

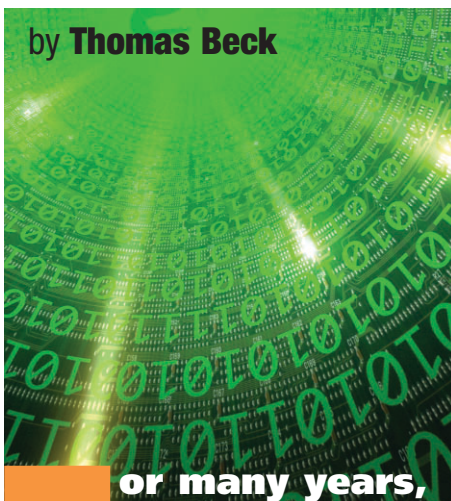
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Management

Open Source software collaboratives: Overcoming the challenges that lie ahead

by **Thomas Beck**



or many years,

For many years, the Open Source software movement has been dismissed by the vast majority of large software producers and consumers alike as an organization ill-equipped to produce and support quality enterprise software. Many large organizations believed that they had little use for Open Source software and the processes used to produce and support it. Besides, most Open Source software provided solely application infrastructure—operating systems, application servers, and the like. Open Source business applications, on the other hand, were nearly non-existent.

This changed in early 2004 when the launch of two very important initiatives was announced. These initiatives, the Government Open Code Collaborative (GOCC) and the Avalanche project, represent software

collaboratives. These collaboratives are based upon agreements by members of the public and private sectors to share their business applications and the underlying source code. The GOCC is of particular interest since it is a collaborative of four U.S. municipalities and seven U.S. states—one of which is Pennsylvania.

The adoption of an open code initiative brings with it certain challenges. Foremost among the challenges that the GOCC and like-minded software collaboratives will face is managing a software process characterized by geographically diverse developer pools, unclear standards, versioning and release issues, and inter-organizational communication difficulties. Eric Raymond, in his widely read work, “The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” metaphorically represented such challenges as differences between the centralized software development processes of the proprietary software world (the cathedral) and the decentralized world of Open Source development (the bazaar).

To overcome the challenges of moving to open source, the software collaboratives will need to get their member organizations to behave less like cathedral builders and adopt best practices that are innate to the Open Source software organizations operating in the bazaar:

- **Automation**—Automate the entire software build, testing, and documentation process. If people have problems installing

and learning about your application, they're unlikely to use it or improve upon it.

- **Documentation**—Document everything about the software process and leave nothing to question. A new team member should be able to become a productive project contributor using your documentation alone.
- **Reusability**—Make use of building blocks such as application frameworks instead of building from scratch. Use existing frameworks where available and extend them to meet your needs.
- **Communication**—Use groupware such as newsgroups and managed Web-based bulletin boards as a communication medium. These methods are non-intrusive and all-inclusive; email is not.
- **Configurability**—Build configurable and standardized solutions. The goal is to build software which is more extensible; not to build more non-extensible software.

Adopting these practices would likely represent significant changes for most organizations. However, undertaking these changes is the way to get what the collaboratives are banking on—higher quality, more transferable solutions. This will ultimately be in the best interests of the collaboratives' constituencies—be it citizens or shareholders. **IT**

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