



## OpenNTF.org: The Future of Lotus Notes & Domino?

Can the open source movement effect a paradigm shift in Notes and Domino development?

By Terrance A. Crow, Technical Editor

**W**hat do you get when you combine a passion for the Notes/Domino platform with the spirit of open source? You get OpenNTF (<http://www.openntf.org>). Based on Nathan Freeman's vision dating back to the R5 beta cycle in 1998, and on the more recent addition of Bruce Elgort's organizational flair, OpenNTF has a stated mission "to provide applications for Lotus Notes as open source which may be freely distributed, to increase the awareness of the power of Notes."

There's a wide variety of open source projects, and Nathan Freeman says he's always looking to expand the list. "Mail template modifications are a big one. Messaging is so critical to the operation of so many Notes shops, but at the same time, its use is very personal and specific to a given user. So we're putting a lot of focus on super-configuration on mail. That's seeing some great payoff, and will see a bit more with our OpenNTF Notes 6 mail template." [Editor's Note—This was released in October and is available from the OpenNTF Web site.]

But mail templates are hardly the only applications. Freeman continues, "The other big area is development tools—enablers that cut development time for Domino apps. XML/XSLT abstractions, workflow templates, Crimson are designed to make it easier and faster for Domino shops to build and deploy new tools. Developers like to build things that save them from a lot of work later. We also like to solve really hard problems and show off the results."

The open source community can be strict about what platforms it supports. When I installed the drivers for my NVIDIA GeForce4 Ti4600 graphics card, for example, the loader reported that the drivers "tainted" the operating system with code that wasn't freely available. Open source developers can treat commercial platforms such as Domino and Oracle as suspect, because their experience

with such platforms hasn't lived up to their expectations. I asked Freeman if he had seen any such attitude among the developers contributing to the OpenNTF effort.

"We're not drawing participation from the general open source community yet. What we're getting are Notes/Domino developers who are already specialists. It would be great to someday get a lot of participation from the same kind of people that work on new Linux kernels or KDE. But I don't see that happening any time soon."

"We're targeting better solutions for Notes/Domino shops, and in a broader sense, the proof that Domino is itself a super-scalable platform. To do that, we need brilliant Notes developers, and that's what we're getting. These people are participating out of a sense of passion for the work and the platform. So they certainly aren't going to be reluctant based on the fact that Notes is commercial."

The twin goals of bringing together talented and driven Notes/Domino developers with making their work available as open source is powerful, but it isn't dramatic enough to illustrate what I think is the most compelling argument for this approach. Freeman summed it up best when I asked him where he'd like OpenNTF to be in five years.

"I tend not to think that far ahead. But assuming we can keep the momentum building into a significant movement, I'd like to see OpenNTF as a paradigm (and for once, I'm using it in its true sense) for general business application development. A lot of companies operate under the delusion that they're better off with proprietary applications to run their businesses. Making the user solution standard and interoperable among enterprises would be an enormous benefit for every one of the 30 Fortune 1000s I've worked in. I'd love for OpenNTF to demonstrate the viability of such an approach. It would be a great extension to

the fundamental idea of open source, pushing open processes as well as open technology."

Whereas Linux and its tremendous potential as an OS platform provide ample opportunities for developers to share code for everything from drivers to applications, OpenNTF could potentially do the same thing for groupware applications. It could offer not only the shared code for a given application, but, as Freeman points out, shared processes as well. You'd get not only an application based on best practices, but procedures to use it based on best practices—and presented in a context that itself is based on best practices. The OpenNTF site can potentially turn the combined intellectual power of the best and brightest Notes/Domino developers loose on the workflow problems of the world.

That's scarier for the developers than simply sharing code. Many companies consider their processes proprietary and a source of their competitive advantage. Perhaps that's why they spend so much time and money constantly developing and redeveloping them.

How much better off could businesses be if we got above the mundane processes? If we pooled our expertise and solved the common problems collaboratively? How much better off would we be if we could focus on projects that really advanced our products and services?

Is it better for my developers to write yet another purchasing system in Notes, or to write the B-to-B e-commerce site that gives me a competitive advantage while leveraging open process and open source solutions for purchasing? With the latter, I get a good purchasing process and application and a competitive advantage. That's the best of both worlds.

OpenNTF is the first site I've seen to touch on this potential. Who knows? This might be the start of a truly important change in the industry—products and services that focus on the customer and not a vendor. That would be a welcome event! **ADVISOR**