

VA Vista Open Source Enablement Executive Summary



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The Vista system is the beating heart of the VA's clinical infrastructure, and the ACT-IAG report in May of 2010 has made it clear that an open source, open standards approach is required to maintain Vista's utility and leadership in healthcare IT. Red Hat and Amentra are the world leaders in Open Source.

The advantages to an open source, open standards Vista are well-articulated by the ACT-IAG report. It is important to recognize, however, that creating an open source community around Vista is much more complex than resolving intellectual property concerns, setting standards, and ensuring proper review of code submitted to the project. Executed properly Open Source Vista will muster the collective efforts of the legions of Vista developers both inside and outside the VA, extending the software's reach and encouraging an ecosystem of private concerns which can contribute to its success.

Proper governance of the project is the means by which this transformation will take place. Based on years of experience in creating and cultivating open source communities, Red Hat proposes the following plan for the creation, governance, and deployment of an Open Source Vista in the VA:

Establish a Governing Body

A proper open source community cannot belong to a single stakeholder. There are already many stakeholders in the Vista community, and they need to be brought into the fold. This is best accomplished through the creation of an independent governing body, which will preside over the Open Source Vista project. The body will define the necessary policies and procedures for the project, and provide the infrastructure necessary to handle the daily tasks of development, including issue tracking, a version control system for source code, mailing lists, wikis, and so on.

It is critically important that this governing body be composed of all members of the Vista community, and not representing the interests of one stakeholder or another -- even if that stakeholder is the VA. The governing body is responsible for setting the tone, priorities, and strategy of the project.

The purpose of the Governing Body is to create the canonical (or "upstream") Open Source Vista distribution, which represents the collective effort of the entire Open Source Vista community. This canonical edition may serve as the basis for many "downstream" efforts, including the VA's own Vista implementation.

There are a number of existing open source Vista projects already in place. One or more of these organizations may be willing to serve as the Governing Body, or form the basis for a new, more inclusive body.

Establish the Intellectual Property Terms

Without clear licensing and policies on intellectual property, developers will be unwilling to contribute to the Open Source Vista project. We suggest that the

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existing VA codebase, to which the government has unlimited rights, be released to the Open Source VistA project and be licensed under an OSI-approved license. This way of releasing government source code has already been used by the OSCMIS project at the Defense Information Systems Agency. It ensures that issues of rights and ownership are clear from the outset.

Once the rights to the core codebase are clear, subsequent changes to the open source project must be similarly clear. The project will ask each contributing developer to sign a contributor's agreement, similar to that found here: <http://fedoraproject.org/wiki/Legal/Licenses/CLA>. This ensures that ongoing changes to the project are made free of encumbering intellectual property or risk of infringing patents.

The intellectual property terms should cover data as well as software. Drug allergy data, data on terminology, and many other artifacts of VA's VistA system should be made available as well. Making this data public, mindful of security and privacy concerns, would immediately increase the value of the Open Source VistA project, and would represent an enormously valuable contribution to the collective work of healthcare providers around the world.

Establish an VA Productization Team

Once the open source project is established, it's now possible for the VA to create its own downstream distribution of Open Source VistA. This requires an internal team that's equipped to review, test, certify, package, and support a derivative work that serves the VA's need. Given the structure of the VA, it may be appropriate to have many such teams in different regions. In any case, these teams should endeavor to work as much as possible in the upstream Open Source VistA project, such that their contributions are shared with the broader community.

Keeping improvements or fixes local to a particular region or facility ultimately marginalizes that work and makes other community improvements inaccessible or difficult to incorporate. This dynamic between many cooperating but superficially redundant projects is already used to great effect in many open source communities.

The VA Productization team should articulate and develop create rules and procedures for contributing to the open source project, with an eye towards making contributions as simple as possible.

Establish an VA VistA Internal Certification

The VA VistA Productization team should create a standard set of tests, reviews, and approvals which serve as prerequisites for release to their users. Harmonizing VistA implementations in this way ensures interoperability between VistA implementations, while permitting the greatest possible freedom for each region,

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department, or office to improve VistA for their own purposes. Again, any such improvements should be contributed to the upstream project. Again, much of this work has already been accomplished in the context of the SAC standards.

Optionally, Establish a Public VistA Certification Program

Just as an internal VA certification program provides a baseline platform on which others can improve, it may be appropriate to establish a similar certification program for the upstream Open source VistA project. This certification would be carried by downstream VistA distributions, and would ensure that they each work together, despite distribution-specific improvements.

This plan adheres closely to the well-established "Fedora" model, pioneered by Red Hat. It satisfies the needs of the developer community and the enterprise user community simultaneously. This model has been effectively used in many large-scale open source projects, including Red Hat's own Enterprise Linux, Novell's SUSE Linux Enterprise Server, JBoss Enterprise Application Platform, and the Eclipse development tools.