

Enterprise Open Source Is Not Just the Code

What open source has to offer human resource management?

After infiltrating corporate operating systems and middleware products, open source software has in recent years moved into enterprise applications with great success.

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Within Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and Customer Relationship Management (CRM), many companies have enjoyed a blossoming of open source software. By harnessing the collective wisdom, experiences, expertise, and requirements, the model has ensured that needs have been rapidly met while the open source code has provided the wanted flexibility and low cost. Everything made possible through the Internet, which has enabled easy zero-cost distribution and improved global collaboration. By leveraging large user communities the software products have grown fast and made it possible for open source companies to challenge major proprietary vendors.

Up till now Human Resource Management (HRM) has been an area of development and use of open source software overlooked by most. This seems due to existing barriers and special aspects that have made entering this area troublesome and have kept open source HRM systems from penetrating mainstream IT. However, if these barriers are passed and the special aspects are kept in mind when developing a system, open source software and HRM is a great match and the benefits for HRM are numerous.

Let's first briefly look at the main factors that have kept open source software from breaking through to HRM. What has kept many companies from looking the way of open source software has often been the fear of troublesome installation, user unfriendliness, and lack of support.

The users of Human Resource Management are typically non-IT professionals with little or no knowledge of the more technical standards and specifications of the software. They simply demand a well-featured product, easy to install and use. A focus on user friendliness is therefore crucial when developing an open source HRM system. So is community management. Having a large and active community shows the skeptical user that he/she can get support if needed and that an effort is being made to improve the product. Last but not least, when developing HR software, supreme programming skills alone are not enough. A clear understanding of the human resource field is essential.

It will be a constant challenge, but if these things are managed properly, HR professionals will benefit from open source just like other individuals and companies are benefiting because of successfully handled projects.

The Benefits

So exactly how can HRM benefit from open source? Many of the benefits are closely related to the user community and collaboration around an open source HRM system. Developing and managing this community is crucial as I said. This continuously evolving collective knowledge base holds a positive consequence: speed of innovation. When delivering free open source software the number of users can grow fast. And because of the speed with which users, developers, and companies can post bugs, feature requests, documentation, and patches the product lifecycle will be shortened considerably. Through this model functionality is constantly being improved and product stagnation avoided. And because money isn't wasted on expensive sales and marketing campaigns, more money and resources can be put into product development.

Evaluating products is easier with open source. Many proprietary vendors make the user sign agreements that prevent him/her from publishing benchmarks on their products. No such requirement will be imposed by open source vendors. There's no interest in suing the community of users, stakeholders, and partners who can help improve the product.

Another benefit is improved flexibility and possible customization. Because no two HR departments are created equal, the consensus is that HR software must be customizable. Companies and HR departments throughout the world have different standards and procedures and the open source code approach makes the system more flexible. Anyone is allowed to modify the code for a system to match the specific needs of the company. Furthermore the approach gives control over the HRM implementation that proprietary closed source HRM restricts and the user avoids vendor lock-in.

Open source also enables better possibilities for support services. Any software or consultancy with the expertise, the resources, and the will can elect to provide whatever level of support it feels the market will bear. With complete access to the source code nobody has the edge that was previously only available to the owners of the proprietary software. Support is now open to competition and the quality of support is open to market forces. This will also be a benefit in a way that it makes space for local people with clear knowledge of local business standards and culture to take the task on providing support for the products.

It's been said many times before, but it's worth mentioning again. A major benefit of open source software is the financial impact. Many SMEs simply can't afford the price of proprietary HRM software. Open source gives every company the right and possibility to have its own HRM system.

The financial benefits are often what begin the exploration of open source software. After adoption the primary benefit might shift to flexibility or simply the acknowledgement of the products' high usability and superior quality. In the near future this will also be the case for open source HRM systems. Open source software is neither a religion nor an ideology. It is however a very pragmatic way of developing software in today's rapidly changing environment. An important question often asked by HR professionals and their managers about a new system is: "Will



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this software make or save us money?" Developed and managed properly, open source HRM software will do both.

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