

Managing Commercial-Off-the-Shelf (COTS) Items During the In-Service Phase

By Ram White

Configuration Management (CM) of COTS hardware (and software) has become a major interest to many businesses, including many government agencies. COTS by definition, is the "As-Built" configuration of the COTS provider. The users of COTS products normally do not have control or even influence to configuration changes to the COTS products. However, users of COTS product most maintain control of the COTS products usage in their specific applications and therefore must become the configuration manager of this in-service application. In order to control this application (usage), the user must create a definition "document" which becomes the user's authority over the COTS usage configuration.

The first element of this configuration management control process is to address the identification of the COTS item itself. There are two basic choices, using the COTS vendor number or using your own number. Using your own number requires an additional element, that is creating a document defining your numbers, which then can be used to identify vendor products numbers that "equal" your numbers. This is a document in the "old school of CM" was called a source control drawing or source control specification.

Secondly, you must identify the particular usage of a COTS product in order for it to be controlled. This is accomplished by having a document that calls out the COTS product's usage by whichever number you have chosen to use (vendor number or your source control number). This "document," calls out the COTS item(s) to be used in your particular application as the allowable components that make up that configuration. This "document" becomes the design authority definition of your specific application of the product.

Using basic CM procedures for managing changes to the "document" you, the user, are controlling additions, deletions, substitutions, and modifications to your configuration in relation to the COTS components. For example, if the original COTS workstation was delivered (as-built) with a MS mouse and driver software, your design authority "document" would so reflect those configurations. Later when there was a desire to allow use (and procurement) of a Logitech mouse as an alternative, that design authorizing "document" should be revised to reflect the new configuration of alternate mouse and driver. The change process of your design control document would normally incorporate standard change assessment, impact analysis, and funding authorization, i.e., normal CCB process and approval.

The above process becomes even more important to COTS hardware configurations when changes to COTS software are included as part of the equation. Often software upgrades, changes, or additional applications drive major change requirements to hardware. Using standard CM practices to process change requests, change proposals, and change orders against the design authorizing "document" provides the user control of their application and implementation of COTS products.

The normal reactive comment to this approach is that the COTS provider make changes and I (we) can't do a thing about. Vendors do make changes to their products all the time. The real requirement is to understand your life cycle phase relationship in the COTS product delivery process. Vendors are working primarily to the "build phase" whereas once you have bought a product, you are working to the "in-service phase." You must create, document, configuration. The controlling of changes to that definition provides you with the configuration management of your specific and maintain a manageable object, which represents your design authority over your specific application's configuration in terms of COTS components.

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