Open source initiatives are gaining ground
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Open source code data bases are becoming a serious threat to the companies who develop propriety applications, such as Oracle and Microsoft, because their cost is very low and technically they work well. However, the experts warn that there is still a long way to go and the support from prestigious enterprises will be vital.

During the eighties, related data bases became an indispensable part of the systems used by giant multinationals and Public Administrations. Last year, data base licences took in some 9,000 million dollars, according to Gartner dataQuest.
This market is mainly divided between two companies: IBM with its DB2 and Oracle with its veteran and prestigious XL. The market share of both products runs between 35% and 40%, depending on sources. For its part, Microsoft SQL Server boasts about 11% of this market followed by several companies that have a single digit share, such as Sybase.
But this panorama of domination of data base propriety software is slowly starting to change with the introduction of initiatives based on open source code software (OSS). Among the best known developers are Borland, Firebird and PostgreSQL. However, the undeniable leader in the open source data base market is MySQL, owned by a Swedish company of the same name. Proof of this is its four million programme installations and its 30,000 daily downloads. MySQL offers its data base in two different ways: one provides a download with a freely distributable licence and the other charges 440 dollars per server (the user is not charged) and that includes maintenance.
Some of their most distinguished customers are the dotcoms Yahoo, which uses this data base in its news search engine and financial website, Google and The Associated Press and Sony, which use them for their websites.

Success
Up to now, the success of open source code data bases has been focussed on a sector of the IT architecture of organisations: the sector of the data bases that acts as a web page support. In fact, the combination between Linux (operating system), PHP (programming language of dynamic web pages) and MySQL (data bases) has become an overnight success simply because, from a technical point of view, it works well and the cost of licences and maintenance is very low.
Although MySQL also serves companies that handle large volumes of data, some of which are Cisco, Lucent Technologies, Motorola and NASA, several studies by Gartner and Forrester show that the open source data bases are far from replacing propriety data bases like DB2, Oracle or Microsoft.
This can be put down to two reasons. Firstly, OS applications are still not able to offer the same degree of support and service as commercial products in the administration of complex data bases. Secondly, the main actors in the data base market are also the big
suppliers of business management systems (ERP). For example, Oracle sells a suite of ERP products that interact with its databases. These integral solutions are highly valued by companies as all their needs are covered by a single supplier and the compatibility of all the software is guaranteed.

The reaction of the OSS database suppliers did not take long. Last May MySQL signed an agreement with SAP to develop a new version of DBMS, a database application built on the open source philosophy.

This and other operations guarantee a growing presence of open source software on the database market. It seems that, increasingly, open source software is not just a threat for Microsoft, the leading exponent of propriety operating systems. Business applications, which are supported by databases, could be the next victim.

**Will companies adopt critical open source applications like data bases?**

**The support of prestigious enterprises**  
**Josep Valor, IESE professor**  

The popularity of open source systems is magnified when prestigious enterprises offer their support to customers who have decided to install those systems. Therefore, the acceleration of the growth of Linux in the servers sector is largely maintained by the support given by IBM to this operating system.

In the same way, the agreement between SAP and MySQL, the developer of open source database, provides the latter with the necessary credibility to become a serious alternative for enterprises.

The fact that both Oracle and Microsoft are also suppliers of ERP systems explains the decision of SAP to set up its own ERP on a database different from that of its rivals. In this context, the support that SAP has given to MySQL not only adds credibility to open source databases to work as a support for ERP applications, but for other critical applications as well.

**A long way to go**  
**Juan Pérez Vilaplana, Director of Technology at PwC**  

Nowadays, having the opportunity to install in companies, without any apparent cost, a critical business solution or database developed in open source is indeed very attractive. However, the strategic decisions are not only based on the free price tag of the source programmes and on the liberty to modify, but on the viability of development, introduction and integration as well as the capacity of management and evolution.

How much we can criticise applications depends on the degree of availability, quality and capacity of reaction demanded in solving problems. The decision by large enterprises to adopt this new environment is an unmistakable sign of the degree of interest aroused, but for the moment companies are not ready to take the risk the novelty entails. The technology used in critical applications must be backed by absolute credibility and confidence. There is still a long way to go.