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“Most of the leading software vendors now announced their commitment to developing, supporting and promoting open source software,” Wang adds. “The open source space has expanded to virtually every aspect of software and application, including operating system, database management system, web server, web browser, document processing, photo management and more.”

From a vendor perspective, an open source-based strategy provides several advantages, such as having internal development and QA staff augmented by a vocal and active community of developers, says Chander Kant, founder of Zmanda, supplier of open source backup and recovery solutions. “We need to spend far less money on marketing to get the word out,” Kant says. “Freely downloadable community editions create a groundswell of users who spread the word out worldwide.”

Billie G. Blair, president/CEO, Change Strategists, Inc., a consulting organization, likens the dynamic as a “two-heads-are-better-than-one” relationship. “Some design flaws can be caught as the software is ongoing; corrections can be made on-the-spot – the building-it-while-you-fly-it idea,” Blair says. “Other benefits are cost savings – having others do the work that you would otherwise pay for, and good PR for your firm – as well as getting your product into many more hands than if there was closed source and payment involved.”

Don Thomas, president of Austin, Texas-based SoftLight Development, a technology consultancy and software developer, points out that enhancements to the product come more quickly than in mainstream propriety software and users are now direct stakeholders in the growth of the software and there is no adversarial relationship between vendor and client.

Meanwhile, as with Microsoft, many vendors selectively apply open source strategies. For instance, Journyx provides web-based time-tracking, project accounting and resource management solutions based, in part, on open source software. “Our strategy is to incorporate powerful free open source technologies into our offerings, which allows us to deliver more value for less money to our customers,” says Curt Finch, Journyx CEO. “We do not make our own software code open source, however. Any changes that we make to the open source components that are valuable we give back to the communities that can benefit from them.”

Such a strategy, though, is not without its own inherent challenges. “Sometimes we’ve been accused of not using the right technology that is fashionable at the moment,” Finch says. “Our code is all in Python so for a while, when C++ was all the rage, then Java, and now Ruby on Rails, people have complained that our code would never integrate into their IT infrastructure. Of course, Google writes everything in Python and they seem to be doing okay.”



Despite its collaborative element, or in some instances because of it, there are shortcomings to the open source software model. For instance, any company that decides to release software in open source form should assume that it will no longer be able to exercise control over trade secrets or patents embodied in the code, warns attorney Meeker, who is also the author of [“The Open Source Alternative: Understanding Risks and Leveraging Opportunities.”](#)

“The same is true for copyrights, if the code is released under a permissive license, as opposed to a copyleft license,” Meeker says. “For trade secrets, this assumption is true. An open source release essentially makes the trade secrets evaporate.”

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For patents, there are some limitations on the scope of rights being granted and some open source licenses contain express patent grants, and all arguably result in implied grants, Meeker adds. In each case, the scope of grant is limited, but the assumption is still the right one.

“The bottom line is that it does not make much sense to spend the money to seek patent protection on open source code,” Meeker says. “Open source is not the same as public domain, from a copyright perspective. Copyleft licenses place significant conditions on the exercise of the license. Still, suing to enforce open source licenses is still in its infancy, and courts have not yet fully examined the remedies available — injunction, damages or statutory damages.”

Aside from litigious considerations, an open source strategy also warps competition. “You compete against yourself,” Zmada’s Kant says. “For many of our users, our Amanda Community Edition provides a perfectly good backup solution. So, we have to find a sub-set of users who want production support and advanced features in the paid-for Amanda Enterprise Edition.

“You are giving up a lock on your users,” Kant adds. “You are inherently switching to a strategy where retention of your customers will depend solely on your ability to add value continuously to their environment.”

The founder of the Free Software Foundation Richard Stallman recently wrote an article titled “[Why ‘Open Source’ Misses the Point of Free Software.](#)” Stallman argued that open source software is heading in a very different direction of the original free software movement.

“In my opinion, when leading software vendors got into the picture, the line is blurred,” CSU computer science professor. Wang says. “This is unavoidable. The open source community and the software vendors should work together to come up with some policies or license agreements that promote the freedom of the contributors. These policies should also keep track of where their contributions are used and make sure they are properly accredited. The world is not black and white. Can there be an arrangement that will be mutually beneficial? I think so.”

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