

Open Data Challenge – a milestone in the development of public sector information in Europe

OpenForum Europe (OFE) and its sister organization, the OFE Academy are delighted to have been involved in the organizing of the Open Data Challenge, a competition designed to inspire developers to come up with innovative and useful ways of re-using public data.

This is a relatively new field of activity for us. We became aware of it a year ago when Nigel Shadbolt, an open data pioneer and collaborator with worldwide web inventor Sir Tim Berners-Lee, spoke about it at our 2010 annual summit in Brussels ([2010 Shadbolt presentation](#)).

Opening up government data for re-use has been going on for a few years now in Europe, longer in the U.S.. There have been numerous grass roots events like hackathons and local open data competitions to encourage people to make use of the data that we pay for with our taxes, which for the most part sits in civil servants' databases gathering virtual dust.

Open data is more or less at the stage of development that open source and free software were 20 years ago. Until now it has been driven almost entirely by enthusiastic grass roots developers, non government organizations, journalists and some diligent civil servants. And like many open source supporters, they consider themselves part of a distinct community.

Just as with many of the early open source and free software developers, many open data folk are instinctively suspicious of large corporations and are motivated primarily by a desire to serve society rather than make fortunes, and by an almost evangelical belief in the collaborative potential of openness.

The Open Data Challenge marked an important milestone in the development of this new and exciting field. Not only was it the largest such event ever staged in Europe, attracting 430 entries from 24 different E.U. countries, and awarding 20,000 euros in prizes to the winners. It also brought the open data developer community together with some of the best known IT companies in the world, including Google, IBM and Microsoft all of which sponsored the Challenge.

While developers have pioneered the open data domain, these large companies will play a crucial role in spreading its benefits to citizens, and in creating new economic opportunities for developers and SMEs across the E.U., just as some of them – Google and IBM in particular – are playing vital roles in spreading the benefits of open source software and open technology standards.

How the re-use of public data evolves is still uncertain. Will we see the creation of must-have applications for our computers and smart phones? Who will make money from public data? What technology standards will emerge? Will they be open standards or will the field become dominated by a handful of companies working exclusively for their own proprietary platforms?

The answers to these questions will become apparent over the next few years. The European Commission is revising legislation in the area of public data. OFE participated in its public consultation on the revision, calling on lawmakers to ensure that open standards become the foundations on which this new and exciting domain can flourish.