

TRENDS



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Unisys Pioneers The Right Model For Open Source Services

by **Julie Giera**

with Tom Pohlmann and Ronald J. Furstoss

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unisys has announced a set of service offerings, called OASIS, for companies with open source platforms. It is the first time that a major IT service provider has offered a fully integrated set of services — including installation, configuration, maintenance, and enhancement — for a predefined open source stack. Competitors like HP and IBM have long had a menu of open source services that customers could choose from, but they have been reluctant to put a stake in the ground around a specific set of open source components. The OASIS announcement is an early indication that the open source services market is starting to mature. Through the OASIS offerings, open source customers can expect to achieve some of the same benefits as commercial software customers — predictability, cost savings, and strong service-level guarantees. With the OASIS set of services offerings, Forrester believes that Unisys should be on the shortlist of vendors for open source services.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Chief information officer, IT operations/engineering professional, enterprise architecture professional

OPEN SOURCE SERVICES CONTINUE TO GROW UP

Unisys has just released a set of robust service offerings that it calls OASIS, targeted at medium-size to large companies with open source application and database platforms. For the first time, a leading services vendor has created a fully integrated services offering around a predefined stack of open source components. As the proliferation of open source continues in the enterprise, IT services vendors are recognizing the very real needs of this customer base. To date, though, services vendors have responded by offering customers pieces and parts of service offerings — a kind of “your mess for less” approach. The Unisys announcement signals the beginning of maturity for open source services. IT services providers and outsourcers deliver the most value to customers when they can leverage a standard set of services across the global marketplace.

There Are Two Sides To Every Open Source Story

Open source, by its very nature, is challenging to maintain and support.¹ After talking to organizations that have more than one year of experience with open source, Forrester has found some common themes:



Headquarters

Forrester Research, Inc., 400 Technology Square, Cambridge, MA 02139 USA
Tel: +1 617/613-6000 • Fax: +1 617/613-5000 • www.forrester.com

- **Open source choices delight, and confound, the CIO.** Companies have many more software choices available to them today, in the form of both commercial software products and open source projects. Forrester believes that in the next two years entire enterprise application suites targeted to specific vertical industries will be available in the open source community. But since open source can be changed by anyone, the version control and feature/function planning that IT managers have come to depend on in commercial software markets doesn't necessarily exist. Of course, distributors like Red Hat are trying to dampen some of that unpredictability by applying change and release management processes to some of the more popular open source components. But the rigidity that comes with standardization flies in the face of some of the core tenets of open source — namely freedom and choice.
- **IT service providers have tried to be all things to all people.** It has proven difficult for IT services vendors like IBM to appear supportive of customer choice and freedom on the one hand, while at the same time driving standardization. In a recent discussion with IBM, Forrester was told “we don't want to alienate the open source community” by creating a standard services offering around one specific open source stack. IBM, like its rival HP, is concerned that if it creates a standard set of services around a predefined stack, it will be accused of forcing open source customers into an IBM-defined set of choices. IBM wants to avoid even the perception that it might be limiting customer options for software; especially since it has long been a cheerleader for open source, and it's been a proprietary software vendor for even longer.

The Unisys Standardized Approach Is The Right Model For Open Source Services

To deliver cost savings along with high levels of service, service providers have to standardize the platform they're supporting. In fact, the differences between supporting a standard platform and supporting a nonstandard platform are as high as 40% over the life of the code.² That's a huge number, especially if you consider that some IT applications can live for 10 years or more. Suppose a company like Unisys, for example, can create a set of installation tools, templates, problem and change management processes, and best practices for one or two variations of an open source application or database stack and then roll out that intellectual property to all of its personnel. Not only can it ensure quality and consistency; it can also begin to offer a much higher level of quality than it could if every open source configuration it managed was different than the one before it. More importantly, a company like Unisys can lower the price of managing and supporting these stacks. This is what Unisys intends.

Unisys has pulled together an end-to-end set of offerings around a standard set of the most popular open source applications and database components and has added some of its own intellectual property around security, management, and performance. Unisys has not abandoned open source customers who prefer to choose their own components. In fact, the OASIS strategy is meant to address the needs of the broader set of open source customers.

OASIS includes four components:

- **Suites that are certified by Unisys.** Suites are the fully integrated stacks of open source components that are tested, tuned, and *certified* by Unisys. Unisys is introducing both the application server and database suites for the first time with this announcement.
- **Solutions combine platforms, open source, and commercial software.** Solutions is the term that Unisys uses to describe the set of services it offers around hybrid components. Solutions combine platforms, open source, and commercial software; they also include related services. Solutions are targeted offerings, which means that Unisys will create these packages of services and software for what it deems are the most popular configurations.
- **Services and support are the general technology offerings for open source.** These include consulting and support services that are typically sold à la carte to companies that wish to buy only a specific service, such as installation or migration assistance.
- **Hardware optimized for open source.** Unisys does have a full line of server hardware that is optimized for open source software and the OASIS suites. The hardware can come preloaded with Unisys systems management tools if the customer desires.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR NOW, EXPERIENCED PROVIDERS TRUMP DISTRIBUTORS FOR OPEN SOURCE SERVICES

As always, the key to good service provider selection is experience and knowledge of complex infrastructure management. Skill with the open source components is next in line, followed by excellent change and problem management processes. Although it might seem attractive to sign a services and support contract with an open source distributor, the better alternative for companies with more than one open source component is usually to go with the experienced IT services vendor. The challenges associated with integrating, managing, and supporting a set of software products over many years and business cycles are complex and daunting to the uninitiated. Open source distributors like Red Hat don't yet have that experience.

Unisys has been one of the best-kept secrets of the IT services industry for some time; great technical skills, years of experience, good prices, and top-notch global service are hallmarks of this organization. Unisys has successfully carved out a spot as one of the worlds' leading IT services vendors in infrastructure management. With the OASIS set of services offerings, Unisys steps ahead of most competitors in open source services by offering customers a robust suite of services at great prices and with strong service-level agreements (SLAs). As for its competitors in the open source services market:

- **HP isn't far behind.** The company will be offering updates to its own open source services portfolio later this year. Its open source Building Blocks offering, which offers a somewhat standardized point of view, starting with a JBoss applications server and JBoss middleware suite, stops just shy of having a specific set of prescribed components configured in a standard stack. HP combines its servers and hardware with its intellectual property into a set of offerings it calls the HP Open Source Foundation. HP Building Blocks are pretested, best-of-breed open source components that HP will support. Blueprints are collections of best practices and configuration/installation guides for those customers needing just a bit of extra help.
- **IBM is at least 12 months away.** The vendor is still creating IT service offerings around a standard open source stack. This isn't because IBM lacks the capability; it's just that IBM is very cautious in this regard. In Forrester's latest discussion with IBM, the company agreed that standardized stacks are the future of open source in large companies, but that IBM was nine to 12 months away from creating standard stacks because it was "following the needs of the market." It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate just how committed IBM is to open source and associated services. IBM has indicated that there are 40 full-time people assigned just to craft the strategy around *business services* (separate and distinct from technology services) of open source.

WHAT IT MEANS

THE OPEN SOURCE SERVICES MARKET WILL BECOME MORE COMPETITIVE

Looking forward, customers will have more robust services and outsourcing offerings to choose from, at better price points and service levels. This is because IT services vendors, open source distributors, and eventually business process outsourcing (BPO) providers will continue to evolve their products and services. Forrester expects that the pricing for open source services will be much more competitive in the next 12 months, as strong services providers like Unisys begin to challenge the premium rates that some vendors are charging. Although further down the road, Forrester also believes the Indian offshore vendors will recognize the open source services opportunity in a more aggressive way than has been the case to date. During the next 24 months, firms like Tata Consultancy Services and Wipro will be aggressively competing for their share of the open source software (OSS) pie. All of this spells good news for customers.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Customers are finding that there is a very real cost to open source. The flexibility and freedom open source can bring comes with consequences, namely integration of the components, maintenance of the platforms, and ongoing support. IT services vendors have been slow to address these needs, although the market is in the midst of rapid change. See the December 23, 2004, Trends "[The Impact Of Open Source On Service Delivery](#)."

- ² The differences in cost and stability between a custom or customized application and a packaged application are most evident to the services providers that have to manage these platforms. The entire business model employed by outsourcers, including pricing and service-level agreement (SLA) guarantees, takes into account the differences in time and resource commitments required by custom applications. Open source, in this context, should be viewed as a custom application. A full discussion of the impact of standardization on costs and service delivery is available. See the May 14, 2002, Best Practices “[Live From GigaWorld: Managing IT Service Delivery — Lessons From The Pros.](#)”