

Open Source Library Systems: A Guide. By Robert Wilson and James Mitchell. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021. 155 p. \$32.00 softcover (ISBN 978-1-5381-4139-7); \$95.00 hardcover (ISBN 978-1-5381-4138-0); \$30.00 e-book (ISBN 978-1-5381-4140-3).

Robert Wilson and James Mitchell have written *Open Source Library Systems: A Guide* with two purposes in mind: “to gather in one place information on a variety of open source software (OSS) used by libraries worldwide” and “to provide an updated treatment of library OSS that has been sorely needed” (137). This approachable guide accomplishes both purposes and is well suited for anyone seeking a practical understanding of the parameters of OSS, the relationships and differences between OSS and proprietary software, and the place of both in the current library ecosystem.

The guide begins with two chapters recounting the history of OSS in computer science and the development of OSS applications in libraries. The first chapter explains the important difference between OSS and free software: “Free—also referred to as ‘libre’—software is not to be confused with free, as ‘in gratis’ or ‘without cost’” (2). Software without cost is often referred to as freeware. The user may not have access to the source code in freeware, and there are no assurances that the application will do what the user needs. OSS comes with licenses that allow users to see the source code and copy, use, and develop this code to meet their needs. The source code is libre, but there are costs associated with access.

Taking a high-level view, the authors describe how library automation supplanted manual workflows on the back end, and the impact of a world increasingly dominated by born-digital and electronic content on public-facing systems. OSS solutions arose to meet the need to share and manage nonprint resources. Integrated library system (ILS) vendors began implementing OSS technologies in their products, but in a highly competitive environment many ILS vendors have either merged or been bought out.

The authors integrate the evolution of OSS license types into the historical narrative and provide descriptions of the most common licenses for OSS applications used by libraries and other cultural heritage institutions. The chart “Popular Open Source Applications and License Information” (5) serves as a handy reference when reading about specific OSS library solutions in later chapters. Both chapters are brief, clearly written, and provide foundational knowledge that informs discussions about the different types of library systems described in subsequent chapters.

Each chapter, from chapter 3 onward, discusses a type of open source library system and describes the most popular OSS used by libraries. Chapter titles include “Open Source ILS,” “Open Source and Digital Repositories,” “Open Source Discovery,” “Open Source Resource

Sharing,” and “Open Source Electronic Resource Management.” These chapters can be read in any order, as needed. Each chapter begins with the “History and Current State” of the library system type, followed by descriptions of the “Open Source Options.”

Within every chapter, each OSS option includes a brief history and description of the application, as well as a testimonial from a community member organization. The guide authors include information about “Community and Service Providers” and address the “Future Outlook” for that OSS. The chapter formatting allows a reader to quickly determine which OSS library systems are included. The index also includes references to organizations, developers, and terms, as well as the OSS headings.

Throughout discussions about OSS applications, the authors address the risks as well as the benefits of adoption. The guide does not provide detailed information on system implementations, although the appendixes include an essay “Notes on Library Systems Implementations” (139) and a high-level “ILS Selection & Migration Example” (143). The appendixes address some of the challenges that might arise during selection and implementation processes.

When considering the adoption of any library system, whether OSS or proprietary, the authors state that an application should not be judged on itself: “an individual or organization must evaluate the ecosystem around an application” (20). For OSS solutions, libraries need to consider the user community and any service providers that support the application. Service providers can work with the community to respond to development needs and offer hosting and technical support. The OSS system might not have all the functionality needed immediately, but that functionality could be developed within the community.

For proprietary applications, the health of the company must be considered, as well as how well the vendor responds to development requests and support over time. A library can implement a proprietary system that works well until the vendor is bought out by a competitor, which might then have other solutions and a support system favoring other systems options.

With this guide, the authors have made an enormous and intimidating topic accessible to library practitioners and decision makers who must determine their library’s current needs, as well as assess the risks and benefits of choosing open source software.—*Patricia K. Thurston (patricia.thurston@yale.edu), Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut*