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Open Forum Europe Summit 2010

Letter from OFE Chief Executive, Graham Taylor

To those of you who attended our Summit on Thursday June 10th a big thank you for helping to make the event our most successful to date. And to those that couldn't attend, either due to lack of space or for other logistical reasons I would like to give you a flavour of what happened.

It is clear from the turnout on Thursday that the issues relating to openness in computing are no longer the preoccupation of a small fringe minority. They have now taken centre stage in the debate about the future direction of the IT industry. Policy makers and corporations alike are no longer ignoring the fact that the tide is turning away from the business models of old, which may have locked customers into systems based on proprietary IT standards. Open computing's time has come. We heard it from some of the most respected academics in the field, from some of the biggest companies in the industry, and most importantly from the European policy makers whose job it is to ensure that technology is made to serve the interests of European citizens, governments and businesses, rather than maintain revenue streams for some companies with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

We could not have hoped for a better keynote speech from European Commission Vice President Neelie Kroes. For those of you that have followed OFE events over the years you will recall that she gave a hard-hitting speech in favour of open standards for the IT industry at our briefing in 2008. This year she went a step further: choosing open standards isn't just a smart business decision, it is the obvious way to work, she said. We welcome her determination and personal commitment to take the necessary action to make open standards the norm in Europe.

If Vice President Kroes gets her way, the European Commission's Digital Agenda strategy will serve as a beacon to the IT industry. However, However, not everyone in the Commission shares her views, as she made clear in her speech when she referred to there being "blood on the walls" after some internal debates, and she has a substantial task ahead of her to get her colleagues in line with her vision. We at OFE offer her our full support and will do everything we can to help her achieve her goals.

One specific challenge she faces concerns the revision of the European Interoperability Framework (EIF). The importance of this document cannot be overstated. Without a clear and unambiguous definition of open standards in public procurement across the European Union the move towards open, interoperable IT systems will be stalled. If the public sector remains locked into IT systems based on proprietary standards it means that European citizens will have to follow suit if they are to be able to communicate with the governments and local authorities using the latest technologies - a practise that will soon become the norm.

As Vice President Kroes said herself, this not only results in a waste of public money that most public bodies can no longer afford; it also means a waste of citizens' own money, because if

for example they are to file their taxes online, or if their kids are to submit their homework via the Net they will have to continue buying expensive IT solutions instead of turning to cheaper software and hardware products that comply with open standards.

The latest draft of the revised EIF is a backwards step. If nothing is done to improve the document as it stands, Europe will have missed a rare opportunity to break with the past and adopt a more open and competitive approach to the public procurement of IT. We at OFE believe there should be a complete re-write of the EIF. If this doesn't happen Vice President Kroes may not achieve the goals she is working so hard towards.

This year's Summit avoided protracted debates about many detailed aspects of openness, eg the value of open source software and an open Web, although our support for these issues remains undiminished. We felt that our time would be put to better use focusing on open standards because that is the debate of today.

We brought together an impressive line-up of speakers to tackle this issue, which in our opinion shouldn't be an issue at all. It's a no-brainer as far as we are concerned. But given the resources available to those that oppose all things open in the IT industry, and given the lobbying success they have had - particularly with regard to the EIF - we decided to present world-renowned thought leaders on the subject, to help state our case. These speakers included academics such as Professor Yochai Benkler, faculty co-director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Harvard University; top executives from some of our member companies including Google, IBM and Oracle, lawyers, and government advisers such as Professor Nigel Shadbolt who works closely with the inventor of the Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee to help the British government transform public access to government information.

These speakers didn't just bang the drum for openness. They identified trends in the IT industry that the Commission's Digital Agenda will have to address. And they explained why what seems a rather esoteric topic like the standardization process is so important to every one of us in this digital age.

I won't go into all the details of their presentations. You can get a snapshot yourself by looking at their slides which you will find here.

One final word about our Summit. Originally it was never planned to be an annual event, but more and more people want to know about the issues we are raising. The numbers of delegates just keeps on rising. So when Vice President Kroes ended her keynote speech by saying that she wants to keep coming back to speak at our event until she has achieved her - and our - goals, we are left with little choice. All I can say is see you next year, and thank you again for your support

Yours sincerely,

Graham Taylor

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