The real costs and benefits of open source data platforms

An Ovum brief for Striim

Catalyst

Today, when we come across new platforms and companies offering big data solutions, one of the first questions that we ask is whether the underlying technology is open source. As a business model for the software industry, open source has come a long way since Red Hat pioneered this model to become a successful billion-dollar company. Many enterprises have embraced “open source first” strategies with the requirement that there be robust commercial support behind it. But how far can enterprises take this strategy? The strongest proponents and pioneers of open source software including Google, Facebook, and Netflix continue to also use vendor-specific technology solutions that deliver unique value. So where should enterprises draw the line?

Ovum view

Open source projects work best when the underlying technology is or should be commodity, and the technology is reasonably mature enough that it can be organized for outside eyes to look and work with it. Open source products work best when components are integrated and supported by a viable technology provider.

There is a myth that open source software is “free” because customers do not pay for software licenses. With open source, there is a cost associated with maintaining, updating, and integrating the software that are performed by the IT team or via annual subscriptions paid to commercial providers of open source technology “distributions.” Depending on the maturity or breadth of the open source project, there may additionally be hidden costs when enterprises assume the tasks of evaluating the scalability and touchpoints with other open source or legacy enterprise software to ensure that it meets security, reliability, ease of use, and scalability requirements. This is especially critical for open source projects that are still maturing, where core components such as APIs may change.

Ovum views a hybrid approach that blends open source with proprietary software is becoming the norm for enterprises and technology providers alike because it is ultimately the most cost-effective. It avoids reinventing the wheel when it comes to commodity, foundational technology, and focuses the value on the unique IP that the vendor brings to the last mile. For most scenarios, enterprises will rely on technology providers who support their own mix of unique and open source IP, delivering the level of support that enterprises have come to expect from enterprise solution providers.
Executive summary: The costs and savings

The savings

Open source software licensing is different from proprietary software. The core open source software code or functionality may be free. Commercially-supported open source projects typically employ subscription pricing models. These annual support subscriptions of commercial open source software providers are akin to the maintenance fees charged by traditional proprietary solution providers.

Vendors who deliver packaged, integrated, and supported products incorporating open source software should deliver the reliability, security, and quality that enterprises expect from open source software – as long as the open source software projects are sufficiently mature. As noted below, the savings equation changes when enterprises adopt do-it-yourself approaches to supporting and integrating disparate open source projects.

The real costs

When it comes to real costs of “free software,” enterprises should examine the development, support, and maintenance costs of homegrown development, as well as risks and costs associated with ensuring security, need for extended functionality, and obsolescence.

Development, Support and Maintenance Costs

Like any best of breed strategy, enterprises implementing open source software projects on their own are taking on the same tasks as custom developing homegrown applications and/or assuming the burdens of integrating them. That entails deploying, configuring or customizing, patching, maintaining, and integrating the open source components with other software. Even where commercial support is available, if the open source product or capability is not broad enough, paying for multiple support contracts while ensuring that there is support for the integrations may be cost-prohibitive compared to obtaining comprehensive support from a single provider.

Security

Integrating an open source stack brings with it the need to harmonize security, which, depending on the project, may or may not cover all components.

Obsolescence

An ongoing concern for IT organizations is getting left behind when it comes to software support – regardless of whether the software is open-sourced or vendor-owned. With rapid emergence of new open source projects that are early in their lifecycle, ensuring that features such as APIs are future-proofed is not always sacrosanct.

Extensibility

Organizations that deploy and integrate open source technologies may also have to extend the software with additional functionality outside the bounds of the open source project.

For the full white paper, please go to:
www.striim.com/real-costs-benefits-of-open-source/
Appendix

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We hope that this analysis will help you make informed and imaginative business decisions. If you have further requirements, Ovum’s consulting team may be able to help you. For more information about Ovum’s consulting capabilities, please contact us directly at consulting@ovum.com.

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