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Open Source - Now it's getting serious

I was fortunate enough to attend the first UK Open Source GIS Conference in 2009 and luckily I also made it to this year's event.

Like a good cheese these conferences get better with age! I saw a few of my customers there, and several other public sector delegates but it was surprising to me, in these days of austerity, that weren't many more there – perhaps it was lack of awareness or that the 'axeman cometh' had already stopped travel to conferences. This year the format changed (for the better in my opinion) from a one to two days conference. Day one consisted of a variety of hands on workshops including a variety of web mapping technologies and a new (to me) Desktop GIS - gvSIG. Over the next 5 years I think we are going to see some further changes to what are currently accepted as viable alternatives. I hope you appreciate that I normally don't discuss what I do commercially, but to put everything in its proper context, I feel that in this article I must. When I started Astun Technology and started writing this column for GeoConnexion:UK I used to have to 'sell' the idea of Open Source (OpS) to prospective users. Today, with budgets being squeezed, I don't. The main open source web mapping servers, MapServer and GeoServer, are

pretty well known by those in the GI community and accepted as viable alternatives to proprietary offerings, but are there more? One example is PostGIS, the spatial data enabler for the PostgreSQL database. This is now beginning to replace the likes of Oracle Spatial (saving substantial amounts) as the spatial database of choice especially as it is supported by the major proprietary GIS vendors such as CadCorp, PBBI and ESRI. I've written previously about installations of PostGIS being able to serve the whole of the OS Mastermap Topography Layer with ease - with its hundreds of millions of features. At Astun we've installed PostGIS at over 30 installations within the UK public sector and now have customers asking what needs to be done to extend its use to become generic Spatial Data Warehouse and we now have several instances where this has been done very successfully. This is starting to impact across the whole GIS arena, not just OpS. Major vendors have started to offer alternatives to their existing Desktop GIS such as the GIS Server model or to a SaaS model. I am sure the transition is far from complete; for these companies are clearly looking at the bottom line and their existing revenue stream. OpS alternatives such as gvSIG and Quantum GIS have really started to compete and the future is going to be very interesting. I think that there is still a long way to go before we get 100% of the functionality that exists in a traditional Desktop GIS but if we take the Pareto Law into account and combine modern web technologies (think web vector editing via WFS-T) with the power and stability offered by these up and coming OpS GIS applications I think that 80% of users can already be accommodated. Within 5 years, I predict that OpS functionality will be nearing 100% parity in terms of functionality with proprietary solutions. I know that things are changing – as we all know within the Public Sector every area is being asked to cut back by 25-40% over the next few years. Do you think that GIS budgets are immune? Glad you asked but I think you know the answer anyway. eGovernment money that used to support the 10's if not 100's of desktop licenses has long gone. Many OpS providers have started to question their 'services only' model and are trying to work out how to scale their businesses or how to productise their offerings or to support certain technology stacks. I've always taken the view that one size does not fit all. SaaS isn't suitable for everyone (think Data Protection) and OpS may not meet specific market requirements without custom implementations. This is where hybrid installations come into play. When I say hybrid it maybe that a mix of off the shelf 'stacks' of OpS and closed source coalesce to meet specific Business requirements and show a true Return On Investment. This type of open and transparent combination, where it is obvious what you pay for and what you don't, will become the norm and provide customers with incredible value. This will be fully supported at an enterprise level proving once and for all that there is a serious and viable alternative to proprietary, archaically licensed installations. Some people call them Enterprise Agreements – I like to call them Open Agreements...

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