Linux in Government: The Government Open Code Collaborative

Dec 03, 2004   By Tom Adelstein (/user/801140)
 in

Can a 'gated Open Source community' really work?

As we celebrate the holiday season and prepare for the next round of legislation, a group of state and local governments has banded together to collect and distribute freely the costly software that normally runs taxpayers $100 billion annually. Called the Government Open Code Collaborative or GOCC.gov (http://www.gocc.gov) , this organization states that its members work together voluntarily to encourage "the sharing, at no cost, of computer code developed for and by government entities where the redistribution of this code is allowed".

In addition to state and local governments, the organization also encourages collaboration between public sector entities and non-profit academic institutions. With Web facilities hosted by the University of Rhode Island, GOCC.gov has a repository dedicated to hosting open-source software for download by any state or local government.

As so many people have said, "Nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come." And GOCC.gov is an idea whose time is long overdue. Open-source advocates attempting to initiate legislation and fight the battles on the floors of the various Houses, only to discover the political might and opposition of Microsoft, now have an alternative. State agencies now can download software for free and use it to create a cohesive and standard government infrastructure.

Instead of every county in the country buying the same Commercial Off-the-Shelf Software (COTS) 3,750 times, they simply can find what they need, download it and install it--a design similar to the distribution of Linux. Think of the cost savings and standardization this offers Homeland Security, law enforcement, the judicial system, deed databases, eGovernment applications and financial applications, to mention only a few areas. Additionally, the concerns of connecting various disparate databases across the country, a topic we heard about daily during the last campaign season, can be put to rest.

An example of the kind of software you can find on the GOCC.gov site is Election Tally, contributed by the city of Newport News, Virginia. Election Tally is a parameter-driven Web-enabled application written in Python and utilizing ModPython and MySQL. It generates an election tally report by extracting files for the state Board of Elections and produces a video simulcast.

That's pretty heady technology available to everyone in the country. In my voting precinct, our team had to generate the results and post them on the door of the polling place. If we could interest the Dallas County Election Board in adopting Election Tally, it would allow us to interface our polling machines directly with headquarters. The commission immediately could begin its audit, save time and eliminate voter fraud.

Of the many types and kinds of participants, eight states now participate to some extent in GOCC.gov: Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Utah, West Virginia, Virginia, Texas and New York. In the majority of cases, individual agencies have joined. Of course, GOCC.gov hopes to attract every state in the country. The more governments that participate, the faster the adoption rate can grow, along with the cost savings.

Beginnings

According to the GOCC.gov site:

> *" The organizing meeting of the GOCC was sponsored in December 2003, by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in conjunction with Harvard University and MIT. The morning session at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government was conducted by Professor L. Jean Camp, who presented an excellent tutorial on the various license options available to code sharers. Sparing every expense, the attendees took advantage of the Commonwealth's excellent public transportation system and used the MBTA's Red Line to make the transition to MIT for the afternoon program. "*

> *" The afternoon session at MIT included an audio bridge for those folks that could not attend in person. The genesis of the collaborative was vetted and launched through a discussion facilitated by Dan Greenwood of MIT's E-Commerce Architecture Program. Dan has been a significant contributor to this initiative from inception. Through a series of subsequent audio conferences, the group agreed to the operating rules for the collaborative and the repository, the governance and officer structure and the actual announcement process. Highlights include the following: "*

> *" The GOCC will be entirely independent and not affiliated with any professional or private sector entity. "*

> *" The GOCC will accept no financial or in-kind assistance from any private sector company. All initial members will be either municipalities, legal entities of state government, or academic non-profit institutions. "*

> *" Four officer positions were established to serve for one year: "*

> - *"Chairperson: Peter Quinn, CIO, Commonwealth of Massachusetts "*
>
> - *"Municipality Representative: Mike Wells, CIO, Gloucester, Massachusetts "*
>
> - *"Technical Lead: Jim Willis, CIO, Secretary of State, RI "*
>
> - *"Policy Lead: Patrick McCormick, Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government "*

On June 30, 2004, GOCC.gov made an official announcement that it was in business. Again, according to the Web site, "The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Information Technology Division; the Rhode Island Office of the Secretary of State; the Pennsylvania Office of Information Technology; the Utah Governor's Office, CIO Section; the Kansas Secretary of State Office; the Kansas Treasurer's Office; the Missouri Secretary of State Office; the West Virginia Auditor's Office; the City of Gloucester, MA; the City of Worcester, MA; and the City of Newport News, VA, [announced] the formation of the Government Open Code Collaborative (GOCC)."

The GOCC wants to offer only code licensed under an "OSI Approved License" or any other open-source license deemed acceptable under the GOCC's operating rules. And according to the GOCC, this code routinely is referred to as either "Open Source Software", "Free Software" and, less frequently, by other similar names.

GOCC also states that:

> *" Government entities, defined as a federal, state or local government, an authority or other sub-national public sector entity of the United States, can join the GOCC as*

Members by signing the GOCC Operating Agreement through an authorized representative. The signatory or their designee can then appoint additional members within their entities. "

" Private non-profit U.S. academic institutions can also become members by signing the GOCC Operating Agreement through an authorized representative. The signatory or their designee can then appoint additional members within their institutions. "

" People belonging to a government entity or private non-profit academic institution that has not signed the Operating Agreement can participate with an Observer status. Representatives of non-profit associations of public entities can also participate as Observers. Observers have to be sponsored by a Member. Observers are able to join the GOCC list server to receive announcements and participate in discussions and are encouraged to participate in the GOCC bi-weekly conference calls. "

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Comments

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A problem of cooperation (/article/7932#comment-13695)
Submitted by Andy Stein (http://www.nngov.com) (not verified) on Dec 06, 2004.

James Surowiecki in his recent book "The Wisdom of Crowds

> **A problem of cooperation** (/article/7932#comment-14003)
> Submitted by Anonymous (http://nospam.com) (not verified) on Dec 11, 2004.
>
> Mr. Stein,
>
> After reading your explanation, I'm further convinced that the author's point about bureaucratic inertia rings true. As a student of psychology and sociative behavior, I have to reach back to one of essential tenets of Freud: The essence of society is repression of the individual subsequently the essential of the individual is repression of self.
>
> Your explanation sounds like a rationalization, reason, excuse, belief and justification as to why you and your associates have no sense of urgency. I guess you forgot that this nation faces an emergency -- defined as something needing immediate attention -- called a war on terror.
>
> Terrorist want to destroy our culture, our life and annihilate (carry off, decimate, eliminate, eradicate, extinguish, wipe out) the state of Israel, all Jews worldwide and all Christians worldwide. They want to invade our homeland, murder children in schools, explode atomic and nuclear weapons, expose our food supply to poison, contaminate our water supply and have our blood run in the streets.
>
> Frankly, I have no sympathy for you, your organization, your excuses or your "good old boy" network. You are the repressors, you hold back the hundreds of thousands of technologist with a sense of urgency to get a perponderance of software distributed and to cut the costs of doing business.
>
> It's odd to me that Afghanistan and Iraq have both embraced Linux and have put together a government

infrasturcture with free software while in our country, you and your associates talk about what to do.

How do you look at yourself in the morning, ride in the same car with yourself, have an authentic conversation with anyone?

In my field, we would say you are in total denial. Wake up!

Right on target (/article/7932#comment-13667)
Submitted by Martin Tullier (not verified) on Dec 04, 2004.

I am a worker bee for the Office of Information Technology in county government. We have every hardware platform under the sun. Most of this is vendor driven by way of client departments. There are some concerned about "takings" where the government displaces the opportunity to make money with software by the private sector. As Tom points out, I find local government is a lot of hurry up wait. This causes very slow uptake of new technology. We are still running an IBM mainframe programming in Cobol. I keep asking why we run not running Linux on it in addition. Yes there are web/Java initiatives but those are done primarily by contractors creating one off solutions very slowly.

Why should a local government build a flexible solution for other municipalities? Typically, they are purpose built applications for the method of operation in a particular municipality. These could morph into more broadly useful applications if they were offered to the Open Source community.

I spent some time thinking about this about 18 months ago. Complete open source success in local government would displace most of the programming staff in a inside out metamorphosis; Open Source pulled inside turning the unneeded coding staff out of a job. The only remaining staff would be application caretakers. Local government programming staff had better learn all they can about open source solutions or they may be out of a job. Like the very successful Open Source application like LAMP etc… there will be vertical applications for the local government that will offer professional support contracts.

In the world of Open Source, Government Open Code Collaborative is a relatively small vertical market that is incredibly dependent on the much broader worldwide resource of Open Source. When they wake up and smell the coffee maybe they will have a clue.

Colin, I am a very big fan of the work done by your company VA Software.

Tom, thanks for the article and keep up the good work.

This represents a personal statement and not the views, ideas or opinion of my employer.

Disapointing (/article/7932#comment-13666)
Submitted by Colin Bodell, VA Software (http://www.sourceforge.net) (not verified) on Dec 04, 2004.

Interesting that as of 4 December 2004 there are only five published applications, and non is more recent than August 2004. Sad that such an initiative appears to have almost no support from the agencies it was establsihed to serve.

I'm CTO of VA Software -- parent company of SourceForge.net, freshmeat, slashdot and other Open Source sites. I tried to contact the site webmaster to ask if we could post a link on SourceForge.net to direct govt. employees to the site -- the e-mail was returned as undeliverable(!). I was very encouraged to see the site launched, however it's disapointing that this appears to have gone nowhere. Perhaps the site admin or person/people responsible for ths site and the initiative could contact me (and representatives of other Open Source supportive sites) to help encourage patronage of the site?

Col

RE: The Government Open Code Collaborative (/article/7932#comment-13656)
Submitted by Christopher Fowler (not verified) on Dec 03, 2004.

As a peripheral member of the GOCC I feel compelled to speak up for the GOCC while not necessarily representing the GOCC or the views of its members.

First let me be clear that many members of the GOCC contribute their time voluntarily. While there is no doubt a layer of bureaucracy covering the GOCC it should be noted that this is not a "government" program. No member that I am aware of has been told that they "have" to participate. The importance of this is that there are heartfelt motivations to see that the GOCC works.

It is also important to realize that the layering of bureaucracy accomplishes several things. First it is designed to achieve controlled growth so that the project does not implode on itself. Second it is there so that future members can continue the operations of the GOCC without having to have institutional knowledge. Third it establishes ground rules for the organization. This does not mean that the rules can't change. It just means that everyone knows what the expectations are.

Regarding the "closed gate" approach to Open Source one must keep in mind of what the GOCC is trying to accomplish. It is not trying to be an open-source repository. While I'm sure everyone appreciates Source-Forge (I know I do), the GOCC is not trying to be a Source-Forge. The GOCC is trying to encourage sharing code, applications, and processes between the various governmental agencies through-out the US. I'm not sure why having a moderated source for Government related software development is a bad thing. While individually we may enforce large scale applications like Zope/Plone, there is no need to house the code on the GOCC. There are plenty of avenues to share code - this is just one. I undestand your use of the asylumn metephore, but I would prefer to use this one: "For the People by the People".

Finally let me make clear that the GOCC is a work in progress. Slow work? Sure - but again a great deal of this is done with volunteer effort. Will the GOCC open it's doors to more contributers? Potentially - but it needs to get it's footing solid first.

Christopher Fowler
Software Developer of eGovernment and Information Technology
State of Rhode Island
Office of Secretary of State

> **Christopher Fowler's Comments** (/article/7932#comment-13672)
> Submitted by Ray Trygstad (http://blog.raytrygstad.org/) (not verified) on Dec 05, 2004.
>
> During my time in the Navy we always had serious chuckles about other Navy organizations who developed software, and then wanted us to pay for the software (i.e. transfer some of **our** OPTAR [budget] to **their** OPTAR). Since all works prepared for hire or by employees of the federal government are in the public domain in the United States, we would ask them exactly what we were paying for and of course they would tell us "support". We would then find out if the software was any good, and if it was we would get a "pass-along" copy from some other unit and just use it. If it required much in the way of support, we didn't have much use for it anyway, because we were going to get precious little support on a destroyer in the middle of the Pacific. In any case, there should be PILES of software to go in this repository, since all Federally developed software is already in the public domain!
>
> --Ray
> Ray Trygstad
> Illinois Institute of Technology

> **Christopher Fowler's comment** (/article/7932#comment-13658)
> Submitted by Anonymous (http://nospam.com) (not verified) on Dec 03, 2004.
>
> It's normal for someone in the bureaucracy to become defensive when someone from outside nudges them. The author's point was to nudge you in the first place. As a program auditor, I think the author has made an important observation. GOCC appears to have taken the shape of a bureau instead of dropping it's cultural roots and using a new model or paradigm.
>
> In other words, you have taken the open source model and adapted it to a federated system rather than the other way around. The model of a closed or gated community is inherently evil in terms of repression of individuals, society in general and taking on accountability.
>
> I don't care how many hours you work. That's simply a rationalization for the organization's ground of being. A rationalization is a wrong reason for wrong behavior - but it's a reason and it allows you to cope.
>
> GOCC is not about "People for the people" unless you mean the people exist so the bureaucrat can have a job. No service exists here. This is centralist thinking at its highest.
>
> I also believe the points about inertia ring true. Governments or related entities or products of government will stay in a state of inertia unless acted upon. Look at your results not at your reasons.
>
> I think the article was fair and also balanced. He gave your vision first read and then asked the pertinent question. Not often done in journalism these days.

>> **Should Local Gov't Have a Unique License?** (/article/7932#comment-13697)
>> Submitted by L Jean Camp (http://www.ljean.com) (not verified) on Dec 06, 2004.
>>
>> >In other words, you have taken the open source model and adapted it to a federated >system rather than the other way around.
>>
>> I believe, despite the rather odd malevolence in this post, this is very close to GOCC.
>>
>> GOCC is indeed taking a multi-layered government system with unique concerns about transparency, not competing with the private sector, and being risk-averse and fitting open

source to that organizational reality. It is a compliment to open code that this flexibility exist. GOCC is not, as some apparently would wish, waiting for fundamental change in adopting a new paradigm of government (ecotopia? corporate libertarianism? radical federalism?) that fits perfectly with Sourceforge in all cases and for all code. Rather GOCC is developing licenses and agreements that work with the local and state public sector as they currently exist for those situations where general purpose code is not available.

GOCC is uniquely concerned about transparency in contributions because the adoption of a system with IPR by governments would be a very good way to force a monopoly. After all, everyone must interface with government. Own a little bit of that format, and everyone would have to pay you to interface with government. Open contributions create IPR risks. The certainty that government will continue to exist, and that some functions absolutely must be implemented makes government software a very good target for a loss-leader lock-in strategy. The legal concerns are a significant reason that the progress appears, from the outside, so slow.

Government is unique in that every other group or party is unconcerned with competing with the private sector. Government has to be careful that they are not re-inventing the wheel, or worse yet putting all the national wheel companies out of business. This is, in part, why there is a small number of specific implementations on the server. No, GOCC does not host software available elsewhere. This is not a problem. The code, by definition, is available elsewhere. Where code exists and serves government as well as general needs there is no need to develop a group to create and share such code. Yes, Tom made this observation with sarcasm, but without the sarcasm the fundamental idea is obviously sound.

Local and state governments are risk averse. In general, people who pay taxes prefer a risk averse approach to spending money and time. Revolutionary rather than evolutionary change may be attractive on an ideological basis, but it tends to prove less attractive in practice than in theory.

Given this set of concerns GOCC has developed a legal agreement and an authentication mechanism with policies that will work across state and local governments. Certainly just slapping something up there and sharing passwords in an ad-hoc manner would have been faster, and more in the spirit of some open code projects. It also would have doomed the project to either slow death by a thousand cuts or large scale disaster. These contributions are extremely valuable. GOCC has built a foundation, and is expanding its code and its membership. No, Bill Gates cannot, at this point, join. Yes, we have the people who have read the manual - on government - to built the authentication model.

>The model of a closed or gated community is inherently evil in terms of repression of
>individuals, society in general and taking on accountability.

And this quote, by a following poster, basically sums up Tom's analysis: Closed is bad.

Moving government to a free (as in beer) and open (as in democratic) code base it too important to accept this vacuous analysis.

Local and state governments are unique. As such, local and state governments may require unique licenses for some of their distinctive code for distinctive functions. GOCC is developing that unique code within the appropriate organizational framework. GOCC is using available general purpose code when feasible, and developing code only when it is not.

Finally, the observation that universities hinder open code must have been meant to be humorous, given the critical role of universities in open code - especially MIT.

regards,
Jean Camp

Christopher Fowler's comment (/article/7932#comment-13668)
Submitted by Anonymous (http://nospam.com) (not verified) on Dec 04, 2004.

On the subject of defending the GOCC: anytime you point out a problem in a bureaucracy, the members start to circle the wagons. That's why they have been loathed throughout history.

Einstein said it better than anyone and perhaps this is all the article should have said: Title - GOCC: A closed "Open Source" Community.

Body:

We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. - Albert Einstein

Respectfully submitted.

Author

Collaborative Model for technology sharing (/article/7932#comment-13654)
Submitted by Jim McManus (http://www.sosnc.com) (not verified) on Dec 03, 2004.

The Department of the Secretary of State has been watching GOCC from it's inception from a unique perspective. Rather than be an active participant we have chosen to create the KB Consortium, a collaborative model organization. We developed an application suite (SOSKB) which we share with other jurisdictions There are over a dozen states using our software and many more in the process of aquisition. We do not charge the jurisdiction for the software, they simply sign a licensing agreement and become a member of the KB Consortium. They are free to do anything they want to with the code under the limitations of the agreement. Primarily, that means they cannot share the code the private sector or an unlicensed public sector entity. They benefit from code development provided by new (and existing) jurisdictions, since it is shared with Consortium members. Implementation services are provided by Consortium approved vendors. This allows the jurisdiction to concentrate their resources on implementation rather than aquisition. The Consortium also provides a model through which third parties can develop interfaces to SOSKB at great cost savings. They build their side once

and underwrite the SOSKB interface once and it is applicable to all Consortium members. We have already used this process to underwrite an application for submitting online annual reports. I haven't even mentioned the application specifications but that isn't the point of this reply. The point is to draw attention to a successful exercise in distributing technology across jurisdictional lines in a cost effective manner and insuring the future success of participants through collaboration. Additional information about SOSKB and the KB Cosortium is available from Jim McManus, Applications Development Manager - NC Department of the Secretary of State jmcmanus@sosnc.com (919)807-2191

"Open Source ?????" or "Collaboration" (/article/7932#comment-13653)
Submitted by Jim McManus (http://www.sosnc.com) (not verified) on Dec 03, 2004.

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"Open Source ?????" or "Collaboration" (/article/7932#comment-13652)
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"Open Source ?????" or "Collaboration" (/article/7932#comment-13665)
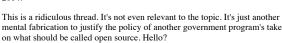Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on Dec 04, 2004.

"They are free to do anything they want to with the code under the limitations of the agreement. Primarily, that means they cannot share the code the private sector or an unlicensed public sector entity."

Why shouldn't they share with the private sector or unlicensed public sector entity? The software you developed was paid for by the citizens and you are sharing it only with your friends. At least you /are/ sharing it.
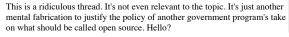
regards,
Gus Bjorklund

"Open Source ?????" or "Collaboration" (/article/7932#comment-13670)
Submitted by Anonymous (http://www.nospam.com) (not verified) on Dec 04, 2004.

This is a ridiculous thread. It's not even relevant to the topic. It's just another mental fabrication to justify the policy of another government program's take on what should be called open source. Hello?

Look, it's either open source or it's not pertinent. Very black and white. And saying "at least you're sharing it" is another take on the same ridiculous point. It's not "open", it's closed.

"Open Source ?????" or "Collaboration" (/article/7932#comment-13669)
Submitted by Anonymous (http://www.nospam.com) (not verified) on Dec 04, 2004.

This is a ridiculous thread. It's not even relevant to the topic. It's just another mental fabrication to justify the policy of another government program's take on what should be called open source. Hello?

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