

Title: Why Open Source Works

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Open source is an idea which has become a buzz word in the computer development world ever since the Linux operating system gained acceptance. It has become more important today in an uncertain world to be able to buy products with source code. When we are able to extend the product ourselves, we protect our investments in the product. But while end users appreciate this, Progress has a strong reseller community where there is often a fear of losing revenue if the source code was shipped with it. Through a series of white papers, some very interesting commentary on Linux and other open source projects has been made by Eric Raymond, an influential internet developer and writer on open source topics. These papers and others on the open source topic can be found at Raymond's home page <http://www.tuxedo.org/~esr/writings/index.html>. They explain why perhaps resellers should not be so fearful of their profits after all.

First, by open source we mean that the source code is available and can be modified. In fact, most open source projects allow or even require modifications done by outside programmers to make their way back into the product. Open source has the general attached idea that the code is also free of cost, however the "free" is the "free" in freedom as many projects allow charging for the source code. So why would someone want to contribute time and effort to such a project, either as an individual or a company? And why do companies choose to use products developed this way? This is the question that the white papers try to analyze.

In theory software is driven by the monetary value it has. However in recent times as the software industry solves the same problems over and over, some applications are now over programmed. The number of available solutions drives the monetary value down to almost nothing. Such software might as well be given away and actually creates an unexpected reward. Clever programs, when valueless in monetary terms, still have value in their usage. That usage in light of so many alternatives proves the cleverness and rewards the author with notoriety and prestige.

Think of a new Progress dictionary enhancement. Many people over many years have made small enhancements to the dictionary and it is unlikely something so small could be sold as a separate product. However, if posted on a public forum like the PEG, an enhancement accepted by a large Progress community could bring reputation building publicity. The more innovative the software, the greater the community acceptance, and the greater the pay back.

So why use such a piece of software? First, it comes with source code or it could not be trusted to perform its stated function. Such programs can be used as the basis of custom software developed to meet your exact needs. Second, the same open nature promotes giving back that customization to further your own company's gain by increasing the community. And third, that increased community brings together a support network committed to the product. Since the community itself develops the software, a high acceptance level is assured. As the community grows so do the enhancements and the value of the software in a self re-enforcing snowball effect.

Communities are the key for successful open source projects as they are the source of the reward sought by the participants. If a development group simply bickers and carries on, the project dies

as enhancements and support give way to unproductive arguments. The ultimate nemesis of an open source project is when the developers are so divided about the direction the product should take, and multiple pieces of code result. It would seem at first the alternative code is what dilutes the value of both pieces of software. On closer inspection we notice the commonality of direction, purpose, and resources that a community brings is the real benefit to the project, and it is the split in the community instead of the code that devalues the product.

Keep the community together, and the source naturally stays put, as the project thrives. If the community argues and splits, so does the code. This is the fundamental challenge of Open Source project leaders.

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