

Open Source: Lots more power in your software

Aparna Ramalingam | TNN

New Delhi: Customers need no longer solely depend on software companies to release new versions of applications. With a lot of these now being run on open source, users have a lot more freedom — they can view the source code and alter and redistribute such software.

So a company like Microsoft which gives most of the software loaded on your PC and therefore having a monopoly there, now has a competitor. Open source is especially used in e-governance where common government processes are computerised and automated and are used to bridge the digital divide between communities. It also reduces costs, improves efficiency and provides better services to citizens.

Open source software is being used by many countries so that they're not dependent on a single vendor for all their software requirements. Says lawyer Priti Suri, "Even though the source code is open to the public, a greater degree of control is possible when applications are run on open source."

Cyber law expert Pavan Duggal corroborates this. "Sovereign nations are more comfortable working on a platform where the source code is not the property of a private vendor." Countries such as China and Germany prefer to use open source software for sensitive areas like defence. "Access to the source code allows the military establishment the liberty to modify it according to its requirements," explains Suri.

Many countries have also initiated policies on use of open source. Singapore, for instance, even promotes it by offering tax benefits to companies using it. In India, a number of G2C (government-to-citizen) applications such as land records, commercial tax and Panchayati Raj applications of state governments run on open source.

Many a time, says Suri, proprietary vendors are not interested in developing a localised version of their software if the country or language is not economically viable. "This increases the barriers to technology usage," she says.

However, Microsoft is of the opinion that a hybrid model (combination of open source and proprietary software) will be the answer to the information, communication and technology needs of the masses. "In fact, under our Shared Source Programme, we share our source code, making it available to our partners," says Vijay Kapur, national technology officer, Microsoft. Under the Government Security Programme, Microsoft shares the source code with governmental agencies and nearly 43 countries have signed up for the programme.

Indian government officials have meanwhile decided to play it safe in this tug-of-war. Says M Moni, deputy D-G, National Informatics Commission, "While choosing a platform for an e-governance application, we look at the total cost of ownership and the robustness of the technology. We also look at that platform which best fulfils user needs."