Slide 1: Promoting Openness and Freedom of Choice

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

My name is Noel Cuschieri and today I will talk to you about Openness and more specifically how Open Standards can promote Freedom of Choice.

This presentation will be followed by another interesting topic. My colleague, Malcolm Mizzi will in fact talk to you about Open Source Software.

So what do we mean by Openness and why is it so important?
Slide 2: Why Openness?

We believe that Openness is about people working together towards common goals. It is therefore an environment where Walls and Barriers, are replaced with Transparency and Visibility, with the intention to harness and maximize our creative potential.

From an IT perspective Openness is about improving how computer systems exchange information and can be use together to make better ICT services.

Ultimately we believe that Openness is about Empowerment and Maximum Choice.

It is interesting to note that the biggest success story for using these values in ICT related decisions is the evolution of the Internet.

It all started because a group of researchers needed and wanted to share their data across long distances. Back at that time, there were no networks linking individual systems, so they decided to create their own communication methods. Instead of keeping these communication method (or specifications) to themselves, they made it available for everyone to use and improve on.

And from two nodes (or computer systems), to four, to hundreds, millions, etc.; the biggest network in the world was born. And not surprisingly, these open methods or specifications are still the foundation of the Internet as we now it today.

But even Openness, comes with its own set of Challenges.
Slide 3 and 4: Openness has its own challenges

In fact, one of the biggest challenges when talking about Openness is in the name itself. Since Openness is perceived as a good quality, it can be used incorrectly (or out of context) to create a false sense of security or ambiguity.

So for instance, if I tell you, “Our system is based on open principles” or “The system will be installed on an open infrastructure”.
We might think that this is a good system since there is open mentioned, and maybe it is, but do we really now? Do we actually now what it does, or should be doing?

That’s why we believe that like in other ICT disciplines and areas, Openness should be considered within a context so requirements are properly understood. We’re doing this of course since we want to get the best value from our investments. On the other hand, if we do not, then Openness can be taken to an extreme and add unwarranted costs and extra work.

As an example, let’s imagine a run of the mill company. So we want to introduce transparency (an Openness value) to improve the business relationship with our customers and other stakeholders.

One possible avenue is saying, “From today on, our company will document each and every discussion our employees are having and publish them on our corporate website”. This is a type of transparency of course, but are we adding enough value to justify the costs incurred. Do our stakeholders really care about what I ate for lunch yesterday? Probably not.

On the other hand, publishing the financial status of the said company is perhaps more reasonable and justifiable since it has direct impact to relevant stakeholders.

So, what is MITA doing to promote Openness?
Open is now engrained and integrated as a key guiding principle in the MITA Strategic Plan. But that wasn’t enough. MITA has also created specific initiatives and projects to target areas which we believe can have considerable beneficial impact to public implementations.

One of these key areas is in fact the subject of my presentation, i.e. the proliferation of Open Standards in Government to improve ICT related public implementations.

So having spoken about Openness in general and before jumping into Open Standards, let’s first have a quick look at Standards in general.
**Slide 6: What is a Standard?**

A Standard (both in ICT and other areas) is most of the time a documented agreement among a community of interest to solve a common problem (that they have) using a common solution.

Before a specification (in ICT the common solution usually is a specification of sorts) is actually formalised into a standard, there is whole process that needs to take place. That is why usually a Standard lifecycle and terms of use are managed by a recognised (by the community of interest) organisation or group of organisations.

The bigger the community and the more internationally recognised is the organisation managing the standard, the more prominent is the standard and the more it is actually implemented in products or services.

We mostly need standards to:

1) Reproduce similar products, processes and services
   - For instance what if we had to produce one million electric kettles across 10 European factories in only a month. It is critical that all the relevant stakeholders, have a very clear understanding of that the kettle should be doing and how it has to be assembled, i.e. it’s specification. If not, we’ll end up with a million different kettles!

2) Produce compatible products
   - Electric kettles need a standard power source. Without power, an electric kettle becomes an expensive water can.

But even in this simple example we are already aware of some challenges, like the fact that there is no universal standard for power sockets or even voltage regulation. Again we find that purpose and context plays an important role when setting a Standard.

So what makes a Standard “open” in the IT world? Does a Standard become “open” or is it born that way?
Slide 7: What makes a Standard “open” in the IT world?

If the Openness values described before (such as Transparency) are fully integrated within the Standard’s whole lifecycle, then it can be called an Open Standard.

More specifically, in IT an Open Standard is a technical specification which more often then not is subject to full public assessment and can be used without constraints in a manner equally available to all parties.

In contrast proprietary or closed standards have specific terms of use which might reduce our choices when designing IT solutions or when implementing the standard within other products.

In principle, an Open Standard should remain “open” during its creation process within the organisation (so for example allowing willing parties to participate in defining the standards, ensuring there the process is not biased, etc.), when implemented from product vendors and finally when used by the actual user.

This means that solution providers / product vendors should avoid creating their own flavour of the standard when incorporating them in their product; because if they do so they might run the risk to create incompatible products.

So what MITA doing about Open Standards?
Slide 8: How is MITA promoting Open Standards?

From a Governance point of view, MITA has published a Policy and Directive informing Government organisations to adopt Open Standards when procuring ICT systems for public implementations.

We’re also highlighting that the currently adopted ICT standards and technologies within Government are listed in the Adopted Specifications List available through our Policy Framework. This list should indicate to prospective solution providers the international specifications which are either used or in the pipeline to be used in Government.

We are also aware of the pains involved and the added complexity incurred when dealing with multiple standards for the same business requirement such as the issue with multiple power sockets. To avoid unnecessary costs, we are advising, that unless there is a very valid reason, we should always stick to one standard per business need.

Ultimately we are doing all this because we believe that Open Standards are key to:

a) minimise unwarranted lock-in scenarios and dependencies
   - Sometimes business decisions are taken due to ICT constraints. We want to avoid that and to use ICT as an enabler.

b) improve our integration capabilities and re-usability opportunities, thus making the best use from our investment, and of course

c) improve access to public information, as the internet does and keep on doing over these past decades.

As mentioned before, all ICT related policies, standards and directives pertaining to Government can be found in our GMICT Policy Framework, i.e. ictpolicies.gov.mt

And since we’re talking about openness, here’s a sneak peak at something we’re currently working on.
Slide 9: What’s next?

So we have mentioned the policy that directs public organisations to adopt Open Standards and we have also mentioned the Adopted Specifications as a list of international Standards recognised by Government.

MITA now wants to give the opportunity to anyone to recommend the inclusion of an internationally recognised ICT Standard in Government.

In a nutshell everyone can upload a business case through a form which we will make available online in the coming months, so that our evaluation team can:

a) review the request and in doing so identify all relevant contributory bodies

b) together the identified advisors, assess the impact in terms of benefits, risks, costs, etc and

c) if deemed appropriate recommend for inclusion in the Adopted Specifications, published through our GMICT policy framework.

From then on, any solution provider can make use of the Standard in question in their designs for public implementations.

As pointed out before we have also realised that Open Standards are key to improve how computer system interoperate more effectively. It was therefore a natural choice for us to link the Open Standards initiative with another initiative, that of Interoperability. Basically Interoperability aims to improve the way systems, services and process work together to produce better services.
Slide 10: Open Standards key for better Interoperability

In fact, in the coming months, MITA will launch the Malta Interoperability Centre which is going to be a meeting place where anyone can find relevant information and practices about Open Standards and other related initiatives that improve interoperability.

It will be also a place, where real life challenges and most importantly real life experiences and lessons learnt are openly shared.

We also want to use this portal to hear about your own experiences, ideas and even concerns.

Ultimately we believe that this feedback loop is critical, so together we can create better ICT services. This is why we are promoting openness and more specifically Open Standards to give us more choices in our ICT decisions.

Thank you very much for your attention. That was all from my side.

Now I hand over to my colleague Malcolm Mizzi.
SLIDE 13 – What is Open Source?

- Perhaps one of the most prevalent facts about OSS is that Source code is made available.

- However there are other aspects which relate to license and distribution, in the context of modification and re-usability of that source code.

- Another important factor which is not mentioned in the slide is that OSS tends to be more innovative. This is because OSS is supported through collaboration between communities. Communities made of different people coming from different backgrounds. Each and every individual in the community would collaborate towards a common goal.
SLIDE 14 – OSS Misconceptions

During our research coming up with the vision paper we encountered a number of misconceptions. Perhaps the most prevalent misconceptions include:

- **OSS equates to Cost Savings**
  Although this is somewhat true in terms of Acquisition cost, I am sure that we all agree that TCO merits a more comprehensive discussion then just acquisition cost (consideration should include Training, Support and Exit Costs)

- **OSS equates to Low Quality**
  During our research we encountered a number of people who were reluctant to consider OSS because of fear of low quality. On the contrary, today OSS has reached quality levels that equal other commercial software

- **Proprietary vendors do not acknowledge OSS**
  Today, Vendors, traditionally not associated with Open Source, have endorsed OSS models and are investing considerably in various shapes and forms in OSS. Such vendors include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM and many others.
SLIDE 15 – OSS Strategic Direction

- Moving on to the MITA business plan; in its 3 year plan, MITA seeks to facilitate the adoption of Cost Effective and non disruptive Open source Software.

Form a business perspective this translates to

- Reviewing the application of OSS within Government an activity which is already in progress
- Launching of Open Source Observatory and Repository (OSOR) on a national scale
- and Identifying best of breed OSS products to be used/ re-used across Government
Another interesting fact to mention is that MITA has already employed a number of Open Source Software products. Such software includes:

- UBUNTU and Centos at operating system level
- MySQL at a Database Management System level
- Plone for collaboration
- ….. and a number of others

Besides MITA, other ministries including a number of NGOs are using OSS actively and routinely, in their day to day operations.
SLIDE 17 – The Strategic Principles

- Moving on to the vision paper itself, we immediately identify a number of fundamental principles. Freedom of choice is one such principle.

- The vision also highlights the importance of an equal level play between proprietary software and OSS. It also seeks to disseminate the adoption of OSS:
  - Through awareness programs: Such as the participation on EU Open Source Expert Groups
  - And through Open Source Initiatives such as Sun Open Source and World Plone Day Malta

The vision also establishes a set of guidelines which encourage and promotes collaboration and reusability.
Moving on to the objectives themselves, the vision outlines a number of immediate and medium term objectives.

From a governance perspective we have the Establishment of a Policy and Directive.

From a more practical perspective there is:

- The setting up of an OSOR and potentially an associated Forge intended to encourage re-usability and collaboration between stakeholders.
- The identification of a an Open Source CMS to be re-used within Government.
- And Investing in the Open Source User Group – promoting collaboration and innovation.

We simply do not have the time to go through all the objectives. So I kindly encourage you to go through the vision paper at your convenience; I am sure that you will find it very interesting.
Moving on to the policy and directive, In June MITA has launched a policy and directive to regulate and ensure a degree of quality with respect to the adoption and use of OSS.

It also ensures that the Cost Effective and Non-disruptive elements are always kept in context.

It also tackles aspects related to licensing and the adoption of an Open Source Business Model.

Ultimately the Policy/Directive are intended to safeguard government's business continuity.

For those of you who may wish to access the Policy and Directive, these are available for download at ictpolicies.gov.mt
If you have any feedback or comments on the vision paper, you are kindly asked to send us an email at oss.mita@gov.mt

Thank you