

[Home](#) >> [Open Source](#) >> [New Life for OpenOffice.org](#)

Monday, October 04, 2010 5:31 PM/EST

[New Life for OpenOffice.org](#)

From an IT columnist perspective, Oracle's acquisition of Sun Microsystems is a gift that keeps on giving. As the enterprise software giant works its way through digesting Sun's many hardware platforms, software products, intellectual property holdings, and open source communities, there's no shortage of fresh topics to cover.

Last week, another such topic presented itself, when a group of vendors and individuals launched LibreOffice, a fork of the OpenOffice.org productivity suite that Sun first shipped in 2002. The group also announced the creation of the nonprofit Document Foundation to maintain the breakaway office suite project.

Where Sun Microsystems had been bent on building itself out as a grand steward of open source projects, Oracle has pursued a spartan approach toward the projects it inherited from Sun. For instance, Oracle has continued development on Solaris while allowing the open source project OpenSolaris to sink beneath the waves.

Similarly Oracle hasn't ignored OpenOffice.org—the company has selected "Oracle Open Office" as the name for the commercial version of the suite, in lieu of the StarOffice moniker that Sun used for its paid edition of the suite.

Given Oracle's ambivalent stance toward running open source projects for their own sake, and taking into account the central role of OpenOffice.org on the Linux desktop, it's not surprising that major Linux and OpenOffice.org distributors Canonical, Novell and Red Hat—all of which are supporting the Document Foundation—would prefer a more certain home for the suite.

It's not that OpenOffice.org under Oracle appears at risk of moving backward—it seems to me that development on the suite under Oracle has continued at a pace that seems more or less the same as before the Sun acquisition.

The trouble is that as a project, OpenOffice.org needs to do more than maintain its pace. Even with Sun's open source enthusiasm, development on the project merely crept along—particularly when compared to Mozilla's Firefox. For instance, while the suite's

chief target, MS Office, has begun making a move to the Web, OpenOffice.org showed no such signs.

Instead, the Web-ward growth that was absent from Sun's roadmap has indeed begun, in the form of an upcoming Oracle Cloud Office product that's no more open (in terms of source or of development) than are the Web office offerings from Microsoft, Google, and Zoho.

“Fork” is often treated as a dirty word in open source circles, but project splits can be very effective, as was the case when, in 2004, the X.org project split off from the XFree86 project that developed the graphics layer for Linux and its cousins, delivering a much-needed shot of life into those OSes.

I'm hoping that the creation of the Document Foundation, and of the LibreOffice project, will enable the developers and backers of the code base to blow up the project and remake it into a faster-moving, more broadly accessible, and more relevant project moving forward.

Posted by Jason Brooks on October 4, 2010 5:31 PM