

## The Open Group Customer Council Takes Form



Combining the user groups of OSF and X/Open should give more power to the customer's voice.

The world of open systems has always been highly political. This is a common situation when people are trying to agree on something, which in this case is specifications for technical solutions to certain information technology problems. The open systems world is made even more political by the number of companies and organizations competing to put forward their solutions or standards. And, of course, there's the money factor. Billions of dollars are at stake. The players with market share want to hold on to it, the new innovators want to grab a piece of it and customers must dance on the knife's edge of putting up the money for today's solutions while planning to accommodate futures that only can be guessed at.

The formation of The Open Group and its Open Group Customer Council (OGCC, a consolidation of the OSF End User Forum and the X/Open User Council) brings the open systems marketplace one step closer to political stability. Members of the OGCC lobbied strongly for a consolidation of X/Open and OSF, starting as long as two years ago, according to Denis Brown, vice president of PRC, Inc., a Washington, DC, area systems integrator. Brown is his company's representative on the OGCC and was a user representative to the X/Open board of directors when informal discussions of a consolidation first came up. "It didn't seem likely at first," he recalls. "The two organizations did very different things. We didn't look at the synergy that could arise from

bringing together the management structures of the two organizations."

In later discussions, members of the OSF and X/Open user groups identified that synergy and how it could best be channeled. These customers realized that a combined organization would give them more influence with vendors of open systems solutions. The OGCC membership represents over 25 percent of worldwide IT buying power, and they nominate full voting directors to the Open Group, X/Open and OSF boards of directors. "The new customer group is more diverse and more representative of the entire industry than ever before," says Brown. "It gives the customer voice more breadth and greater credibility with vendors."

Achieving this credibility is important if the open systems partnership between customers and vendors is to progress. OGCC requirements must clearly represent the needs of the majority of customers, and the OGCC must convince vendors that products meeting those requirements will be purchased. This is a fundamental open systems conundrum. Which comes first, the product or the requirement? Customers would like open systems products to be available before they commit to purchases. Vendors would like customer commitments to purchase before starting a costly product development cycle.

The Open Group has put in place processes to help solve the conundrum. Among these are the OSF Advanced Technology Offering (ATO) and Pre-structured Technology (PST) processes, and the

X/Open product specifications development process, which is backed by the X/Open brand's guarantee of compliance with international specifications. These processes are geared to speeding time-to-market and to reducing and amortizing the risks associated with developing and deploying new open systems technology and specifications.

The participants in these programs have stepped up to the plate. Now more open systems customers must participate in these relatively low-cost programs and "put their money where their mouth is when it's time to make purchases," says Brown. "But it isn't easy. Technology managers often must make technical decisions based on the immediate needs of their organization. They can't always wait two years for the desired and promised solution to be ready."

Over the past 10 years, much progress has been made in delivering and deploying open systems technology and specifications. The Distributed Computing Environment, the Single UNIX Specification (formerly known as Spec 1170), the Motif user interface and the Common Desktop Environment are examples. But now the old open systems idealism, which abhors compromise and slows the process, must give way to a new pragmatism that embraces essential compromise. The formation of The Open Group, and the OGCC within it, embodies such pragmatism. The OGCC intends to reach out—to other industry groups, to other vendors and to more enterprises, both large and small—to foster greater cooperation and collaboration among all the players in the open systems marketplace.

"What the OGCC gives us," says Brown, "is a way to bridge the natural differences in perspectives between customers and vendors. And it gives us a way to bring into the process industry players important to our businesses who, until now, have had no reason to participate in any major way." ■

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