

OpenOffice.org meets charity's needs - and makes for good business too

It's a 'warts and all' story - we tell you the good points ... and the not so good.

One of the main reason migrations fail is because of inadequate planning or poor change management.

Never forget the end users. Winning their buy in for the change is key to a successful change

When you are a charitable organisation, you need to make every penny count. This case study shows how OpenOffice.org enabled Migrant Helpline, a UK based charity, to invest in its staff and deliver a better service to clients, while generating useful business for a local consultancy.

Background

Migrant Helpline is a charity which helps newly arrived asylum seekers access support, and assists refugees to settle into the UK. Like all charities, it has to get the best value possible from the funding it receives. In its search for better value, its IT department evaluated the open-source OpenOffice.org software. OpenOffice.org is an office suite (word processor, spreadsheet, etc.) which is regularly ranked as "best in class" by reviewers. As an open-source product, it is available under a free-of-charge licence.

Following a management review in early 2004, Migrant Helpline decided to make the change from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.org. With over 200 users and around 1,000 documents and templates, it was essential that the change was properly managed and users prepared for the move. Migrant Helpline engaged The Burningsuit Consultancy, a local consultancy and training provider, to help them through the transition.

Burningsuit's Stuart Box explains the business case. "Moving to open-source software like OpenOffice.org means an immediate saving in licence costs, plus ongoing savings in not having to pay for software maintenance or upgrades. Migrant Helpline have also discovered that open-source software is more efficient, extending the life of their PCs. There are also indirect savings, as open-source is reliable, with less PC crashes and no worries about Microsoft viruses."

Making the Change

Migrant Helpline decided to re-invest some of the licence savings in staff training from Burningsuit. Users were given on-site training in small groups while their PCs were converted to the new open-source software. Box believes this is essential for a smooth migration. "OpenOffice.org does everything the users wanted and more, but it is not identical to Microsoft Office. Many IT professionals underestimate the problems that can be caused to end users by, for example, minor differences in menus."

But what about those 1,000 existing documents? OpenOffice.org offers a high degree of compatibility with Microsoft Office documents. As users moved to OpenOffice.org, they could continue to share the same documents with their colleagues who were still using Microsoft Office - no need for a risky "big bang" migration.

OpenOffice.org doesn't just meet users' expectations - it exceeds them

Contrary to the claims of proprietary software vendors, open source software is good for business - both for companies using it, and for those who supply and support it.

Box admits there were some challenges when converting the Microsoft Office documents to OpenOffice.org. However, once the relevant training has been delivered, the process of conversion could be completed with almost no impact on the operation and staff. Staff could open their old documents and use them in OpenOffice.org straight away, but invariably they used their new skills to tidy up the documents and make them easier for others to use in the future.

With their new skills and more powerful software, Migrant Helpline staff also discovered that a single OpenOffice.org component - "Writer" - replaced two different Microsoft products - "Word" and "Publisher".

The Results

Now over half way through the migration, Migrant Helpline's Senior Management Team are pleased with the progress. The training courses have been useful in that they have addressed staff concerns about people's perceptions of OpenOffice.org. Users have been told the reasons for the change and now have many applications available which they are able to use. They also appreciate the investment in their skills and think their PCs have been given a new lease of life

The Burningsuit Consultancy too is pleased to have another satisfied client. Box believes his experience lays to rest the myth that companies cannot make money out of open-source software: "How many organisations can resist the OpenOffice.org challenge: would you rather spend money on an endless cycle of software licences, or use it to invest in your staff?"

A good Community Member

The Burningsuit Consultancy are also keen to give something back to the OpenOffice.org Community. "We used to provide clients with big training manuals at the end of courses. However, we found they ended up as unused 'shelfware'. We now issue laminated quick reference cards - which users really appreciate. We have released these to the Community under The Open Software Licence".

The Burningsuit Consultancy <http://www.burningsuit.co.uk> provides practical and unbiased advice on business computing. Migrant Helpline <http://www.migranthehelpline.org.uk> is committed to promoting the welfare of asylum seekers and refugees within the UK and creating awareness of asylum issues. OpenOffice.org gratefully acknowledges the assistance of these organisations in the preparation of this case study.

OpenOffice.org is the leading open-source office productivity suite, containing a world-class word processor, spreadsheet, drawing package, presentation manager, and database user tools. It is currently available in many different languages for Microsoft Windows, Linux, Sun/Solaris, and Mac OS X under X11. It is easy to use, free of licence fees, and offers a high degree of compatibility with Microsoft Office files.

The mission of the OpenOffice.org community is to create the leading international office suite that will run on all major platforms and provide access to all functionality and data through open-component based APIs and an XML-based file format.

For more details, or to download the software free of all licence fees, visit <http://www.openoffice.org>.



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