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# UK Government To Save £600m With Open Source

- 25-02-2009
- **By** Andrew Donoghue

## **New support for open source from the UK government could lead to big savings as long as proprietary vendors don't hijack it, say commentators**

The UK government has announced that open source could be key to helping the public sector cut IT costs during the downturn with some commentators claiming savings could be as much as £600m a year.

In a statement released late on Tuesday, the government announced what it claimed was a new policy on open source that should "ensure maximum value for money for taxpayers".

The new policy is a reaction to the development of open source and the government's approach to IT, said the minister for digital engagement, Tom Watson: "The world of technology has moved on hugely since we last set out our thinking on Open Source, which is why it was so important to update our policy," he said.

The decision to encourage greater use of open source was also based on greater support for community development by IT vendors, he said: "Open Source products are more competitive and have become easier to include in business, and major players in the IT industry now support the use of Open Standards."

In fact, most leading vendors have been selling or open source products for several years, including the industry stalwarts such as IBM, HP, Sun and Dell.

Microsoft, which supplies IT to numerous government departments and public sector organisations, has only recently begun to work with the open source community and support truly open standards.

Open source providers and the UK open source community welcomed the announcement, saying that as long as the government doesn't fall prey to proprietary versions of the open source message, it could save large amounts of money on public sector IT budgets.

"While countries such as France have embraced open source technology in

government organisations, the UK has taken a considered approach since first embracing open source in 2004 in order to be certain that both the technology and economics are proven," said Steve Shine, European vice president, worldwide operations, for open source database provider Ingres.

"Looking at cost savings that have been achieved by companies and governments all over the world, it's estimated that the UK Government could reduce its annual IT bill by at least £600m a year if more open source software was used as part of an effective procurement strategy," Shine added.

The government has to be careful, however, as the open source term has been hijacked by some proprietary providers, said Mark Taylor, founder of the UK Open Source Consortium and chief executive of government accredited open source company Sirius Corporation plc.

"They need to be careful as to whose definition of 'Open Source' they listen to," said Taylor. "Unfortunately the term has been distorted to mean pretty much anything, including entirely proprietary in all but name. Real 'Open Source' is identical to 'Free Software' and will bring all the theoretical benefits to the UK Public Sector if the Government have the courage to follow through and not listen to the FUD."

Nick Mailer, director and co-founder of open source hosting company The Positive Internet Company said that this was not the first time the government had backed open source but this time it needs to deliver.

"The government has talked soothingly about Open Source before, to no effect. Maybe this could be different, though: Free Software is now well in tune with these economically troubled times" said Mailer. "More than that, the political classes have been learning over the last year that placing all their eggs in a monolithic, opaque and proprietary financial basket can have a disastrous outcome. What's true for financial systems is just as true for software."

Although Watson claimed that open source could save the UK tax payer money, his statement did not include any references to the open source development model having any distinct advantages over proprietary approaches other than cost which could anger some open source supporters.

"Open Source software is a not a cure-all remedy and is not the only solution to IT questions. However, by levelling the playing field and allowing Open Source to be as competitive as possible we can ensure that taxpayers get maximum value for money from Government IT, something that is more important than ever during the worldwide financial climate," added Watson.

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