

Women do F/LOSS: Isis Migrates to Open Source on Desktop

By Aileen Familara

Stark reality: The software industry today threatens to make every computer user on the planet dependent on tools that can only be bought at market prices. Being a women's information and communication organisation advocating the use of technologies that empower women, Isis had been forced to look inwardly amid this reality of having to deal with high-cost licensed software with many restrictions. It asked itself: Where does its advocacy start and end? And Isis had come to acknowledge that while it cannot avoid using technology because it is at the core of its advocacy, it should, at the very least, mirror its external advocacy through its own practices. Advocacy does not stop at outward actions but continues, or is also done, internally—within the organisation—such as in the way that Isis uses technology.

The F/LOSS

The Free/Libre Open Source Software (F/LOSS) movement is a response to corporate technology. Working directly opposite to corporate intentions are those programmers and software advocates who believe that software should be free: free to be modified, free to be redistributed, free from onerous licensing schemes, free to use. This essence of F/LOSS is embodied even in the way that the software is created and distributed. Thus, a programmer obliges users to share the software. Other programmers who wish to modify the software are also obligated to keep the language in which the programme was written, its "code," also free for future programmers to modify and use.

F/LOSS has also been seen as a boon to countries, companies and individual software users who do not want to keep paying the high cost of licensed software. But why does software cost the way it does? The answer is because users are just paying for a license, not ownership. It is this licensing that gives the software too many restrictions: only one user, or only one company, or only for a limited amount of time. Beyond these restrictions, a user must pay more, and cannot even look inside the technology to see if it could be modified for more specialised uses. F/LOSS programmers have argued against these limitations of licensed software and thus became advocates as well, saying that software use does not have to come with restrictions in ownership.

Isis's advocacy lies in that juncture where F/LOSS challenges corporate industries involved in information, communication, and technology (ICT): where software cannot be controlled by a monopolistic conglomerate but is freely created, shared, and developed by a community of users in response to community needs.

Isis and F/LOSS

Big fighting words aside, talking about F/LOSS is easy enough. Adopting it is another matter. Isis as an organisation had been a software user since the early 1980s when it was still a documentation and information centre in Rome. As a growing international organisation that had to network with other organisations around the world, Isis increasingly relied on technology to do the job, whatever was on offer at the market that could meet its needs. Even Isis's resource and documentation work had to keep up with new technologies in information management as it gathered more resources in support of the women's movement. Licensed commercial software was available at a cost, but still seen as a necessary tool for Isis. Training was even conducted by Isis for other organisations that were

also becoming increasingly reliant on technology in order to stay productive.

At the same time, Isis was continuing to do advocacy work in media and information for women's empowerment. The organisation became a critic of the unbridled technology consumption and marketing that had spawned a super-class of corporations in the global media and ICT industries.

Nevertheless, Isis was still a software user, and it had also developed specialised needs. To meet these needs, Isis had commissioned the creation of tools for its own use, including a human resource database, and information management and library tools.

It is here that an engagement in F/LOSS became integral to Isis. The organisation saw that if it were to continue using software, it had to be one that was not bought from the giant software makers who demanded costly licensing fees. It had to be software that was relatively lesser in cost and, more importantly, could potentially be shared with other organisations.

Hands on with F/LOSS

Initially, among the Isis staff, there were two who were most familiar with F/LOSS. The system administrator (SysAd) maintained the server machines on Linux and Apache; used Opera for Internet browsing; Thunderbird for e-mail; and Open Office for word processing. The webmaster was also starting to use Mozilla for browsing and e-mail; Open Office Impress for slide show presentations; and had some working familiarity with Linux. All these programmes mentioned are F/LOSS tools.

A decision was then made for the whole organisation to shift to F/LOSS tools. To implement that decision, several steps were taken:

Migration Team Formed

A team of three would be in charge of migration, researching and testing tools, sharing the principles of Open Source, designating a time frame for migration, and providing technical support.

The staff were first surveyed about software needs for their various tasks. Isis work is quite varied, ranging from multimedia production, desktop layout for publications, databasing, Internet access, e-mail, file sharing, to library management. All these tasks used

proprietary or licensed software. Only the SysAd had experience using F/LOSS extensively.

The staff expressed apprehensions that any shift to new tools would entail losing productivity because of the time spent learning the software and getting accustomed to it. However, the effect on productivity was to be taken as a given. The staff eventually saw that since everybody would be shifting anyway, they could help out one another better and become the other one's technical support.

Initial Introduction and Training Done

The staff were initially introduced to two F/LOSS tools: Mozilla Thunderbird for e-mail, and Open Office (OO) Writer, which is part of the Open Office Productivity Suite developed by Sun Microsystems. OOWriter was chosen because it was already a sophisticated word processing programme, with features equivalent to or even better than the commercial rival.

Training was a necessary component of the migration of the Isis staff to F/LOSS tools. The F/LOSS team held training sessions on the use of Thunderbird and Writer, explaining the features, making comparisons with features of proprietary software, and exploring features that were new and could be useful for the staff. Because a lot of the work of Isis was destined to be shared among several staff, or were likely to be sent off as e-mail to other organisations, part of the orientation for F/LOSS was in the use of open standards. To work with open standards means saving files in formats that could still be opened by other programmes. For example, RTF (rich text format) is an open standard file, and which can be edited by most word processing programmes without a loss of formatting, although in a limited way.

Staff then agreed to use F/LOSS software for a familiarisation period of three months, after which the proprietary software would be removed from the hard drives.

Of course, the software had to be installed in all the computers in Isis. Here the SysAd ran into a minor problem: not all computers in the organisation had enough processing power or hard disk space to run the new software. Nevertheless, this was a problem that could be easily addressed, and the staff whose computer had limited disk space agreed to a reformatting of her computer's hard disk to accommodate the new tools.

A Mailing List for Support

Technical support was deemed another vital component to the migration. The SysAd set up an internal mailing list to handle queries on the new tools' functions. The mailing list would also facilitate sharing of the staff's own learning experience. At the start, the staff were very active in posting questions on the mailing list, and would also make an effort to help fellow staff on such matters like creating bullet points, pasting graphics, adding spreadsheet elements, and putting password protection on documents. After a while, queries on the mailing list dwindled to one posting every two weeks.

On the second month of Open Office use, the staff were already quite used to the software and to sharing files in RTF. They found the transition easy, a reflection of their familiarity with using software in general. Most of them had been using software since late 1989 to the early 1990s when tools such as WordStar and MS Word were first introduced.

Some Comments

To quote the Isis staff on their use of the F/LOSS tools: "I remember being one of the guinea pigs earlier on, and it was really during the time that there were so many bugs with Star Office [the older version of Open Office]. Anyway, it looks better now. The interface is familiar enough for intuitive use. "

"For me, it is not so difficult because I'm used to learning and using software on my own. And I am the type of person who wants to explore every available feature of a software. So I guess, there's not so much unpreparedness in me. It's also a state of mind, I guess. Before, when [our SysAd] installed Open Office in my computer, I did not bother to use it because I was so busy, and I didn't want to even take a look at the software. But when everybody (or almost everybody) started using it, I had to force myself to use it, too. And then, it was quite easy."

"Everything that is new to me and anything that can further enhance my computer skills is always great for me. I've learned a lot from the session and have told this to some friends who are using MS software most of the time. They wanted to learn it, too!"

Isis's Advocacy

The migration team in Isis is banking on the enthusiasm shown by the staff in these introductory phases of F/LOSS. There will be monthly training sessions on Open Office Impress and Calc, which are the slide show presentation and spreadsheet tools, respectively.

From this point on, Isis advocacy in F/LOSS will be two-pronged, as a developer and as a user.

Isis had commissioned the creation of an open source library management software that will be offered to community resource centres via distribution on CDs and on the Internet. This software, known as the Web-Integrated Library Management (WILMA), can run on one computer or on a server, allowing small resource centres to organise, update and serve their materials using international standards of information management. Isis will conduct training on its use and will offer WILMA's source code to the online F/LOSS community who can help in developing it.

Isis is also looking beyond its own internal migration and is hoping to encourage and support other organisations in using F/LOSS. Isis will be revising its skills-building training programme to offer open-source tools.

If your organisation wants to explore F/LOSS tools for your own use, here are some useful resources:

Primer on Open Source for Non-Profits
<<http://www.nosi.net/>>

To download Open Office:
<<http://www.openoffice.org>>

Help and documentation:
<<http://documentation.openoffice.org>>
<<http://www.ooodocs.org>>

About Mozilla Thunderbird:
<<http://www.mozilla.org/projects/thunderbird>>

About the Opera Browser:
<<http://www.opera.com>>

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