BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

Open Source Web Applications for Libraries. By Karen A Coombs and Amanda J. Hollister. New Jersey: Information Today, Inc. 2010. 268 pages (soft cover). ISBN 978-1-57387-400-7. US$39.50.

Increasingly, libraries are using Open Source Software (OSS) to manage their information online. This book, written by two librarians, provides readers with detailed information on various general OSS web applications, including Content Management Systems (CMS), available specifically for libraries. The book outlines their strengths and limitations and demonstrates how to determine the most suitable software for any given library. Most of the applications described are small and innovative and can be installed in a short time frame.

The book contains 15 chapters divided into four parts: Part I serves as the introduction to OSS web applications such as LAMP and WAMP; it explains their structure in layers, languages used, etc. Many of the OSS discussed also have certain server, scripting language, and database requirements such as Apache Server, PHP or Perl, and MySQL database. The authors provide information on where to find and download these OSS applications. Part II is about the different kinds of OSS for Blogs and Wikis. Part III is about commonly used CMS in libraries, and Part IV provides information on OSS for reference and instruction tools. These tools will help with assignments, research work, library surveys, and citation. Part IV also discusses two open source subject guide tools: SubjectsPlus and LibData. Part V concludes with resource discovery tools and NextGen catalogues to conduct federated searches. Both NextGen catalogues and resource discovery tools offer more sophisticated search possibilities to locate and retrieve information from all of the different resources in a library (e-journals, monographs, digitized collections, etc.) with a single search.

All chapters in the book follow a similar pattern: they discuss the origins of the software, installation, configuration, authority provision and authentication where needed, administration, customization, and support groups to consult when necessary. Each chapter also provides examples of libraries that use the described software along with many screenshots taken at various stages of downloading. There are also screenshots of specific library homepages that use the software discussed.

While explaining the installation processes, the authors use very technical language, but they make up for this by providing many screenshots and codes to include, edit, or erase during software implementation. When the authors talk about downloading the installation packages, creating a directory, changing the name of the directory, and uploading this to the web directory on the server, things get more technical. Personally, I would need help from IT personnel at this point. In libraries like mine, librarians cannot download anything without permission. When speaking of Ruby on Rails, an open source web framework that helps programmers with code writing, the authors mention that a drawback of Rails is "not scaling up well." There is no explanation of what this means and there are no examples provided. But they do go on to mention that changes have been made to make it more scalable. As software programs are constantly upgraded, the OSS versions discussed in this book may no longer be current at the time of reading.

There are many books about web applications for OSS, but very few focus on relaying information to novice librarians dealing with OSS. This book will be a useful reference tool for those already using OSS and for others who may need a brief overview of some current OSS issues in the field. Information in the book is concise, clear, and presented using simple, mostly nontechnical language, so those who are attempting to learn OSS can understand and practice. However, librarians very new to OSS may require help from their IT personnel.

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