

NEWS RELEASE

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OPENNESS TEST TO HELP COUNCIL BUYERS

A new programme for gauging the 'openness' of IT solutions has been unveiled for UK local government by Open Source Academy - the consortium backed by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister through the e-Innovations programme.

Called Certified Open, the new programme will ensure that local government IT managers will be able to make informed procurement decisions based upon the openness of products, services and staff, which have been assessed against an open framework.

Freedom to make decisions based on creating 'best value' is a critical element of professional local government procurement, as is the ability to interoperate both within and across authorities and national boundaries. Given the extent of current technological development, restricting technology options ('lock outs') now will mean that future opportunities will not be available to be channelled into key citizen and business services.

Whilst representing best practice today, open standards are universally recognised as the key to building an open environment - usually incorporating both proprietary and open source solutions. Typically, however, such standards are not always followed and systems that are being procured today may well have lock-in issues such as the use of closed document formats, the inability to integrate databases, restricted platform choice and lack of reuse.

Bob Griffith, of the Society of IT Management (SOCITM), said: "For local authorities to be able to deliver on its targets for improved service delivery to their citizens, IT must be able to play its part by both integrating current applications and delivering new services.

"Working in an environment in which speed of innovation is essential, if we find that lock-in has occurred, then we will be unable to achieve the aggressive targets that are being set."

Until now, identifying and assessing this exposure to risk has been very difficult. Certified Open is a fully graded 'kitemark' of openness, providing an easily assessed guide to the potential risk; it defines the product's potential for integration and interoperability with other products and platforms, and identifies any potential risk of lock-in for the future.

The Certified Open programme uses a self-assessment methodology, governed by the Certified Open Council (COC). The COC oversees the development of the frameworks for evaluating openness, the code of conduct that all organisations and individuals using Certified Open standards have to adhere to, and the appeals process.

A supplier assesses its own product or service against the framework, grading it with a gold, silver or bronze, depending upon the level of compliance to openness standards. It can then promote that product or service to the market using the Certified Open branding, and the grade attributed.

"Self assessment, combined with the authority of the Certified Open processes, gives us a light touch/high rigour approach," said Graham Taylor, director of OpenForum Europe. "Even the smallest supplier can compete on level terms. This is very much a scheme where both the public and private sectors jointly benefit from a more open market."

As is the nature of open source, the community oversees the accreditation. If anyone is concerned that a supplier is making untrue claims about its product or

service, there is a rigorous appeals process through the programme administrators (OpenForum Europe/Institute of IT Training) with all complaints fully investigated and assessments validated against the framework.

"Our regulation process is thorough, and has teeth," said Alan Bellinger, business development director of the Institute of IT Training. "It means that cheating in the self assessment process is about as effective as cheating at Solitaire!"

Another issue addressed by Certified Open is that of skills. There is little point in adopting a mixed software economy using both open source and proprietary software if an organisation does not have the staff with the skills to support it.

Development of skills can be managed by using the Certified Open SkillsTracker - a web-based skills assessment tool which maps certifications, qualifications and courses against the Certified Open framework, enabling any specifier, recruiter or supplier to evaluate an individual's IT skills.

Certified Open is the latest step taken by the Open Source Academy, which is funded under the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's (ODPM) e-Innovations programme, to encourage local authorities to make more use of open source software systems, such as Linux, StarOffice and OpenOffice, as well as for locally developed applications.

The ODPM wants to see greater competition in the software market, and has tasked OSA to provide answers to local authorities on the use of OSS and its integration and interoperability with the omnipresent proprietary systems currently dominant in the sector.

Les Timms, IT manager, Development Directorate at Birmingham City Council, which is leading the Open Source Academy consortium commented: "Certified Open provides a tool for local authorities to adopt procurement policies which involve making balanced 'strategic IT choices' between traditional proprietary and open source software solutions. Open Source Academy continues to provide both the evidence and practical support to local authorities wishing to exploit the benefits of Open Source."

Certified Open is being piloted within UK local government and is being further developed under TOF-E, the consortium project part funded under the European Commission's e-TEN programme, with a plan to roll out across Europe later in 2006.

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Notes to editors:

* Interviews with executives can be organised, either telephone or face-to-face. Please contact Michael Hardware on 020 7939 7989.

* Open Source Academy is a partnership of local authorities and organisations with experience in the open source world, funded under the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's e-Innovations programme. Members of the consortium include Birmingham City Council, Cheshire County Council, Bristol City Council, Shepway District Council, University of Kent, Open Forum Europe (OFE), National Computing Centre (NCC), Society of IT Management (SOCITM) and Institute of IT Training (IITT). www.opensourceacademy.gov.uk

* Open Forum Europe (OFE) is not-for-profit, independent of any organisation and was launched in March 2002 to accelerate, broaden and strengthen the use of OSS in business and government. OFE pursues the vision of an open, competitive European IT market by 2010 in line with the European Commission i2010 Strategy with the mission of facilitating open competitive choice for IT users. OFE is supported by major IT suppliers and works closely with the European Commission and National Governments both direct and via National Associates. It also undertakes contracts designed to strengthen the development and use of OSS in

Europe and has built a comprehensive portal focused on UK Local Government and SME's in Denmark, Ireland and the UK. www.openforumeurope.org

* Institute of IT Training was formed in 1995 and provides a professional membership structure for all individuals involved in IT Training. Other key services include publishing standards that encompass all aspects of IT training, development and delivery and a comprehensive accreditation programme for any training service organisation. Within the IT training industry, the IITT is driving standards through its competency frameworks and by encouraging world-leading qualifications such as TAP and CeLP. The Institute works with other organisations and professional bodies - first, to ensure its standards are as widely accepted as possible, and secondly to recognise other qualifications and experience and accept these against defined competency frameworks as evidence towards its own professional membership. The IITT's philosophy is that the qualifications for admission to individual membership bands should realistically reflect job roles in the workplace. Therefore, qualification is achieved by proving competence in clearly defined training skills areas, along with technical expertise in the candidate's area of activity. The Institute provides a comprehensive range of benefits and exclusive support services for its membership. It also organises a range of awards - presented annually in February - to encourage and celebrate excellence within the IT training world. Web site: <http://www.iitt.org.uk>

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