Chapter I

The Migration of Public Administrations Towards Open Source Desktop Software:
Recommendations from Research and Validation through a Case Study

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Abstract

Several public administrations (PA) have expressed an increasing interest in open source software in the past few years and are currently migrating to open source software on the desktop. Given the large impact such a migration has on the organization, there is a need for learning from the experiences of previous migrations.

In this chapter, we deduct a number of recommendations and lessons learned from previous research conducted on the migration of PAs to open source desktop software. Next, we describe a case study on the migration of the Brussels-Capital Region towards OpenOffice.org, and compare their experiences to these recommendations. In general, our results are quite consistent with previous findings, but also indicate that additional research is still required in order to create a set of best practices—based on empirical research—for the migration towards open source software on the desktop.

Introduction

In the past few years, open source software has become a viable solution for organizations, and is being increasingly adopted. This increased popularity has been enabled by the fact that open source vendors (e.g., RedHat and SUSE) and traditional software vendors (e.g., IBM and HP) provide reliable support for open source solutions. Studies indicate, however, that organizations are primarily using open source software for server applications (see e.g., Dedrick & West, 2003; Lundell, Lings, & Lindqvist, 2006; Ven & Verelst, 2006; Wichmann, 2002). This can be explained by at least two factors. First, open source software has a strong tradition in developing server-side applications. Given this background, most open source projects are situated in horizontal domains such as Internet applications, developer tools, and technical tools (Fitzgerald, 2005). Thanks to the maturity level of most well-known open source server software (e.g., Apache and Linux), these packages are widely diffused through organizations. Successful open source software for the desktop has surfaced only recently with applications such as OpenOffice.org, Mozilla Firefox, and Mozilla Thunderbird. Second, a migration towards open source software on servers is far less disruptive for members of an organization than a migration at the desktop. In case a Web server running Microsoft IIS is replaced by the Apache Web server, or the operating system for an ERP system is changed from Unix to Linux, end users in the organization will not (or hardly) be affected by this change. A migration from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org will, however, affect all end users in an organization, possibly even impacting productivity.

Recently, there has been an increased interest in migrations towards open source software on the desktop. Interestingly, this trend is primarily driven by public administrations (PA). In fact, PAs can be considered pioneers in the adoption of open source desktop software. At first sight, this is actually quite remarkable. In the past, it was frequently assumed that PAs are restricted by their organizational structure, and thus limited in their innovative behavior (Nye, 1999; Moon & Bretschneider,

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