

# An Interview on Open Source and MySQL with JP Rangaswami, CIO of BT Global Services

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## JP Rangaswami

*JP Rangaswami, CIO of BT Global Services since 2006, is a highly-respected voice in the UK IT industry; a fellow of both the British Computer Society and the Royal Society of Arts. Before joining BT Global Services, he was the global CIO of the investment bank Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein, where he introduced several MySQL-based systems. He was named CIO of the year by Waters Magazine in 2003 and CIO Innovator of the year by the European Technology Forum in 2004.*



**Q:** *Good morning Mr Rangaswami, and thank you for taking the time to answer our questions today. In your blog, “confused of Calcutta”, <http://www.confusedofcalcutta.com/> you confess to being passionate about open source. From the perspective of a CIO, what would you say is the major impact of open source on the IT industry?*

**A:** While it might not yet be evident to everybody, open source software today is mainstream. OSS is about commoditization. Upon reaching maturity, open source components form an infrastructure upon which we can build applications and services. Since commoditization results in less differentiation, it will be necessary to provide differentiation above the infrastructure level.

**Q:** *How far do you think this commoditization can go?*

**A:** Business models are evolving from making money with the products you sell to using them as door openers for selling services. Talent however does not get commoditized so this is what you will pay for in the future. Human capacity should be used to create value for the customer rather than in technical details. Any service providing company must transform itself from being a product shop into focusing on satisfying customers needs – and I’m talking about the individual customers. It is particularly important for a company like BT Global Services to develop tools to reach different types of customers with different needs. The strategy must be based on what the customer wants, rather than on what the suppliers want to sell. But delivering such customized services is more complex and therefore requires standardization of the components, of the underlying infrastructure. OSS is about commoditization and it fits perfectly into this strategy. A standardized infrastructure allows us to focus on creating value on top of it.

**Q:** *There are thousands of open source projects out there in various stages of development. How would a CIO know which ones to select?*

**A:** It is important to identify OSS components as they reach the appropriate level of maturity and commoditization suitable for enterprise business. There is a stage in development for any OSS project where we feel confident and may decide to scale it in our business. The most important factors are the size of the surrounding community and the maturity of the project. Eric Raymond stated in his essay “The Cathedral and the Bazaar” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathedral\\_and\\_the\\_Bazaar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathedral_and_the_Bazaar) that “Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow”. This means that in order to achieve the superior code quality which characterizes mature open source software, a sufficient number of independent developers have to be engaged in the project. The software also has to be battle-tested and an acknowledged part of the OSS infrastructure, much like MySQL as the “M” in the LAMP-stack.

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**Q: Traditionally, open source often entered enterprises through technical subsystems and would then eventually grow into the core business infrastructure. You, however, claim that OSS today might be considered as a strategic choice on its own merits?**

**A:** In the past, small systems might have been developed on OSS, only then to be shifted to proprietary software as they grew and became business critical. This is however an outdated way of looking at it. I perceive two evolution stages for OSS components: They started out at an individual and personal level, but have evolved to an enterprise level. MySQL, for instance, has clearly taken the steps from being a resource for individuals to being one for the enterprise. MySQL has moved away from being mostly suited for small individual systems during the last few years. Historically, software started at the enterprise level and after a while became useful for individuals – but with OSS, it's the other way around. And I actually foresee a third evolution stage for databases: scaling to the entire industry segment.

**Q: So do you believe that open source at some point will replace proprietary software altogether?**

**A:** It's really not an important or even a relevant issue. In time, I believe open and closed source worlds will converge but before that happens it's even more important with standardization since we have to live in hybrid environments. If you don't simplify the infrastructure all you'll do is pass the complexity on to the customers. However, there is no idealistic war going on, just pragmatic necessities to consider. In adopting open source software, there's the usual curve of enthusiastic early adopters, skeptical pragmatists and stubborn laggards often making a philosophical stand. Acceptance of OSS however is inevitable. As customers' interest is shifting from what systems are used to what value the systems create we have to move from being a supplier of products, to adding value. Our future business is to teach the customer how to fish, rather than to sell them fish.

**Q: Despite the advantages you describe, the acceptance of open source software seems to be slower in some regions and vertical industries than in others. What do you attribute this to?**

**A:** I believe that the incentive to use OSS may not be as strong in markets dominated by intermediaries choosing the solutions for the end customers. Their revenues might to a certain extent be dependant on legacy proprietary solutions. To change this situation, the demand for simpler and cheaper solutions must come from the end customers.

**Q: Besides commoditization, do you see any other advantages of using open source software?**

**A:** Yes, I'd like to highlight three "unsung values" of OSS:

1. Reduction in training costs, resulting in a lower cost of entry for new companies. This opportunity gave birth to the whole Indian off-shore IT industry.
2. Security value. Open code actually reduces rather than increases security costs. This may seem like a paradox but it's already understood by security experts.
3. Lower costs of merger and acquisition. Simple standards and no proprietary technology lock-in results in reduced M&A costs.

**Q: If you were a CIO relying on proprietary solutions, why would you consider OSS for a new database purchase?**

**A:** You should go to jail if you don't! Seriously, OSS is mature. You can't find a Fortune 500 company today that doesn't use Open Source somewhere. The key is: the decision criteria have shifted from talking about labels to talking about value. OSS is mainstream and after 11 years, MySQL AB can hardly be called a startup anymore.

**Q: So what's your advice to a CIO who is curious but still hesitant about using OSS?**

**A:** Make your life simpler by using OSS. The chessboard is getting crowded -- so where appropriate, you should strive for standardization. Mature OSS enables this standardization with higher quality due to "the million eyes" and at an affordable price. Where's the argument against it?

**Thank you very much for answering our questions Mr Rangaswami.**