

Chapter 2.25

Understanding the Development of Free E–Commerce / E–Business Software: A Resource–Based View

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the development of open source software supporting e-commerce (EC) or e-business (EB) capabilities. This entails a case study within a virtual organization engaged in an organizational initiative to develop, deploy, and support free/open source software systems for EC or EB services, like those supporting enterprise resource planning. The objective of this study is to identify and characterize the resource-based software product development capabilities that lie at the center of the initiative, rather than the software itself, or the effectiveness of its operation in a business enterprise. By learning what these resources are, and how they are arrayed into product development capabilities, we can provide the knowledge needed to understand what

resources are required to realize the potential of free EC and EB software applications. In addition, the resource-based view draws attention to those resources and capabilities that provide potential competitive advantages and disadvantages to the organization in focus.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Many companies face a problem in determining how to best adopt and deploy emerging capabilities for e-commerce and e-business services. This study employs a *resource-based view* of the organizational system involved in developing open source EC/EB software products or application systems. This chapter examines the

GNUenterprise.org (hereafter GNUe) project as a case study. The analysis and results of the case study focus attention on characterizing an array of social and technical resources the developers must mobilize and bring together in the course of sustaining their free EC/EB software development effort. Free EC/EB results from applying free software development concepts, techniques, and tools (Williams, 2002) to supplant those for open source software supporting EC and EB (cf. Carbone & Stoddard, 2001).

This study does not focus on the software functionality, operation, or development status of the GNUe free EC/EB software, since these matters are the focus of the GNUe effort, and such details can be found on that project's Web site. Similarly, it

does not discuss what EC/EB application packages are being developed or their operational status, though the categories of software packages can be seen in Exhibit 1, presented later. Instead, the resource-based view (Acedo et al., 2006; Barney, 2001) that is the analytical lens employed in this chapter helps draw attention to a broader array of resources and institutionalized practices (i.e., resource-based capabilities) (Oliver, 1997) that may better characterize the socio-technical investments that provide a more complete picture of the non-monetized costs associated with the development of free/open source software (FOSS), as well as possible competitive advantages and disadvantages (Hoopes et al., 2003). Such a characterization might then eventually inform other

Exhibit 1. Overview of the GNUe and its GNUe software (Source: Retrieved April 2006, from <http://www.gnuenterprise.org/>)

GNU Enterprise
Software for your Business

Bringing Freedom back to Free Enterprise

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GNUe: An Overview

GNU Enterprise (GNUe) is a meta-project which is part of the overall GNU Project. GNUe's goal is to develop enterprise-class data-aware applications as Free software. GNUe is itself comprised of several subprojects:

Developer Tools

Firstly, GNUe is a set of tools, such as a data-aware user forms interface, a reporting system and an application server, which provide a development framework for enterprise information technology professionals to write or customise data-aware applications and deploy them effectively across large or small organizations. The GNUe platform boasts an open architecture and easy maintenance. It gives users a modular system and freedom from being stuck with a single-source vendor. GNUe supports multi-language interfaces, non-ASCII character sets, and most popular database systems.

ERP Packages

GNUe is also a set of packages written using the tools, to implement a full Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system. From human resources, accounting, customer relationship management and project management to supply chain or e-commerce, GNUe can handle the needs of any business, large or small. GNUe supports multi-currency processing (including euro support).

Note: Packages are not as far along in the development cycle as the tools. Most are still in the planning stages.

The Community

A general community of support and resources for developers writing applications using the GNUe Tools (whether part of the 'official' GNUe Packages or not). It is designed to collect Enterprise software for the GNU system in a single location (much like the GNOME project collects Desktop software). GNUe is a Free Software project (released under the GNU General Public License) with a corps of volunteer developers around the world working on GNUe projects. This provides the added benefits of easy internationalization of applications. The project is working to provide a worldwide GNUe community, allowing everyone who is involved in the project access to other talented business information technology professionals.

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