

# HP has open-source vision for 'orphan' webOS

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The future of webOS - the innovative mobile software that three successive CEOs at Hewlett-Packard have struggled to make into a profitable product - may lie somewhere in the windowless rooms of a Stanford Medical School radiology lab.

That's where researcher Andrew B. Holbrook is working on ways to operate a cutting-edge, million-dollar medical scanner with the help of a discontinued model Palm smartphone that he bought online for \$50.

HP had bigger things in mind for [webOS](#) when it paid \$1.4 billion to buy Palm two years ago: Executives talked about putting Palm's critically praised software on millions of phones, tablets and even PCs. But after a predecessor abruptly abandoned those plans, CEO [Meg Whitman](#) decided in December that HP would release the code under an open-source license, which means other companies and individuals like Holbrook are free to come up with their own uses.

And while many experts say it's unlikely the software will ever supplant more widely used mobile operating systems from Apple or [Google](#), analysts say webOS could find a new life if developers use it to create applications for specialized automotive, industrial or medical equipment, such as Holbrook's [MRI scanner](#).

Stanford's Holbrook, who has a Ph.D. in [bioengineering](#) and a tinkerer's enthusiasm for writing code, has been working with other researchers on using the MRI in conjunction with new treatment techniques for

removing tumors or unwanted cells without invasive surgery. But as a sidelight, he's used webOS software to create new applications for tracking and adjusting some of the MRI's functions.

Holbrook uses those apps on a modified phone, as well as an HP TouchPad tablet, from which he's removed most of the metal components so he can take them into the room where patients are treated with the massive magnetic scanner.

That can save time, he notes, and perhaps let doctors and technicians interact more closely with patients. Most MRIs are typically operated with more bulky computer equipment that sits outside the heavily shielded scanner room, both to protect the computers from the powerful magnet and prevent them from causing radio frequency interference with the MRI image.

"These are incredibly useful tools," Holbrook said of the webOS gadgets. Holbrook added that he doesn't really want to go into the software business himself, but he's hoping that some health care company or medical device-maker will eventually pick up on his work.

Whether that creates any kind of financial return for HP remains to be seen.

"It's a head-scratcher," said Al Hilwa, a software analyst for the IDC research firm. "Clearly HP has decided they're not going to be able to make money on webOS right away. But it doesn't hurt to have a small ecosystem of developers who are still working on it out there."

HP acquired Palm in a 2010 deal negotiated by then-CEO Mark Hurd, who was ousted in an unrelated scandal before the company could launch new Palm products. His successor, Leo Apotheker, touted the first webOS tablet as a rival to Apple's iPad. But when initial sales proved

weak, Apotheker abruptly halted production on new webOS devices last summer.

Experts debate the pros and cons of webOS: While critics said it could be slow at times, fans said it had innovative features, including an elegant approach to operating several applications at the same time.

Many believe HP's biggest problem was taking too long to bring its webOS products to market, after Apple locked up the tablet business, and Google's Android had already become the leading alternative to Apple's software for smartphones and other gadgets.

Top HP executives, however, insist they're still enthusiastic for webOS. While ruling out new smartphones, Whitman told the San Jose Mercury News in December that HP may one day produce webOS tablets again. She recently told the industry news outlet CRN that the software has "huge advantages" over both Apple's iOS and Android, and that she still believes HP can build a business around it.

HP says it isn't ready to disclose plans for a webOS business. But Sam Greenblatt, a veteran HP manager now helping lead the webOS group, hinted in an interview that he expects other companies will find ways to use the software.

"I'm not going to tell you who's going to make hardware or who's not going to make hardware, but I don't believe webOS is going to be an orphan for long," he said.

Meanwhile, the company has announced a timetable for releasing elements of webOS over the coming months, until it's fully available under an Apache open-source license in September. Experts say that will give the company time to make sure none of the elements are subject to patent claims or other licensing issues.

HP also is adding some elements in hopes of making webOS more appealing to independent developers. These include an open-source development tool called Enyo, which programmers can use to create applications that will run on webOS and other mobile operating systems, including iOS and Android, as well as on PC browsers such as Microsoft Explorer and Mozilla Firefox.

The additions acknowledge what most consider a rule of mobile software: Consumers won't use an operating system unless it comes with lots of applications that serve up information and services, but developers won't build new applications unless they can reach a wide audience of users.

By extending the reach of webOS developers to other operating systems, Greenblatt said, "more people are going to be writing more apps."

Analysts praised the new features, but several said other developer tools offer similar benefits.

"There's no doubt that webOS has its fans," said Stephen O'Grady, an open-source expert with the RedMonk analyst firm. "But at the end of the day, for most developers the attractiveness of the platform is a direct function of the size of that platform's audience, and for webOS, at this point, it's a rounding error."

Like Hilwa, however, O'Grady suggested there could be demand for using webOS in niche devices such as retail kiosks, printers or industrial equipment.

Other webOS enthusiasts have suggested that some phone or gadget-makers may ultimately turn to webOS as an alternative to paying royalties for Android, which has been hit with patent infringement claims from Microsoft, Oracle and others.

"An open-source webOS, backed by [HP](#) or Palm's patent portfolio, should be an attractive alternative to the existing, entrenched mobile platforms," suggested Rod Whitby, the Australian leader of a loose-knit group of "home brew" programmers called WebOS Internals.

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#### MOBILE SOFTWARE PLATFORM:

HP's webOS lagged far behind other smartphone operating systems in number of users, according to comScore's report on U.S. market share in the fourth quarter of 2011:

-Google (Android): 47.3 percent.

-Apple (iOS): 29.6 percent.

-RIM (Blackberry): 16 percent.

-Microsoft (Windows Mobile/Windows Phone): 4.7 percent.

-Symbian (used by Nokia): 1.4 percent.

-HP/Palm (webOS): 1 percent.

SOURCE: comScore

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