Open Source Software in Pharmaceutical Research

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Abstract

Open-Source statistical software is being used with increasing frequency for data mining of pharmaceutical data, particularly in support of “omics” technologies within discovery. While it is relatively straightforward to employ open-source tools for basic research, software used in any regulatory context must meet more rigorous requirements for documentation, training, software life-cycle management, and technical support.

We will focus on R, a full-featured open-source statistical software package. We’ll briefly outline the benefits it provides, as seen from the perspective of a discovery statistician, show some example areas in which it may be used, and then discuss the documentation, training, and support required for this class of use.

Next we will discuss what is needed for organizations to be comfortable with employing open-source statistical software for regulatory use within clinical, safety, or manufacturing. We will then talk about how well or poorly R meets these requirements, highlighting current issues. Finally, we will discuss options for third-party commercial support for R, and evaluate how well they meet the requirements for use of R within both regulated and non-regulated contexts.

Outline

Introduction

Open-Source statistical software is being used with increasing frequency for the analysis of pharmaceutical data, particularly in support of “omics” technologies within discovery. While it is relatively straightforward to employ open-source tools for basic research, software used in any regulatory context must meet more rigorous requirements for documentation, training, software life-cycle management, and technical support.

Requirements

Software used in mission critical and regulated contexts must exhibit 7 key attributes:

1. Functional
2. Verifiable
3. Repeatable
4. Documentable
5. Auditable
6. Stable
7. Supported

Requirements: Details (I)

Functional Performs the required tasks

Verifiable Demonstrate that computer output is correct, or at least consistent..

Repeatable Given the same data, the same results can be obtained, potentially much later in time.

Documentable Documentation is available or can easily be generated for the entire software life-cycle: Specification, Design, Development. Testing, Deployment, Change Management

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Requirements: Details (II)

Auditable Track everything done to data and the system

Stable Doesn't change too fast, so that there is enough time to develop required documentation

Supported Guaranteed (by $$) availability of external expense for installation, problem resolution, bug fixes, feature development, training, application development, consulting

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What is R?

- System for statistical computing and graphics
- Language is very similar to the S-Plus
- Full featured support for statistical and graphical techniques:
  - linear and nonlinear modeling,
  - classical statistical tests,
  - time-series analysis,
  - classification,
  - clustering
  - ...
- Highly extensible with good development tools
- *Huge* library of user-contributed add-on packages: $>$ 1200 !
- Source code is freely available

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Status of R (I)

Functional +++ This is R's strength. Largely provided by the $>$ 1200 user-supplied add-on packages. R currently provides more functionality than any other statistical software system and is growing rapidly.

Verifiable — Most of the functionality of R comes from user-developed add-on packages ($>$ 1200!), but there is currently no formal mechanism for evaluating the level of quality of these packages (e.g.: development, test, production, peer reviewed, validated) or documentation that they accomplish the required tasks.

Repeatable — Currently, add on packages do not display version information when loaded, making it difficult to know what versions were utilized for a given analysis, and thus impossible to reliably replicated.

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Status of R (II)

Documentable — While the R core team has a well defined and managed process for design, development, testing, release, and change management, no formal documentation of this process appears to exists (aside from the specifications of the language itself). No centrally defined or managed process appears to exist for add-on packages.

Auditable — R has no built-in no audit log, either for data analysis steps or for changes to the system (e.g.: package updates, patches)

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Status of R (III)

Stable — The R core team releases minor (major.minor.patch) versions twice a year. Since bug fixes are currently applied only to the latest released version of the system, it is difficult to properly support embedded and validated systems where one may need to resolve bugs in R, but must constrain the R version to remain constant for long periods due to the burden of documentation and testing that must be performed.

Supported — While there is an increasingly large pool of statisticians and statistical consulting groups that have R expertise, no organization formally supports R at this time.

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Moving Forward (I)

Functional Already a strength. Continue!

Verifiable RFORGE proposal

1. Develop a SourceForge-like system for contributed packages:
2. Support package status categories, including clear standards
   - development,
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Repeatable Display versions of packages on load

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1. Formally document the development process used for R
2. Provide tools to perform and document this process for add-on packages
3. Develop validation templates for use by organizations
4. Encourage commercial vendors to support R and to provide additional validation effort and associated documentation.

Auditable Add an audit-log facility

Stable Establish a system for back-porting bug fixes to previous versions.

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News Flash!: RPRO from *Random Technologies*

Random Technologies LLC announces the immediate availability of RPRO, an enterprise-strength statistical computing environment providing the strengths of the open source R statistical software system from the R-Project coupled with the enterprise-level support and high-performance computing expertise of *Random Technologies LLC*.

Additions to R:

- Technical Support
- Simple Installation and Maintenance
- Performance Tuning
- Documentation and Training
- Validation Materials
- Consulting and Services

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