▸ http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/newsletters/october2009.pdf

OSS Watch
Supporting open source in education and research

▸ **http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk**

IN THIS ISSUE:

- How to build an open source community
- Pragmatic virtuosos
- Strong leadership and openness = software sustainability
- FAQs

Online newsletter available at
▸ http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/newsletters/october009.pdf

Here we are again with the October edition of the OSS watch newsletter. Earlier this month we ran a workshop looking at how you can contribute to an open source project. If you missed the workshop you can always take a look at the live blog to see what happened. This month's newsletter focusses on how project leaders can attract users to their community and we hope that you will enjoy reading the featured article and the blog posts on this subject.

Elena Blanco, Content Editor, OSS Watch ▸ info@oss-watch.ac.uk

News from OSS Watch

New member of OSS Watch team

We are pleased to announce that Sander van der Waal has joined the OSS watch team. Sander is an experienced software developer and he will be spending half his time developing Simal with the remaining half of his time devoted to general OSS Watch activities. Welcome Sander!

▸ http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/about/staff.xml

ATutor LMS: a case study

ATutor is an open source, online learning environment used to develop Web-based courses, author e-learning content, and present instructional materials on the Internet. Greg Gay, the lead developer for ATutor, tells us all about ATutor's history, the project structure and where it is heading.

▸ http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/resources/cs-atutor.xml

New York Times to release document viewer as open source

The New York Times' document viewer allows the newspaper to publish on its website the actual documents mentioned in its stories. In a few weeks the NYT will launch a new version of their document viewer and will also release it as open source.

▸ http://www.mediabistro.com/baynewser/conferences_panels/ona_09_ny_times_to_release_opensource_document_viewer_in_weeks_138725.asp

Landmark GPL violation case

In a landmark ruling that will set legal precedent, the Paris Court of Appeals has decided that the company Edu4 violated the terms of the GNU General Public License (GPL) when it distributed binary copies of the remote desktop access software VNC but denied users access to its corresponding source code.

▸ http://fsffrance.org/news/article2009-09-22.en.html

STAY UP-TO-DATE
▸ OSS Watch news feed
▸ http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/rss/osswatchnews.rss

Get the BUG

The Bug modular consumer device is now available in Europe. A collection of electronic modules are available that snap together and can be programmed using Linux and Java using Eclipse. Perfect for prototyping gadgets and embedded applications, it's a platform for open innovation.

▸ http://buglabs.net/

MySpace launch open source project Qizmt

MySpace has launched a new open source project called Qizmt, which makes a distributed computation framework developed in-house now available for community development. Qizmt is based on the MapReduce distributed processing framework, which is a core part of Google's search indexing infrastructure. A notable difference, however, is that Qizmt runs on large clusters of Windows servers.

▸ http://qizmt.myspace.com/

IBM Opens Linux Innovation Center in Kazakhstan

IBM has opened a Linux innovation center in the capital city of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

▸ http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/ibm-opens-linux-innovation-center-in-kazakhstan-61480067.html

▸ OSS Watch online
▸ OSS Watch blog
▸ Contact OSS Watch
▸ OSS Watch twitter

OSS Watch is funded by the **Joint Information Systems Committee**

JISC

▸ OSS Watch online (http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk)   ▸ OSS Watch blog (http://osswatch.jiscinvolve.org)   ▸ Contact OSS Watch (info@oss-watch.ac.uk)   ▸ OSS Watch twitter (http://twitter.com/osswatch)

How to build an open source community

Full article can be found at: http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/resources/howtobuildcommunity.xml

Community is vital to an open source project. An active and supportive community is the heart of the project. However, having an open source licence is not enough to bring users and developers to your project and build a community.

1. Why do open source projects begin?

Open source software projects are not really any different from other kinds of software projects in how they are initiated. They start out either because someone wants something built or, in the case of product development, someone intends to meet the future needs of others. In the former case, the possibility of sharing the end-result may never even be considered. In the latter case, there is the specific intention of sharing the software, often generating revenue from an appropriate business model.
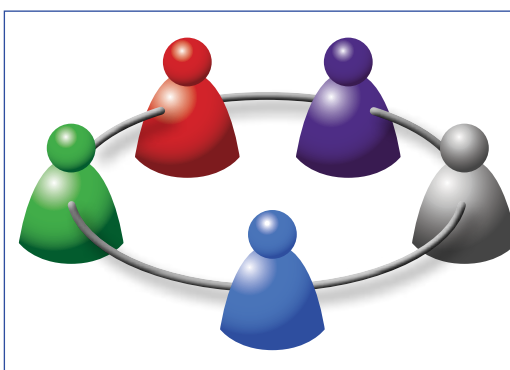
some time, even years, as an "incubation period" during which the initial team works hard to get something working off the ground. If the software is to eventually attract users, the presentation and branding must convince prospective users that the software does something significantly better than the competition. Once interest has been secured, the barrier to entry must then be low: for example, simple things, like the installation procedure, need to be extremely slick. Signing up users is not the end of the story though; in the long run, developers are needed too, at least to handle the the smaller contributions that may bog down a lone developer. Developers might emerge from the immediate user-base but may also come from elsewhere, drawn in by the technical challenge, kudos, or opportunity to improve or publicise their programming skills.

2. What is a community and why do open source projects want to build them?

Communities are simply groups of individuals sharing common interests. Both closed and open source projects have communities of users, most of whom will be relatively passive in terms of their interactions with other community members. On the other hand, either type of community may have members who decide to take on more active roles through, for example, reporting bugs, helping other users, writing documentation or evangelising. The most active members may even be rewarded for their efforts. Microsoft, for example, rewards those in their user community who help people make the most of Microsoft technology through a Most Valued Professional (MVP) programme. In open source communities, active members tend to be rewarded by being granted additional access to, and control over, the project.

3. Typical paths for open source communities

At their outset, open source communities may be extremely small, perhaps with one or two developers and hardly any users. Depending on the type of project, this situation may go on for

4. Steering clear of the pitfalls

It is the responsibility of community leaders to ensure conditions continue to be right for the full potential of open source to be realised. This does not happen automatically and has to be carefully managed.

In their early stages, the most significant concern for projects is likely to be dealing with the inevitable support burden. Handled badly, this might at best, lead to users turning away and at worst might lead to the founder giving up. If success is to be achieved, the leader ultimately has to find people to carry out this work. Employing people is one option; another is encouraging users to help out each other by writing documentation and fixing bugs. However, if this is to happen, there must be an infrastructure in place to allow them to do this. Contributions need to be proactively encouraged and leaders also need to ensure that contributions are helpful and not just opinions.

5. Letting go

Healthy open source communities must have the capacity to outlive their founder's original interest in them; while they rely on a dictator, they risk fragmenting and falling apart when their leaders move on or retire.

▸ http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/resources/howtobuildcommunity.xml

OSS Watch is funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee

JISC

Pragmatic 'virtuosos'

Published by Gabriel Hanganu on October 2, 2009 in business, development, strategy and policy and community.

Message posted today on our social mailing list at work:

'Do you lendaround? Let me know if you sign up and I'll email you an invite which'll make it easier for you to connect into the network'.

According to their website, Lendaround is a free web tool that aims to help people borrow things from one another. It's good to bring friends, neighbours, families and colleagues together by swapping things, such as DVDs, isn't it?

Why do such tools exist? Apparently, because somebody had an idea that made them sleepless in the first instance, and this person persuaded others to help make it happen:

"Looking around his home, Tim noticed how much stuff we all seem to have that doesn't get used very much – at a time when there are a billion people in the world who have not very much at all, and when it would be good to use a bit less of the earth's resources".

The email message reminded me of a good read about The Myth of Crowdsourcing my colleague

Amir pointed out to me recently:

"In the popular press, and in the minds of millions of people, the word crowdsourcing has created an illusion that there is a crowd that solves problems better than individuals. For the past 10 years, the buzz around open source has created a similar false impression. The notion of crowds creating solutions appeals to our desire to believe that working together we can do anything, but in terms of innovation it is just ridiculous".

The crowds by themselves, the author suggests, are unable to produce innovation. It is the highly skilled, highly motivated 'virtuosos' who are the real engines behind the often misused term crowdsourcing.

"Open-source developers are often mentioned as a crowd of motivated programmers ready to meet the world's software needs. A lot of wishful thinkers love to put forth the notion that all large software companies should be quaking in their boots because a crowd of open-source developers is ready to eat their lunch and create software for any purpose. There is no crowd of open-source developers ready to attack every problem. In fact, most open-source projects are the product of one

obsessed individual who wrote the software to meet his own needs. Often this individual was joined by other programmers who shared the founder's vision and, under his direction, created great software. Yes, there are large teams of developers on open-source projects, but without the virtuoso contribution at the outset, they would achieve nothing".

In OSS Watch consultations with HE projects we often need to correct the general view that open source is mainly the affair of a bunch of bearded geeks animated by common idealistic views. In fact, as mentioned in one of our workshop reports, the open development model that lays at the foundation of most open source commercial businesses is based on what Harvard Internet lawyer Yochai Benkler termed *"commons-based peer-production"*, a process by which everyone who contributes also gets something back that furthers their interests.

A certain level of pragmatism associated with the business of open source is perhaps not unrelated with the idea of the highly skilled 'virtuosos' that make crowds vibrate. Something worth exploring further, maybe in a break between watching two lendaround DVDs.

▶ http://osswatch.jiscinvolve.org/2009/10/02/pragmatic-virtuosos/

Strong leadership and openness = software sustainability

Published by Ross Gardler on October 2, 2009 in development, software, strategy and policy and community.

Time and time again we read and hear about how successful open source is maintained by an army of volunteers, yet those who are at the core of successful open source know this is not what makes the project survive in the long term. For example, Greg Kroah-Hartman reported, in a Google Talk, that of 2399 unique contributors active on the Linux Kernel project during a year and a half, roughly 75% of the work was done by people who are paid to do so. All of those people are considered volunteers within the project, but they are not there for the good of their health (although open source work is often fun). Furthermore, half of those contributors only contributed a single patch, whilst thirty people (1.25%) do nearly a third of the work. My own anecdotal evidence, collected from over 8 years of working in projects at The Apache Software Foundation, leads me to assert that the popular "army of volunteers" myth is a result of the chatter of the masses (the other 98.75%). In surveys, interviews and snapshot observations the one patch contributors far outnumber the visionary leaders in a project and as a result it is their voices

and opinions that are heard. At the same time, the leaders know that they need to play down their own importance in order to credit the community, since the contributions of the community are vital to the survival of the project, I'll look at why later in this post. Dan Woods, in *"The Myth of Crowdsourcing"* appears to agree that leadership and vision is what is needed in a successful project:

"There is no crowd in crowdsourcing. There are only virtuosos, usually uniquely talented, highly trained people who have worked for decades in a field…What really happens in crowdsourcing as it is practiced in wide variety of contexts, from Wikipedia to open source to scientific research, is that a problem is broadcast to a large number of people with varying forms of expertise…There is no crowd of open-source developers ready to attack every problem. In fact, most open-source projects are the product of one obsessed individual who wrote the software to meet his own needs. Often this individual was joined by other programmers who shared the founder's vision and, under his direction, created great software".

However, I believe Dan, at least partially, misunderstands the importance of the crowd in crowdsourcing.

The real importance of community

The community is vital to the sustainability of an open project, and, increasingly as I'll discuss later, closed projects too. Note that Dan talks about the *"broadcasting of ideas"*, this is where the *"army of volunteers"* comes into its own. They validate what is happening in the project, they fix bugs, make suggestions for improvements and provide sounding boards for new ideas. Without these contributions a project is completely reliant on a handful of individuals in leadership roles. This dependency presents two main problems. The first is that the project relies on the limited knowledge of the leadership. Even the best of the best don't know everything, or as Mark Twain puts it *"to succeed in life, you need two things: ignorance and confidence".* An effective and successful leader has the ability to step back and listen to those with different experiences, make the right (or best) call and ensure it is actioned. That is, the best leaders encourage, support and reward an army of contributors so that their project continues to excel. The second problem of this dependence on a small group of leaders is that things change. Over time, one or more of those leaders will move on. Where will their replacement come from? If the leaders

have already cultivated an *"army of volunteers"* in an open and transparent way there should be no shortage of people willing and able to step up and take on the role.

What about closed development?

To ignore your community is a mistake in almost every case. Community and the power of crowdsourcing is not, as Dan explains, the sole domain of open source software. Open innovation is becoming increasing popular in most industrial sectors, including closed source software. Microsoft, for example, has its Most Valuable Professional programme which is specifically designed to: *"recognize the best and brightest from technology communities around the world… These exceptional community leaders come from a wide range of backgrounds. They are teachers, artists, doctors, engineers, as well as technologists, who actively share their high-quality, real-world technical expertise with the community and with Microsoft".*

Is openness for me?

Most people starting new projects assume that either their project is too specialised to be of interest to third parties or that opening up to the community will result in them being swamped by well meaning contributors. As a result, they don't engage, support and reward their community. Popular communities do not grow from one member to hundreds overnight, there is little chance of you being swamped. They grow organically and, assuming the community is empowered to self-govern under strong leadership, they grow in self-sufficient way. As for niche projects, an *"army"* of just one person can still be extremely valuable, who knows what just one person can do - after all, you are just one person, right? **If you care about software sustainability you should never ignore your community.**

▸ http://osswatch.jiscinvolve.org/2009/10/02/strong-leadership-and-openness-software-sustainability/

Events

Oct
21/22
NGS Innovation Forum '09, London, 21-22 October 2009
The National Grid Service (NGS) is holding their second annual NGS Innovation Forum at the Magic Circle Headquarters in Euston, London on 21-22 October 2009. The two day event will showcase the impact that the NGS has had on research in the UK, allow delegates to find out more about using the NGS in applied research, enable IT staff to find out how their institution can benefit from the NGS, and how you can contribute to and influence the future development of the NGS.

▸ http://www.jisc.ac.uk/events/2009/10/ngsinnovationforum.aspx

Oct
25
OggCamp unconference, Wolverhampton, 25 October 2009
OggCamp, an open source and open culture unconference, is being held on Sunday 25 October 2009 at the Connaught Hotel in Wolverhampton. OggCamp is being organised by the Ubuntu UK Podcast and the Linux Outlaws and as an unconference is an unscheduled, informal event, there won't be a full speaker schedule published beforehand.

▸ http://oggcamp.org/

Jan 2010
7
BCS event - Public Funds in the UK: Open Source for Document and Content Management? London, 7 January 2010
The British Computer Society's Open Source Specialist Group (OSSG) will be holding a one day event to consider 'Public Funds in the UK: Open Source for Document and Content Management?' on Thursday 7 January 2010 at the BCS Central London Offices, First Floor, The Davidson Building, 5 Southampton Street, London WC2E 7HA. This event aims to examine the challenges of web and document management in the public sector, and the part that open source can play. Mark Elkins is interested in hearing from people who would be interested in speaking at this event as well as those interested in attending.

▸ http://ossg.bcs.org/2009/09/20/public-funds-in-the-uk-open-source-for-document-and-content-management-london-070110/

OSS Watch is funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee

JISC

Frequently Asked Questions

Q Can you help us with procurement?

A Yes. One of our objectives is to help people make an informed decision when considering open source software. We are non-advocacy and do not sell software solutions, therefore we are in a position to help you understand the pros and cons of various approaches to software development and software projects regardless of their licensing conditions.

For more answers to your questions visit: http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/about/faq.xml