

The Open Justice Broker Consortium (OJBC) is a nonprofit membership organization of government agencies and jurisdictions, dedicated to improving justice information sharing through the reuse of low-cost, standards-based integration software. The OJBC unlocks the power of open source software and cross-boundary collaboration to promote a more effective, efficient justice system.

Busting 5 Common Myths about Open Source in Government

Myth: Open Source software is unstable and immature, having been built largely by volunteers and lacking industry participation and support.

Often Heard: *How can we trust critical applications to software built by kids working at night in their parents' garage?*

Fact: Like proprietary software, open source software exhibits a range of maturity and stability, but many open source software products have been around for more than a decade and are deployed in thousands of large businesses and government agencies worldwide. Enterprise-class open source products are generally developed and maintained by developers from prominent technology industry players, such as Oracle, IBM, Apple, Google, and many others. Open source software has created many successful business models, and support for many open source products is available from industry.

The OJBC Take: The OJBC uses only open source software that has proven successful over a long period of time in enterprise settings, including in government. The Consortium provides its members with support, leveraging both OJBC staff and partnerships with industry providers.

Myth: Open Source software is not secure and cannot be trusted to protect government data.

Often Heard: *If criminals and hackers can see the source code to our software, then they will know better how to exploit the inevitable holes in it—especially the software for functions like encryption and user authentication.*

Fact: Prominent technology security experts like Bruce Schneier have stressed that enterprise-class

open source software is generally more secure than proprietary alternatives, because the source code has been open to public inspection that has identified security and functional flaws, and also verified that these problems have been fixed in subsequent versions, allowing for continuous, real-time improvement. The number of “eyes” on large open source codebases is much larger than the number of developers and testers at even a large software development company—and with proprietary software, users must trust that software vendors are actively identifying and promptly fixing security holes. The bottom line is, security through obscurity is the weakest possible security—little better than no security at all. Agencies’ best chance of protecting applications, data, citizens’ privacy, and their users is to leverage open source software that has been widely inspected and vetted.

The OJBC Take: The OJBC leverages enterprise-class open source software products that are stable and mature, and that have been trusted by thousands of organizations, both inside and outside of government. It adheres to justice community standards of security, including encryption, authentication, and access control.

Myth: Open Source software is incompatible with non-open source software.

Often Heard: *We run our enterprise on Microsoft/Oracle/IBM/etc. and open source software won't work with our existing infrastructure.*

Fact: Open source software products interoperate with other software in the same way that proprietary products do. Industry standards facilitate this, and typically open source software implements open industry standards as well as (or in some cases better than) proprietary alternatives. Most enterprise-class open source products can run on both open source and proprietary operating systems (including Microsoft Windows) and can talk to both open source and proprietary databases. Open geographic information system (GIS) standards enable sharing of spatial data and layers between open source and proprietary mapping and analysis tools.

The OJBC Take: The Open Justice Broker software is developed in Java and built upon Java open source products. Java has run seamlessly on a variety of operating system platforms—including Microsoft Windows—for nearly 20 years. Current OJBC Members run most OJBC services on Windows and store data on both open source and proprietary database platforms.

Myth: Open Source software is in the public domain online, leading to an uncontrolled and unmanaged evolution of the products, and the potential of being taken proprietary by individuals or companies.

Often Heard: *It is difficult to trust critical enterprise functions in our agency/jurisdiction to software with an uncertain future.*

Fact: “Open Source” does not mean “public domain”. Open source software is made available under a license that, like any license, places obligations on users of the software. Some open source licenses obligate licensees to release any modifications or contributions under the same license, ensuring the preservation of any contributions as open source into the future. Because of the nature of prominent open source project governance structures—that typically involve participants from several companies, operating in a transparent, public way—and the fact that these products have thousands (if not millions) of users worldwide, open source software products

are often more effectively managed than proprietary alternatives. Most projects have very clear and effective governance structures to stage the release of new versions and manage the overall evolution of the products.

The OJBC Take: The OJB software is released under the Reciprocal Public License, which has very strict rules about the licensing and contribution of derivative works, in order to ensure the future availability of members' contributions. The open source software products that the OJB uses all have robust governance structures (most are from projects within the Apache Software Foundation—one of the oldest and most mature open source governance models). The OJBC itself manages releases of the OJB components very carefully, under the direction and supervision of the Board of Directors.

Myth: Open Source software does not have the same level of support as proprietary software, making it risky to implement. Users have nowhere to turn when the software breaks or they need a critical enhancement, and there is little assurance that the product will continue evolving over the long term.

Often Heard: *How can I, as a Chief Information Officer, deploy mission-critical applications that have no vendor to support them or to continue developing new features?*

Fact: Many Open Source software products—and virtually all enterprise-class ones—have at least one (and sometimes several) companies selling support services. Often, these companies employ the lead developers on the project, ensuring a connection between new feature development, product support, and the needs of customers. Open source licensing can ensure that a product is not wholly dependent upon the financial well-being or business strategy of a single vendor.

The OJBC Take: OJBC membership guarantees levels of dedicated staff support, and membership options are flexible to allow for as much or as little support is needed to meet an organization's needs. In addition to getting support for existing products, OJBC members automatically benefit from the ongoing evolution and expansion of the platform—as new capabilities are added, they are available for immediate re-use.