Is OFBiz for Me

Is OFBiz for Me?

Table of Contents

Introduction

This document is all about the question: Is OFBiz something for Me? We have talked to many who are using or considering using Open For Business. We have also talked to many who are trying to leverage OFBiz in their business as a tool or a starting point for more focused endeavors. This document is based on all of that feedback and includes ideas from dozens of discussions with those who are benefiting from OFBiz right now.

There are many ways that OFBiz can be used, many different circumstances where OFBiz can be of value, and many organizations that could benefit from the use of OFBiz.

Asking Build vs. Buy

Build versus buy is a common question for many companies, especially those with special needs or who want to automate unique processes. The difficulty exists because even though an ERP/CRM package can deliver 80% of what you need because of the difficulty of modifying and integrating with the software the remaining 20% can require a great deal of cost and effort, often as much as 80% of the total solution cost.

With OFBiz as an option a much better question than build vs. buy is: "Build vs. Buy vs. OFBiz." Because of the architecture and techniques used in OFBiz, and because it is open source, you can change any component you need to, or even attach logic in various places without modifying the existing logic. With OFBiz your customization needs can be implemented for even less than if you wrote your entire solution yourself. In other words, if you build the whole solution yourself the 20% of the functionality that is custom to your business will likely require about 20% of the total solution cost. If you use OFBiz and customize it to your needs you will probably be able to implement the same functionality for 25-50% of what it would cost developing it yourself as part of a solution from scratch.

With OFBiz you get the best of both worlds. You get the initial functionality that provides most of what you need just like you would with the buy option. You can make the software do anything you want, just like you could with the build option. You save on the initial and maintenance license costs just as you would with the build option. You get a tested and proven architecture and a best-practices based design without having to hire a group of experts, just like you would get with the buy option.

Budget Conscious Organization

Does your organization have a tight budget, but the cheaper solutions are not flexible enough? If you spend all of your budget on the licensing and maintenance costs of the software that does what you need will you have anything left to customize it to your needs? Are you worried about spending tens or hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of dollars on licensing without knowing whether or not the solution will work for you?

If your project or company is very budget sensitive then OFBiz can reduce your initial risk AND you total solution cost, not to you mention the ongoing cost of ownership.

Even if you have plenty of money for your project, wouldn't you rather spend that money on exactly what you need instead of hundreds of features that are part of a bloated package with a bloated price?

Have Custom Needs

The needs and practices of different organizations vary a great deal in different industries. Even in the same industry the ability to compete well in a crowded marketplace often requires that a business be able to change and improve its practices and it is nice when these new practices can be automated and the software can elegantly handle changes in the organization.

With closed source solutions you rarely have the option of changing the included software. In fact, most licensing agreements prohibit reverse engineering so if you want it to work differently you have to re-write the whole thing from scratch. We have worked with companies that have such systems and they often end up with so much "bandaid" code and so much business logic slipped into integration code that the maintenance costs stretch or exceed the limits of the ongoing allocated budget. Many desired features are rejected as "impossible" because adding it in place will have unpredictable consequences, and adding in other places will cost more than is available.

Open For Business is meant to customized. The included applications and components are based on best-practices and can be effectively used as is, but the architecture was designed so that modifying, supplementing, or replacing components can be easily done without affecting the stability of the rest of the system.

This will not only save you money, but it will make it possible for you to implement changes that would otherwise be "impossible."

Consulting/Services Company

The most common question asked about open source software is "how do you make money with it?" The most common answer to that question, among professional and amateur alike, is "by providing services based on the software!"

Software Development

Offering software development services based on open source software is a very natural and valuable service. Because the original software is open source it is possible to hire someone to modify or add to it. One of the main attractions of open source software is that because the source code is available it can be customized or issues can be resolved quickly without having to go through the maker of the software.

This is especially true of enterprise software like OFBiz. We do all we can to make the applications generic and flexible, but it is impossible to satisfy the needs of everyone who uses it with what is offered as part of the core project. Most companies will have sufficient resources to hire someone to add customizations for them. Such arrangements can range from a few hundred dollars to tens of thousands or even millions of dollars. Generally as more money is involved quite a bit more custom functionality and integration with other systems is required.

Business Analysis & Design

Many companies that need information automation software don't know exactly what they need or where they can get it. Helping with these questions requires a combination of business experience and knowledge, and some familiarity with available software packages that can help satisfy the needs of the client. Because the risk of failure is often highest at this stage of a project the rewards for good work can be substantial. This is especially true when a group can demonstrate a history of success.

With Open For Business you can get on your client's good side by recommending a solution that not only has no licensing fees, but can be easily customized. This means that you can actually use all of the good ideas you come up with in the analysis and design phase.

Web Design

Even organizations that don't require fancy software often desire to have a well done web site. If you are doing web site design right now, chances are you have clients that have grown or have become more ambitious and would like to have eCommerce or other functionality on their customer facing or internal web site. Introducing your clients to Open For Business may help them find what they need and give you good work along the way. And if you don't have technical skills for hosting or deployment in house, don't worry, there are many other groups you can work or partner with who can help with just that.

Companies that have customer facing eCommerce sites often want to update and improve the layout and design of their site(s). Some companies even regularly update large portions of their sites for promotions, current events based specials and so on. Sometimes these companies have employees that do this work, but it is more common to see companies that want to outsource the look, feel and content of their site.

These services are especially valuable coming from a web design group that has special talent such a artists and marketers. Because OFBiz is flexible and easy to change and maintain you can offer your clients the best of your creativity.

Hosting

Even if a customer does have sufficient money for a great solution they don't always have the expertise or desire in house to keep that solution running. Larger companies do often have staff and systems in place to host their applications, but there are thousands upon thousands of small and medium sized companies that do not. When you consider the cost of the facilities needed for reliable hosting it makes sense to let someone else take care of that, someone who already has those facilities in place an working well for many other organizations.

Because Open For Business is based on a distributable architecture and primarily uses a web based user interface it is easy to use business applications that are remotely hosted. But this is just one possibility for OFBiz hosting.

One of the most significant needs for hosting is for customer facing sites such as eCommerce sites. Many companies prefer to have such sites hosted remotely at specialised hosting facilities because they are more reliable than on-site facilities given redundant internet connections, redundant power sources and so on. This is true even when the company has most of their systems hosted on-site. So, there are even bigger opportunities for eCommerce hosting.

Product Development Company

Just because the functionality in Open For Business makes good sense to implement and maintain as part of an open source solution it doesn't mean that ALL software functionality makes sense for open source licensing.

Open For Business provides generic functionality that is useful to nearly all modern businesses and other organizations. However, we can't reasonably try to address the needs of every niche industry or large business in the world.

We have receive a LOT of feedback asking about why we don't add this or that feature, or cater better to the needs of this or that group. For instance, why don't we create a distribution focused on making it easy for small businesses to deploy and ecommerce solution? And why don't break out this or that framework component or create a special framework project with graphical development tools and the works?

It is difficult to do everything and we have to limit the scope somewhere. But even more important than that is that these are GREAT ideas for potential businesses. These are things that people would likely be willing to PAY for.

There are dozens or hundreds of niche markets or types of businesses that a special software package could be created for. Without OFBiz you would have to target a MUCH wider or larger market in order to sell enough licenses and other services to finance the cost of the creation of the software. Like every good marketing student knows: the more focused your marketing message is the better chance you have of getting the message about your product into the minds of those who might want to purchase it.

By basing your product on OFBiz you can focus on the functionality that makes your product unique and the functionality that serves the needs of your customers. You don't have to worry about architecture and scalability issues. You don't have to worry about basic functionality, general data modeling, and so forth. You can start with 80% of your final product already in place, and just worry about the 20% that you can really use to focus your market position. Plus, you reduce your client's risk in purchasing your product because if anything goes wrong they can easily find other service providers to serve their needs.

A special case of this opportunity is the option of providing applications as services. The Open For Business architecture supports making applications available remotely with only a web browser installed at the client site. This makes it possible to target even smaller companies.

With a little work the OFBiz applications could be customized to allow for the deployment of dozens or hundreds of instances on a single server. Most companies, even Ma' and Pa' car sales shops, could afford a couple or a few hundred dollars a month for a solution that takes care of their accounting, product and inventory maintenance, online as well as live sales, and the many other needs that such a company would have

Even for larger clients they may prefer the option you totally outsourcing the solution and letting you host it as well as develop and maintain it for them.

There are so many opportunities for creating commercial variations of OFBiz that this is one of the big things that we want to get into once the project is to a point where the majority of the functionality needed for basic business operation is in place.

eCommerce Hosting

If you are currently hosting eCommerce clients, chances are you have a small group of clients who are excellent customers but who are growing out of the solution you provide. They may already be asking you about upgrade options and you may be worried about losing a customer or at least potential business from that customer because you can no longer meet their needs.

Open For Business gives you the perfect solution to this problem. There are no licensing fees, so you don't have to worry about the sticker shock of a $30K, $50K, $200K or even greater than a one million dollar license fee, not to mention the maintenance license and customization costs. But, OFBiz easily competes with these larger packages and has not only won contracts competing with such expensive packages, but has also been used to replace them.

One of the most mature and feature-rich aspects of OFBiz is the eCommerce solution. It has been used for many different live sites, and more are popping up all the time. We are constantly receiving feedback and contributions of improvements to the eCommerce application and related components.

What is even better is that you can keep your client. You can continue hosting their eCommerce solution and you can either do your own customization, deployment and maintenance or you can outsource any or all of those tasks to other OFBiz service providers. We can train you for any of these services you want to provide, or we can help you find an OFBiz affiliate to provide the service for you.

User of an eCommerce Package

So, you already have an eCommerce package in place. That's great. Transitioning to Open For Business is even easier when you already know what you are doing. But why would you want to make the switch to OFBiz?

We have worked with lots of people who have moved from other systems. These are the main reasons why:

- The current solution does not have desired features, is not flexible and customizable enough, and/or cannot integrate with other systems (either within the company or in partner companies).
- The license or license maintenance fees of the current solution are just too much for what the system is delivering.
- The current solution cannot scale sufficiently to handle the increased traffic on the site as it grows.

Open For Business gives you the perfect solution to these problems. There are no licensing fees, so you will save a ton of money there. It is easy to customize, so will save money and get more of the features that will set your business apart. OFBiz easily competes with the largest packages on the market and has not only won contracts competing with such expensive packages, but has also been used to replace them.

One of the most mature and feature-rich aspects of OFBiz is the eCommerce solution. It has been used for many different live sites, and more are popping up all the time. We are constantly receiving feedback and contributions of improvements to the eCommerce application and related components.

Application Server Vendor

If you are a J2EE based application server vendor you are probably dealing with the question of how to differentiate your offering from the competition in such a saturated market. OFBiz has to have a good app server to run well. That's a given. The big opportunity for both of us comes into play when you consider that an app server can be benefited by those who are using OFBiz. We have helped many companies buy app servers to run OFBiz on. In general it is a great complement to any application server offering.

Offering OFBiz with your app server will not only give you a great eCommerce package and suite of enterprise applications, it also gives you an advanced, flexible framework that effectively uses many different open source tools. This can serve as a basis for an offering that helps your customers develop J2EE applications faster and more effectively than ever before.

We have sample configurations for many different app servers, and configuring new ones is not difficult. There are no licensing fees for OFBiz, so you don't have to worry about increasing your price or costs.

Some Questions and Answers collected on user ML

Reports & analytics capabilities

OFBiz currently has a few dozens pre-written reports OOTB, and more can be added using the OFBiz tools, or an external reporting tool (which is still very common, ie companies that use something like Crystal Reports or Business Objects will use that with their OFBiz applications). OFBiz has tools in the framework to facilitate building of user interfaces, and these same tools are used for building reports. This provides a high level of efficiency, and allows developers to use the same tools they are used to... and in some cases scripts and other things can even be reused in reports.

OFBiz also includes some BI infrastructure to support defining and populating star schemas, which can then be used for ad-hoc or pre-written reports. A limited star schema exists, and work is going on to extend it.

Integration and Interoperability (SOA Architecture, Web Services offered)

The OFBiz logic layer is itself a Service-Oriented tool, and all primary logic in OFBiz is implemented as services. Many of these services can be exposed externally as web services automatically, and the more complex ones can be exposed as web services (or call web services) through web services code that maps to them.

OFBiz Workflow (EDA Architecture)

Though you may find two Workflow Engines in OFBiz (in older releases in specialpurpose : workflow and shark directories) OFBIz itself does not use a Workflow Engine. It has been tried, but OFBiz is finally using EDA through its concept of ECA (Event Condition Action)

Usability (for final customers, and administrators)

Usability is very subjective, but I'll try to answer in a helpful way.

OFBiz is often customized for larger organizations, and in those cases the best usability is achieved by analyzing processes and then building user interfaces to directly support those processes. This results in something specific to end-user requirements and is far better than any OOTB user interface that even the best designers could create without specific requirements.

That is the main design goal behind OFBiz: easy customization since the only way to get a really good UI is to do so based on very specific requirements... and those requirements tend to change dramatically between organizations, in many cases even organizations in the same industry.

The OOTB user interfaces are primarily meant for easy reuse in custom user interfaces, so they mostly avoid automating any specific process and are instead meant to fit into any process desired. However, using the OOTB interfaces is pretty common and is usually best done by documenting where and how to do common tasks according to the processes of the organization. In other words, instead of creating a custom UI when you are on a tighter budget you can simply document how to use the OOTB interfaces, and while not usually excellent this way it is quite adequate for smaller organizations and gives them more functionality and ability to automate things than they would have in most software, allowing them to avoid large numbers of spreadsheets and such. Overall this results in tools to keep track and automate organizational information that are far more efficient and usable that a hodge-podge of various systems.

Personalization potential

Personalization is an extremely general term, broadly meaning behavior or data that changes according to the user. There are hundreds of features in OFBiz ecommerce and the OFBiz back-end (manager) apps that would fit this description. Please feel free to send over more details and I (or others) will be happy to comment on them.

Multidevice sites available?

It is pretty easy to build sites targeted at different devices, and there are some available OOTB. If by "device" you mean a specific UI then the hhfacility component is a good example. If by "device" you mean specific hardware control (like cash drawers and CC scanners), then the POS component (Point Of Sale) has some good stuff.

Accessibility considered?

There could be 2 acceptations here

- Ergonomy
  - In ecommerce the templates are often changed so much that accessibility ends up more in the hands of the designers and developers who customize the system (so make sure you have a good service provider!). The OOTB ecommerce templates do a pretty good job of this by using styled text instead of images, alt-text on images, and so on.
  - For the OOTB (Out Of The Box) back-end functionality, accessibility is considered, and to be maintained it must be considered in customizations. These are primarily web-based applications and to improve accessibility are very text-heavy, etc.
  - Note also that OFBiz back-end is able to be read from left to right or right to left (try Chinese or Arab languages to check)
- For disabled persons
  - We did some effort in the back-end part of OFBiz. Sight disabled persons should be able to work with OFBiz without too much pain. For instance, following Jeffrey Zeldman's excellent advices in his "Designing with Web Standards" book (see our books page for details) we have implemented an access key to skip navigation and go diretly to content area. This concept could be extended of course...