



By Brian Bakker

THE QUESTION: Do we pay the penalties and switch over to OSS, or do we continue with the existing supplier, ponders Vusi Magagula, CIO of SITA

will, the reality of open source is analogous to that seen in a business decision.

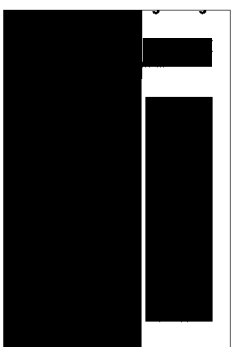
When Brainstorm visited Vusi Magagula, then newly appointed CIO of the State IT Agency (SITA), earlier in the year his attitude toward open source could only be described as bullish. His outlook on open source software (OSS) seemed to be guided by utterances of his ultimate boss: the minister of public service & administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi.

More recently, however, his approach has become more conservative – encouraged no doubt by the results of a recent internal software audit (covered elsewhere in this supplement). “We discovered that we fell short on current licences in the proprietary environment, which introduces another challenge: do we pay the penalties and switch over to OSS; or do we continue with the existing supplier but then look at their strategy regarding open source,” he says.

“I’ll be open about this, one of those suppliers is Microsoft but it’s not limited to that company. At the end of the day it will be a business decision as to whether we are staying with in the current proprietary world, based on their strategy for OSS or whether we migrate the whole of SITA into the Linux environment.”

MODERATION

Despite what staunch advocates of open source in government may believe about Magagula moderating his approach, it is merely an illustration that current commitments must play a role any decision about OSS deployment. One person who could possibly be distressed by the apparent changing attitudes at



SITA is Nhlanhla Mabaso, manager of the open source centre at the CSIR's Meraka Institute.

He was present at the original interview with Magagula and was, understandably enthusiastic about SITA's plans to embrace OSS. "I think it is great and needs to be done," he noted at the time.

Still it is not all doom and gloom for Mabaso because the momentum behind OSS is unstoppable, if recent research by BMI-TechKnowledge (BMI-T) is to be believed. In a report entitled – SA GNU Linux and Open Source Software and Services Market 2004-2009, author, Roy Blume, states: "Penetration within the public sector is clearly a key driver for the adoption of OSS, free software and GNU/Linux."

The National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI) Open Software Working Group published a document in January 2002, which was updated in July 2004. According to Mabaso, the recommendations contained therein are reflected in those of the Presidential National Commission (PNC) as well as in statements made by Fraser-Moloketi and government luminaries.

The most recent iteration of the document (www.naci.org.za/floss/) reveals the underlying motives of government in the promotion of Free/Libre & Open Source Software (FLOSS). The document refers: "... an attractive vision is the central role FLOSS might play in establishing a vibrant, relevant and growing indigenous ICT industry in South Africa, particularly via small, local companies (individuals or start-ups)."

GROWING MOMENTUM

Interestingly, this political will has already translated into a variety of initiatives involving OSS. BMI-T lists, among others: the Digital Doorway project; the Open School project; Culturally Adaptive Software; the

COMMITTED:
Meraka Institute's Nhlanhla Mabaso is understandably enthusiastic about Vusi Magagula's plans to embrace OSS



"At the end of the day it is..."

photo Cindy Ellis

open source school management system; the Cultureware project; and the Go Open Source campaign.

The dialogue has also resulted in the use of OSS within government – a recent example being the SARS decision to run its SAP system on Linux. Mabaso lists a number of departments and state-run institutions that are either investigating the use of OSS or have already adopted it.

Among these are: Statistics SA, the Department of Communications; Correctional Services; Public Enterprises; Mineral & Energy Affairs; and Department of Trade & Industry (DTI). "It's almost like: give me a department and I'll tell you a story," he says.

By way of illustration: "The CIO at the DTI is looking at open source internships, which is interesting and tackles the challenge and the problems from the other end. He's saying: 'let us look at mass certification, at increasing the numbers of interns and trainees by orders of magnitude'.

"The Department of Foreign Affairs, for instance, has been motivating the use of OSS in the African Parliament. And then look at the provincial governments, you find some amazing things," he adds.

THE ROLE OF SITA

SITA's role in the adoption of open source in government is twofold: firstly it is obligated to support OSS in government; and, secondly, it needs to internally evaluate OSS and adopt it where feasible. The two functions are distinct with Magagula, as CIO, responsible for the latter while Joe Mazibuko, head of SITA's professional services division, provides the support infrastructure upon which other government entities can call for assistance.

Magagula says: "When I arrived last year noticed a tendency of combining services SITA offers to government with those it delivers internally. As a CIO I'm here to capacitate SITA to deliver to government and, therefore, we have to separate the two.

"Hence, you'll find we've split everything in two – even procurement policies: there's procurement for ICT in government

and there's procurement for SITA internally. However, with SITA being a regulatory body for ICT in government we shouldn't be selfish and do it all for ourselves. We should go out on tender and to get a list of approved OSS implementers on behalf of government.

"We will then select one of those and partner with them to roll out OSS within SITA. Then those suppliers can actually start rolling out OSS in government according to standards set by SITA," he adds.

However, as an ICT service provider, SITA has access to an extensive skills base not necessarily available to other government departments and entities. Logic dictates that this would result at least some 'follow-the-leader' behaviour but Mabaso doesn't believe it will.

MARKET FORCES

"Many government entities are already using open source and they've made the decision on which distribution is best suited to their specific needs," he says. The implication is that different departments will select an approved supplier qualified to support the distribution they have already chosen.

Mabaso also notes that the choice may have been dictated by support structures available in the regions within which organisations are located. "If, based on the available support structures, there is a prevailing distribution in the Eastern Cape, for example, that's the one that is going to have to be selected. [That's] the argument against a mono-culture."

Magagula takes it further: "Remember we've split SITA internal from service provision. The SITA service provider will be able to support all distributions. We are also not suggesting that we are now going to compete with the industry," he stresses.

Despite all the good news he has heard, CSIR's Mabaso is still disappointed in the penetration levels of OSS within government. "Looking at the report that was done for the Presidential National Commission, it's very low compared to where it should be ... it looks like it's under 30 percent," he says.

He is quick to point out that such levels

are also very difficult to quantify, a view supported by BMI-T: "Predicting how quickly the market will evolve is particularly difficult. However, BMI-T estimates that given the political desire to move away from proprietary software monopoly, visibility in the marketplace and recognition of the quality of a number of free software products will drive external services spending in GNU/Linux and free software."

Mabaso believes the nature of OSS licensing, that it is downloadable from the Internet available and freely distributable, contributes to the inaccuracy of estimates. "A lot of the OSS implementations don't need executive approval because they are not necessarily budget-based," he says.

A TENDER PROCESS

In discussing SITA's internal process Magagula refers frequently to a tender process and a request for proposals was issued in September. "The tender is calling for suppliers who would have an interest in implementing FOSS within government," he says.

After the tendering process is complete SITA will make the 'business decision' mentioned earlier on whether or not it will replace proprietary operating systems internally.

Assuming that it succumbs to government pressure rather than that exerted by certain private sector organisations, it selects a Linux distribution and, subsequently, a supplier to assist with migrating its 3000-plus desktop systems.

"[This process] is why we are being cautious, saying 18 months rather than six or twelve months. Because those are business decisions and at this point in time I cannot tell you which way it's going to go," says Magagula.

The difficulties faced by SITA are not unique, as is clearly illustrated in a recent report published by Bridges.org. Written by Philipp Schmidt, deputy director of bridges.org, the 'Comparison Study of Free/Open Source and Proprietary Software in an African Context' notes that the choice of software raises a number of deep (and often divisive) issues.

“Penetration within the public sector is clearly a key driver for the adoption of OSS, free software and GNU/Linux.”

– Roy Blume

“A polarised debate draws on complex cost-benefit analyses and philosophical underpinnings. Well-intentioned public-access projects – some ignorant of what is at stake, and others overwhelmed by the magnitude of the discussion – get caught in the middle. And decision-makers are urged to choose.” The report can be found on the Bridges.org website but perhaps Magagula and others in his position will take comfort from the conclusions drawn.

“It is difficult to resist the appeal of con-

cepts such as information sharing, collaboration, and freedom of knowledge, which are foundations of the FOSS movement.

Then again, the report’s next statement confuses the issue somewhat: “But in Africa, it is important to remember that FOSS is just one software option in the larger ICT toolbox.” According to any open source advocate you talk to, FOSS is a whole array of tools. Perhaps Schmidt meant to say Linux rather than FOSS, in which case the statement would be true. The reports con-

tinues: “And ICT is merely a means to an end that is most valuable when it supports broad social and economic goals, such as facilitating healthcare delivery, making small businesses more competitive, or improving education and government services. “In this context, the discussion of software choices necessarily moves from philosophical underpinnings to pragmatic concerns.” One imagines this is what Magagula means when he says it will be a ‘business decision’.

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