World News

Legal Case Management Software to Aid NGOs

Although large businesses are boldly embracing Linux and Open Source software as a means of cutting costs, the vast number of small companies and NGOs will be the real battle ground, since they often lack dedicated IT personnel and their needs vary widely. With their limited financial resources they lack the power to negotiate customization with software vendors.

To address part of this problem the Internet Rights Bulgaria Foundation is developing LegalCase – a user-friendly administrative solution for NGO legal aid centers which is easy to use and install. The GPLed project is sponsored by the Information Program of the Open Society Institute, a part of the Soros Foundation Network.

The software is written in PHP and thus web-based. It can be installed and used on a single computer or shared across a network. LegalCase stores cases and follow-up information in a MySQL database, and produces reports and statistical information. The software encourages and facilitates collaboration on common activities. It also provides help with creating structured archives, much needed at small organizations where qualified IT personnel is rare.

Among the main benefits of the system are quick queries on client background and case evolution, resource tracking and reports such as: activity overview for each staff member, statistical information on cases or clients and on usage of the organization's resources; this facilitates expenditure reports and budgeting.

The Balkans are an area where many languages are spoken, hence the software comes with an easy to use integrated translation interface.
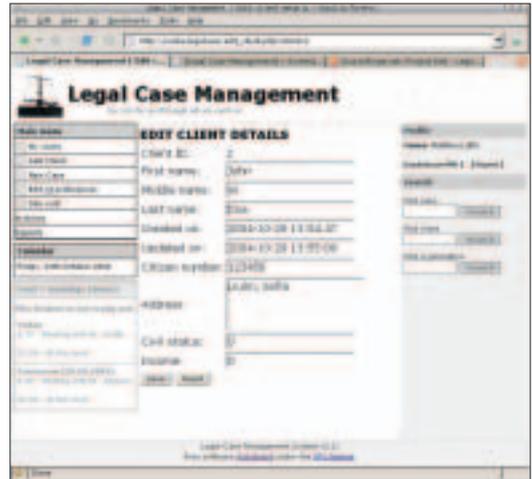
So far the project has already produced its first public release with a final version expected in May 2005. The developers have plans to install it at the Bulgarian Public Defender's office. With the help of InterSpace, a Bulgarian technology/media organization, they hope to integrate it into local Linux distributions and to provide on-site training and installation services. ∎

http://www.lcm.ngo-bg.org/en/
http://sourceforge.net/projects/legalcase
http://www.lcm.ngo-bg.org/public/

Bulletin Boards' Revival

Bulletin Board Systems, BBSs for short and originally virtual places allowing academic discussions, have become a prominent digital phenomenon in Taiwan. Used mainly by university and college students, BBSs provide a platform for anonymous discussion and information exchange.

In October 2004, three major Taiwanese BBS sites merged and formed the biggest online cluster, PTT. It comprises more than 30,000 discussion boards and 600,000 registered users. Its daily log-in number exceeds 1 billion. At peak times, it allows 30,000 users to connect to the system concurrently.

None of this would be of much interest to Linux Magazine if the PTT team had not announced that its software will be released under the GPL, allowing anyone to download, use, modify and redistribute the source code and – of course – set up their own BBS systems. The team is also considering releasing all the posts on site under the Taiwanese version of Creative Common license.

A telnet client is required to use the system. Although the newly developed PCMan X (v0.1.7.9) is mainly aimed at BBS users with MS Windows, it is in fact Open Source and cross-platform. Using wxWidgets, it supports all POSIX compatible systems, 32-bit MS Windows and BSD platforms, including

FreeBSD and Mac OS X. Despite the fact that all the PCMan X documentation, such as CVS comments and readmes, is written in English, the developer, a medical school student, is worried the language might be an obstacle to Chinese-speaking users wanting to discuss the software.

Inspired by PCMan X, BBMam (v3.0), is designed to be a combined SSH/SFTP/BBS/telnet client. It also comes with multi-platform support (Windows/Linux/Mac). Both clients work particularly well in Fedora Core 3. ∎

telnet://ptt.twbbs.org
http://sf.net/projects/pcmanx/
http://pcmanx.sourceforge.net/phpBB2 (Chinese)
http://bbman.sourceforge.net/
http://sf.net/projects/bbman/

City Says "No" but Schools Opt for Linux
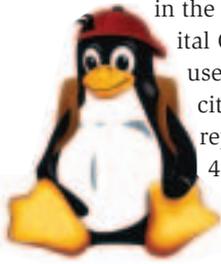
Although school authorities in the Norwegian capital Oslo oppose the use of Linux in the city's schools (as reported in Issue 41 p.10), more and more principals are refusing to follow this recommendation.

According to the Norwegian Linux journal "Linux-Magasinet" four schools have deployed large Skolelinux installations during summer and fall 2004. The growing, Debian-based distribution offers a variety of setups, main server, terminal server, thin client, networked and stand-alone workstation, and is tailored to the needs of schools and other educational institutions.

Interestingly enough, the Oslo and Steinkjær based company "In/Out" which set up these installations, has already sold several Skolelinux solutions to corporate clients. In the course of half a year they delivered about 80 Skolelinux installations throughout Norway – about one per week. "In/Out" serves as the official used hardware broker for public schools and as such recycles and relocates old hardware donated by companies, selling it to schools that can't afford new hardware. ■

http://www.skolelinux.org/portal/index_html
http://www.linuxmagasinet.no/article/articleview/724/1/17/ (Norwegian)
http://www.inout.no/skolelinux/ (Norwegian)

Tech Camps for the Voluntary Sector

NGOs and Open Source – what in theory looks like a dream couple, is actually a relationship that needs a lot of mutual learning on both sides.

The Amsterdam based NGO "Tactical Technology Collective" seeks to help with a series of so called "Source events", camp-style gatherings that bring together NGO workers and techies with Open Source background. Its aim is to offer participants the opportunity to evaluate and explore the practical side of Open Source technologies and to raise awareness about the problems faced by NGO deployers.

After "Summer Source Croatia" in 2003 and "Africa Source" in Namibia 2004, the year 2005 will see a follow-up to "Africa Source" in West Africa, planned for May/June 2005, and "Asia Source" in a small artists' community on the outskirts of Bangalore, India, January 28 to February 4. Both of them will bring together over 100 people each from several countries of the relevant regions.

While "Africa Source II" aims to move beyond conceptual discussions of the benefits of Open Source and technology in general, and to focus on learning by doing, rather than by listening, "Asia Source" – being the first event of this kind in South and South-Eastern Asia – intends to cover a broader spectrum including migration planning, content development, advocacy, campaigning, communication and localization.

Potential participants are invited to contact *asia-source@tacticaltech.org* and *africasource2@tacticaltech.org* as applicable. ■

http://www.tacticaltech.org/