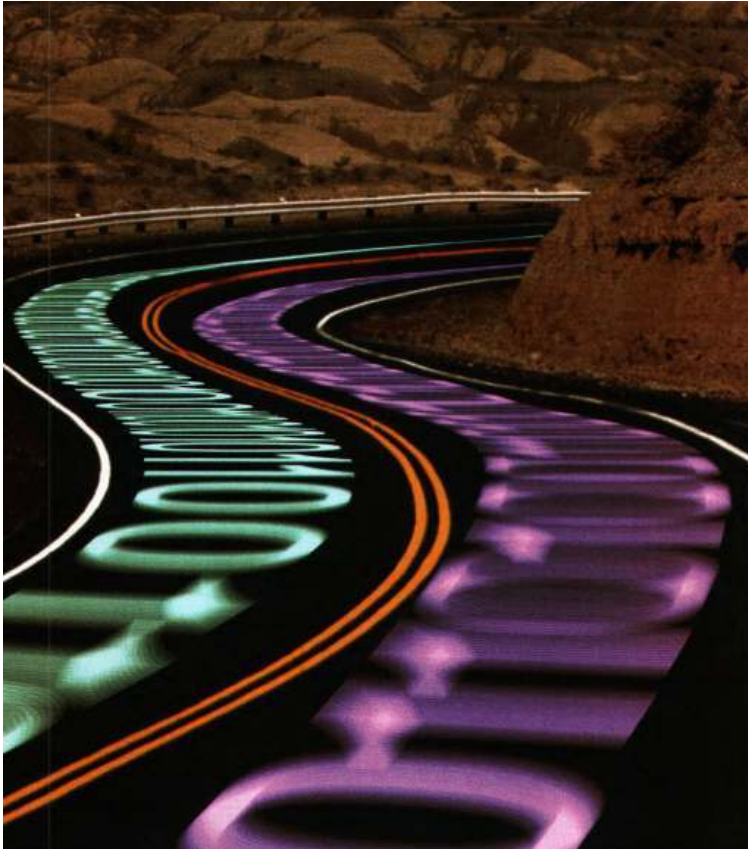
His reticence may be based on the happy circumstance that all this jargon is not accompanied by well-known brands such as Oracle, SAP and Microsoft, and the costly consultancies that inevitably follow like suckerfish. Robertson's department is producing equivalent results, but spending significantly less than the metrics dictate IT generally should, as a percentage of turnover.



Welcome to the world of open source software, as opposed to the proprietary software that provides large and enduring revenue streams for Bill Gates and Larry Ellison. Open source software writers are largely anonymous, inspired by a philosophy that has traditionally had less to do with profit than with a shared distaste for “software hoarding” or “predatory vendor lock-in”: corporate ownership of software and its exploitation via increasingly outrageous licensing fees. Or perhaps they are inspired by a desire to impress their peers, and possibly even genuine altruism.

Gates equates it with communism. Others have branded it part of the “gift economy”. But increasingly, open source software is seen as playing a respectable role in free-market economics.

There is a unique and fruitful symbiosis between those who develop and service open source software and those, like De Bortoli Wines, who use it. Customers share with developers and other customers in the creation, ownership and outcomes of the software they use. And while they make



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substantial savings, an increasing number of open source providers are notching up healthy profits.

Even IBM has hitched its wagon to the open source train, favouring moves towards Linux from its proprietary AIX system.

For many business users, the attraction is financial. Robertson hastens to repeat the open source mantra, "Free as in free speech, not free as in free beer". Though he points out that some of the savings the company makes on licences are pushed into support contracts and on-site training, companies that deploy this sort of "free" software still make considerable savings.

In south-east Queensland, for instance, Toowoomba Shire Council calculated the licence fees it would have to pay Microsoft for running its web content-management system on Windows, SQL Server and IIS (internet information server) to be \$A250,000 per year. And that would have given it a licence for only 15 users, rather than the 90 seats the council needed.

Rather, the council went searching on SourceForge.net, the central repository of open source projects that – at the time of publication – listed 152,684 separate applications, and more than 1.6 million users.

The council's IT department rolled out an application called Joomla!, which is a powerful, flexible content-management system

that can run anything from a personal website to online newspapers, magazines and complex corporate portals.

Joomla! allows the council to run its own site and about 10 others. The simplicity of Joomla! means that, rather than having sites managed by IT professionals, the departments directly involved edit and administer them, which saves even more money.

True to the spirit of the open source movement, when the council developed enhancements (including a Google plug-in module that allows users to scan the search engine directly from the home page, rather than installing a Google tool bar, which would have raised the potential for problems), they released the code for other users to share. That spirit can make the upgrade cycle of proprietary software look painfully slow.

Samuel Moffatt, a web services support officer with the Toowoomba Shire Council, points out another use for Joomla! It integrates with the Novell eDirectory tree, via LDAP (the "lightweight directory access protocol" that email and other programs use to look up information from a server), to provide single sign-on services for users. Rather than having them tying up support resources by ringing up and asking for their password, the system automatically logs them in when they start their computers. The council also uses another open source tool called "dotproject", for corporate performance management and project management.

As it happens, cost is not the reason for Bill Robertson's enthusiasm. In the case of De Bortoli Wines, the motivation for embracing open source was the concept of "data sovereignty".

"For us," says Robertson, "it's the same rationale as for the Australian National Archives. De Bortoli Wines is a family business that takes a long-term view. We want to control our own destiny. We want to be able to open a document >



> in WordPerfect or Lotus 1-2-3 or whatever we choose, in five, 10 or 20 years.”

Robertson says that companies that produce files in proprietary formats, from Microsoft Word or Excel or Oracle databases, don't have ultimate control over them. “The only way you can have ownership of your own data is to make sure the formats are genuinely open,” he says, “and not encumbered by patents, where something has binary data that is embedded in it.”

His view is that Microsoft's recent change of heart, under which it aligned its Office 2007 format with the Open XML standard, is little more than lip service, and that its proprietary code still has Microsoft-specific formatting which to a large extent defeats the purpose. He is supported in his opinion by the Japanese government, which in July became the first government to give preference to software that adheres to open standards, and inter-operates easily with other software.

Data sovereignty is becoming an increasingly strong driver for open source operating systems and applications, and it can bob up in unexpected ways. Alan Lazarus, a partner in Melbourne-based

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boutique outsourcing HR and recruitment firm OnCall People Solutions, went looking for an alternative to proprietary systems midway through 2006, when the hard drive on his Macintosh computer crashed, taking his digital photography collection with it. Although Lazarus was able to recover the images, he could not recover all the metadata, the details of camera settings, dates and other details.

“I'd been getting irritated about Microsoft's Genuine Advantage programs for Windows and Office, which continually forced me to validate the software I'd already bought,” Lazarus says. “And although we'd bought licences for several copies of Office for the Mac, it got angry every time we tried to run more than one copy.

“I realised that I was quite nervous about Microsoft's Digital Rights Management policies and proprietary file formats. It seemed possible that at some point in the future, I wouldn't be able to access my own data, just as I'd lost the information with my photographs.”

The version of Linux he adopted is called Ubuntu. Funded by a powerful friend of the open source movement, South African IT multimillionaire Mark Shuttleworth, Ubuntu has become increasingly successful in achieving its aim of producing a version of the open source operating system that non-technically minded people can easily install and use. In its latest release, version 7.04, it is arguably a respectable competitor to Microsoft Windows Vista. And featuring the Beryl accelerated desktop, it is even more visually appealing than Vista.





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Ubuntu ships with a powerful array of open source software, including the free open source equivalent to Microsoft Office, OpenOffice. Michael Williams, whose company Better Access tutors open source applications, says the OpenOffice suite of applications has become ever more powerful over the past couple of years, and users frequently tell him that they can't believe it's free.

Although Lazarus' decision to look at open source alternatives wasn't inspired by cost saving, installing Ubuntu and using OpenOffice did result in substantial economies for his company.

Ubuntu's hardware requirements, for one thing, are much less demanding than for Vista. Lazarus started playing with Linux on a discarded PC that had proved to be too slow for Microsoft's more recent operating systems.

That's another vital consideration for Robertson – a concept he calls “control over deployment options”. “You risk being locked in where an application dictates the operating system,” he says, “and the operating system dictates the rest of your infrastructure.” Although that's a good business move from the supplier's view, it's not always in the customer's best interest.

Robertson doesn't have any philosophical objection to Microsoft, describing it as a good company with good products. He's seen too many monopolies in the short history of computing that either abruptly folded or faded, among them Lotus and WordPerfect. He makes the point that the axiom, “Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM”, which was once a common rubric in the IT industry, lost its force some time ago.

It's an inspirational thought for Con Zymaris, managing director of Melbourne-based Cybersource, who has been Australia's most public cheerleader for open source. In 1998 he posited the view that open source – an “open and self-correcting system” – would eventually overtake proprietary software as the dominant force in the industry.

So far, the process has been a little slower than Zymaris anticipated, but the latest arithmetic looks favourable. “A company can now buy a viable business desktop PC for a hardware cost of \$350,” he explains. “But putting a proprietary operating system and office suite on it costs between \$1000 and \$1500. A business can get all that functionality for nothing by using Linux and OpenOffice.”

Even if you don't live in Griffith, the figures are compelling. ■

#### FURTHER READING

**In search of the Holy Grail** by Richard Naish, *E.learning Age*, March 2007;  
**Open Source Portals: Frustration & Promise** by Janus Boye and Tony Byrne, *EContent*. Jul/Aug 2006; **The Open Source Option** by Marcia Jedd, *AIIIM E-Doc Magazine*. Jan/Feb 2007; **Unleashing the power of open source in document management** by Seth Gottlieb and Sebastian Wohlrapp, online at [www.optaros.com/en/publications/white\\_papers\\_reports](http://www.optaros.com/en/publications/white_papers_reports)

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