

Comparison of Technical Support for Open Source Software versus Proprietary Software

Vandana Singh

University of Tennessee, Knoxville
449 Communications Building
1345 Circle Park Drive, Knoxville TN
vandana@utk.edu

ABSTRACT

In this poster proposal we present results from an IMLS funded research project to compare technical support for open source software with proprietary software for Integrated Library Systems (ILS). The complete research project is being carried in three phases over a period of three years, in this poster we present the overall project plan and the results from the first phase of research. The poster describes the project approach by presenting the complete project plan and presents results from two survey conducted to identify expectations of librarians for technical support of the ILS that they use and then second survey was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the current technical support methods in solving the technical problems faced by librarians.

Keywords

Open Source Software, Integrated Library Systems, Proprietary Software, Koha, Evergreen, library technology, technical support.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Open Source Software (OSS) development paradigm has emerged and provided alternatives to a multitude of proprietary resources. From its early days, OSS has generated a lot of interest and support within the community of librarians because of its strikingly similar foundational principle: taking collective action for the benefit of the community (e.g Arkles, 2002). The success of open source software depends on community effort, echoing the economics of libraries (Chudnov, 1999), hence the OSS philosophy has been welcomed by librarians. Integrated Library Systems (ILS) is an essential part of libraries and have been traditionally provided to the libraries by commercial vendors. But in recent years, multiple ILS have been proposed by the open source software community. As a result, the discussion of open source software vs proprietary software has become a very popular point of discussion in the library world (Corrado 2005, Breeding 2007, & Wrosch 2007). Initiatives like OSS4Lib (Open Source Systems for Libraries) are catering to the needs of librarians by providing the latest information

about products, bibliographies and other relevant resources for using open source solutions in libraries. The Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) supports the development of open source software for libraries through OCLC research (Balas 2005). The main reasons for the adoption of and interest in OSS by librarians are eliminating their dependence on the proprietary-service vendors, gaining more control over the ILS by making it customizable to the local requirements of the libraries (Wrosch 2007), lowering costs, and acquiring the flexibility of additional feature development (Eby, 2007).

OSS ILSs are being adopted by smaller libraries as well as by big statewide library systems. For example, the Ohio State Library system has implemented KOHA and the State Library of Georgia has implemented PINES Evergreen, for use in libraries ranging from large central ones, to small branch libraries. Some examples of proprietary software that is used in libraries as ILS are Dynix from SirsiDynix, LibrarySolution from TLC, Aleph from Ex-Libris, Polaris from Polaris Library Systems, etc. In this project we will be comparing the technical support for open source ILS with the technical support for proprietary ILS.

One of the biggest critiques for open source software is the lack of technical support during the implementation and for ongoing maintenance of the software. This has been demonstrated as one of the biggest hindrances in the adoption of open source products by researchers and practitioners alike (Cervone, 2003; Breeding, 2007; Wrosch, 2007; Boss, 2005; Buchanan & Krasnoff, 2005). The technical support issue appears to be a **key challenge** for the librarians who want to adopt open source software, or who just want to evaluate the feasibility of open source software for their libraries. Therefore, this project focuses on this problem and will provide in-depth evidence and research-based guidelines and conclusions about the technical support for open source ILS for libraries. The overall objectives of this project are as follows :

The research questions to be addressed are:

- What channels and processes exist for the librarians of open source and proprietary integrated library systems (ILS) to obtain technical support for the ILS?

- To what extent do the existing technical support channels fulfill the expectations of librarians?
- How does the technical support for open source software (OSS) compare to the technical support for proprietary software?
- What do the libraries need to do if they want to adopt an open source ILS?

The results of this research will highlight the differences in the capabilities of open source software and proprietary software for ILS with respect to the availability of technical support. The results will demonstrate the satisfaction levels of librarians with the ILS that they have adopted. Additionally, this research will also provide the librarians with guidelines to evaluate the feasibility of adopting an ILS for their library, and provide them with an implementation plan. In addition to answering the research questions, the proposed study will produce the following **deliverables**:

- A comparison of technical support for OSS ILS and proprietary ILS.
- A resource- based website for the libraries interested in open source ILS adoption.
- A replicable implementation plan for evaluation, adoption, implementation and maintenance of OSS ILS.
- Reports that document all results from various research activities carried out during the study.

The results of this research will yield a better understanding of the technical support process overall, and specifically in an ILS environment. This research will contribute to the ongoing research in understanding the open source software communities and developing better strategies for open source adoption. The benefits to the broader community of open source software researchers and librarians will be transformative.

This study is designed in three phases to answer the above mentioned research questions and the first phase consisted of two survey and triangulating interviews to fulfill the following research objectives:

- Identify the expectations of the librarians about technical support for ILS (both open source software and proprietary software)
- Assess the effectiveness of the current channels and processes for technical support in satisfying the expectations of the librarians

In this poster we will be presenting the results from these surveys. Quantitative as well as qualitative measures were used to answer these questions.

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