

OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

RFPS AND FOSS: IT'S ALL ABOUT COLLABORATION

Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) offers viable alternatives to proprietary software products used by libraries. Koha and Evergreen ILMs are installed in many libraries worldwide.

Historical ways of approaching software evaluation come with a mindset that may not match contemporary ways of supplying the best for users.

Many institutional repositories are built on Fedora, DSpace or ePrints. Generic tools such as Firefox, LibX, Omeka, Kete, and Zotero enrich the ability of libraries to connect people and information.

When it comes to a request for proposal document, however, often no champion emerges in the form of a vendor to argue on behalf of what may be the most flexible and cost-effective alternative – or at least one worth diligent consideration. If libraries wanted to talk to 'whoever is in charge' of a FOSS product to find out about functions and affordability, they are more likely to find themselves talking to an entire collaborative community rather than a single representative with a phone number, office, and glossy brochures.

Historical ways of approaching software evaluation come with a mindset that may not match contemporary ways of supplying the best for users. It took many librarians a long time to accept that, as a source of reliable, up-to-date, encyclopedic information, Wikipedia has a place. Initially librarians asked the wrong questions, and tried to evaluate using criteria that just did not appreciate the role in the information ecosystem of a community-authored and managed work. A change in mindset is illustrated by libraries such as the State Library of Queensland and the German National Library with their donations of

content to Wikipedia. For Wikipedia to be viable and useful to users, libraries need to change focus to collaborative contribution rather than buying in quality.

So too with FOSS products. I believe many of us are still asking the wrong questions and declaring that, when we compare a FOSS software apple to a proprietary software orange, the FOSS apple comes off as not sufficiently orange-like. Library staff can take a few steps to increase confidence in

their ability to assess Free Open Source Software.

1) Keeping aware of FOSS alternatives and understanding where to find them if word of mouth fails. GitHub and Sourceforge are good starting points.

2) Understanding that FOSS is not about saving money, but about redirecting funds so in-house expertise replaces licenses to vendors.

3) Remembering that FOSS is generally created and maintained by people who actually use it. Users are creators and creators are users. There is much more likely to be someone who can both understand any needed change and to make that change.

4) If a FOSS product does not seem to have the same functionality as a proprietary product considering whether it would be more responsible to spend funds to improve the FOSS product rather than paying for an off-the-shelf product that is ultimately less flexible.

5) Educating themselves about quality control and the strict rules and structures of a FOSS product that often means that several programmers contribute and check code rather than just one or two employed by a single vendor.

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