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**Open Source Software**

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I often hear a statement that the open source movement and non-profit work is aligned and that we therefore should look to open source first in the NGO community. After all, both depend on volunteers and free licenses fit non-profit IT budgets, which are lean at best.

The counter arguments are that if the software is donated, license cost is not the barrier. Also, the total cost of ownership (TCO) for open source software can often be higher[[1]](#footnote-1), because there are fewer expert consultants in any given open source project, often at a higher rate. Thirdly, the installed base software at an established organization presents compatibility, integration, provisioning and support issues for an open source application. The larger the application, the larger the issue. Finally, there is the long-term stability of the open source company. What happens if they go out of business next year?

Does this mean that the answer to open source is "no"? Not necessarily. Here are some contingencies to a "yes" reply:

1. The vendor hosts the system – if the platform and the database are essentially invisible to the buyer, maintained and operated by them, we don’t care what the code is, provided our data is protected, and we can extract it at any time.
2. The vendor owns and maintains the code – evolving and customized code by a crowd of developers is fine, as long as the provider owns the code and bears the cost of its upgrades and maintenance.
3. The vendor supports Microsoft compliant Service Oriented Architecture (SOA) – the integration layer in our architecture is Microsoft BizTalk middleware. Software needs to be able to exchange data through its messaging and service architecture.
4. The vendor keeps the code in escrow – if the provider runs into financial trouble and cannot maintain the code, we get a copy of the source code and the right to sustain it.

If an open source provider can assure us on these four factors, then we will consider their software as a viable option.

1. For a balanced treatment of open source and TCO, see the London School of Economics paper [“Total cost of ownership of open source software: a report for the UK Cabinet Office supported by OpenForum Europe”](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39826/1/Total_cost_of_ownership_of_open_source_software_(LSERO).pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)