



OPEN-SOURCE: THE E-CAPITALIST'S SECRET WEAPON

We live in interesting times. The Internet, an inherently technical and sociological phenomenon, has caused a business revolution. Suddenly we have new capabilities for around-the-clock business, and e-Business is demanding a new set of expectations. As if to get back at the engineering world for imposing such stringent new rules, e-Business is pushing the limits of computing platforms. Systems must be scalable to millions of users, extremely reliable, and always available. They must interact with other systems according to industry-standard specifications. They must move from conception to hard launch in less than six months.

These systems are no longer back-end processing tools: They are the business interface to the world. A single glitch can lose a transaction and with it a valuable customer. Faced with the Internet earthquake and new customer demands, **software development methodology is up for a healthy dose of reengineering.**

Open Source is the realization that building innovative software can be achieved only by standing on the shoulders of giants, that true reliability can be obtained only through substantial peer review, and that **selling software without providing source code is akin to selling cars with the hood welded shut.**

Truly standards-compliant software, where one can easily swap out a product for its competitor, provides some safety. In addition, software must be quickly and easily patched when a malfunction is detected. Software, once acquired, must be licensed for unlimited, indefinite usage, for fear that an abrupt license alteration might stop a business dead in its tracks. The closed-source process fares poorly in this new context. Competing in this fast arena means taking risks on technologies from vendors. If they fail to deliver, go under, or are acquired by companies with no real interest in the product, customers can be stranded with no support.

Closed-source software relies on a product

©2000 ROBERTA. RIPPES



“In today’s fast-moving arena, software can make or break an e-Business. And it’s in this arena where the closed-source process fares poorly.”

model. With vendors dependent on recurring sales of their software, there is little motivation to comply with standards that may easily allow a customer to switch to a competing product. Vendors tend to lock customers in with “improvements” to the standard. **RDBMS vendors are famous for this**, where SQL implementations differ widely from one vendor to another.

Closed-source disallows users from altering the software they have purchased. The user is left repeatedly paying for bug fix upgrades with a support service that amounts to little more than sympathy: “We really feel bad about this bug, but we won’t have it fixed for another six months.”

Open Source software relies on a service model, with a vendor focus on maintenance and support. Often, multiple providers offer support for the same piece of software. Sendmail Inc. obviously supports Sendmail, as do Red Hat and Linuxcare. Public availability of the source code makes for faster bug fixes. The reusability of existing components allows for more advanced innovation. In short, the Open Source approach removes software lock-in. With these realities, the “idealistic” freedom of Open Source starts to make solid business sense. 