



DGI Update: Your Guide to Interoperability & Conformance Test Services

September 2008

Commentary: Open Source Does Not Guarantee Interoperability

The open source or free software movement has been in existence for over 25 years. During that time, a number of open source projects have moved beyond a mere *cultural* movement and into a more mainstream class of adoption, creating software applications free for implementation and modification. These applications included well known and widely used products such as the Linux operating system, the Firefox browser and the Apache web server. Open source projects for B2B applications of AS2, ebMS and XML are also active and available.

Open source software has advantages over commercial, off-the-shelf (COTS) software. The largest advantage is, of course, the price. The ability to inspect and even modify the code for a deployment's particular needs can also be of great benefit. For some situations, open source software is a viable alternative to commercial offerings.

However, in the area of interoperability, open source B2B products do not have an advantage over COTS products. For B2B applications, interoperability with trading partners is crucial. A product must not only work as described in its feature set, but it must also work with the B2B products deployed by your trading partners. Message exchanges, like in AS2, are only worthwhile and of value if both parties can properly interpret and understand the content and instructions of the exchange.

With respect to interoperability, open source software has the same limitations as COTS software because, just like its commercial counterparts, it too is a software application. It takes very little divergence in two software projects to break interoperability. Even if a

software project is believed conformant to the underlying specification, the foundational underpinnings like security toolkits, operating systems, and deployment environments can render it non-interoperable with other products. B2B interaction requires a very tight agreement among partners with the alternative being a risk to breaking interoperability. No matter how many sets of eyes have looked over open source code, you won't get the guarantee that other products, open source or COTS, will be interoperable.

For B2B applications, full matrix testing and certification programs are necessary to identify and resolve all the interoperability problems. In Drummond Group test rounds, open source products and COTS that are built using open source code have participated and been certified. As with all the other products, they find problems that require debugging and code changes to be interoperable with the group. Open source software can be a great choice, but it does not guarantee interoperability.

Comments? Send us email at info2@drummondgroup.com