



Technology: Systems Software

by Graham Bird

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Business needs open standards for applications



Push suppliers to provide greater interoperability, says Graham Bird

There are few open standards that enable interoperability - and hence free flow of information - between business applications.

For the open systems platform, and some of the middleware, a large body of work has been done that has minimised the problem of common IT standards. But for organisations striving to have access to integrated information - providing information when it is required, in the form it is required, on the device of choice - the story is different.

Declaration of independence

The Open Group has established a "declaration of independence" to address this lack of interoperable standards. This online petition is designed to demonstrate to companies in the IT supply industry that there is a groundswell of opinion in support of the development and use of open standards.

A proprietary IT system may be a cheaper and easier way to deploy applications. Indeed, it should be - but only if the organisation deploying it has no need to interact electronically with suppliers, partners and customers.

Also, if the organisation's business is relatively stable, does not need to evolve, and is unlikely to need to get data into and out of the proprietary product, a proprietary system may suffice. But if your business is evolving, what was OK yesterday does not meet today's challenges.

So we need to change our processes to support the business, and our information systems must change and evolve in step.

Businesses need information to flow in a secure, reliable and timely manner, which means that we need to be able to extract, massage, integrate, and use the data we stored in the past, when we had little or no knowledge of how we might need to use it in the future. The only way to do that cost effectively is for systems to be easier to integrate; the only way to do that is to use open standards.

The smart software providers are now engineering their applications and providing open mechanisms for data exchange.

They provide integration points for their systems and applications. They make it easier for information systems to respond and evolve to meet changing business needs. They are active in delivering systems that are built on open standards - the very best of these suppliers will certify that their products are open and stand behind them in the event of problems. They are focused on solving the problems of their customers. They compete on quality of implementation, on performance, on functionality.

Clinging to the old ways

But some companies cling to the old ways - proprietary systems - in the mistaken belief that it is the best way to gain and retain customers. Differentiation, as used in their business model, locks in customers, generating higher revenues and profits, making life easier for the IT supplier.

IT is one of the few remaining industries to believe that differentiation on price or on proprietary solutions are the only ways to compete.

As the buyer, the choice is yours, and IT suppliers - at least the ones of the old ways - will only change their behaviour when you demand that they do so. And there is only one way to make your demands real: redirect your money to products, services and suppliers which demonstrate that they support open standards.

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