

INTERVIEW: Why do people contribute code for free?

Source: <http://linux.derkeiler.com/Newsgroups/comp.os.linux.announce/2003-07/0054.html>

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Date: 07/17/03

Date: 17 Jul 2003 20:05:01 GMT

WHY DO PEOPLE CONTRIBUTE CODE FOR FREE?

Or, what role does Free/Open Source have to play in South Asia

WHY DO some of the most creative hackers in the world give away their code for free? There are hints that the reasons why hackers want to contribute code are manifold. It can be altruism, and a sense of sharing. To meet a challenge. Or just for fun. They might do this task because they need it for their own work. Some do it to develop new skills. Others do it in anticipation of an indirect reward, such as improving job opportunities.

This issue — and much more — is the focus of a new study. One of the key researchers undertaking it is Seema Arora <sarora@stanford.edu>. By some coincidence, a series of global high profile studies on Free/Libre and Open Source Software have been undertaken by South Asians.

First was Rishab Aiyer Ghosh's study on FLOSS. (In fact, Rishab was one of the first to use this apt term, which includes both Free and Open Source software.) Later on, Niranjani Rajani of the Sindh, headed a Finland study on the significance of FLOSS for the developing world.

FREDERICK NORONHA <fred_at_bytesforall.org> spoke to the third South Asian researcher to be involved in a major study, Seema Arora, on what it involves. Excerpts:

What's the study all about?

The title of the survey is FLOSS-US which stands for Free/Libre Open Source Software-US. This is an online survey that is directed to open source developers who have contributed in the creation or dissemination of open source software.

The survey is meant to be global. And it is intended to be complementary to the FLOSS survey that was carried out under a grant from the European Commission in 2002.

INTERVIEW: Why do people contribute code for free?

comp.os.linux.announce: INTERVIEW: Why do people contribute code for free?

This survey aims to understand the open source way of organizing software production with a special emphasis on understanding the motivations — monetary and non-monetary — that drive the developers. Also, the expectations that the developers have from making these contributions, the methods of organization of open source software that might suggest some comparisons in efficiency and quality with proprietary software, the types of open source licenses and the incentives for participation and the tools used by the programmers.

This survey seeks additional information from developers that is new to the FLOSS-US survey. Like the relationships of developers with commercial enterprises based on Free/Libre/Open Source software and the support of OS/FS projects by proprietary software firms.

Since when has it been undertaken?

The survey was launched on January 28, 2003 at SourceForge and since has been released on numerous other sites across United States, Europe and Asia.

This is part of a broader project titled "Economic Organization and Viability of Open Source Software," and has been ongoing since August 2001.

What similar studies have been undertaken in the past?

This is a follow-up to the original FLOSS survey of Open Source/Free Software developer communities that was designed by Rishab Aiyer Ghosh (MERIT and Infonomics, University of Maastricht) under a grant from the European Commission in 2002. [<http://floss1.infonomics.nl>]

Boston Consulting Group undertook a survey of a sample of developers from projects listed on SourceForge.

Both the FLOSS and the BCG surveys were dominated by responses from Western Europe and the US, reflecting the EC sponsorship of FLOSS and BCG's use of names of developers listed on the larger projects on SourceForge.

What has been the response so far?

We are getting an enthusiastic response. The survey is open and hence we encourage more developers to contribute.

Who is leading the study? How many people involved?

INTERVIEW: Why do people contribute code for free?

comp.os.linux.announce: INTERVIEW: Why do people contribute code for free?

Paul David is the Principal Investigator on the project. He is Professor of Economics and Senior Fellow at Stanford Institute of Economic Policy Research (SIEPR). I am a co-Investigator on the project and Visiting Research Fellow at SIEPR. Andrew Waterman is a graduate student in Economics. This survey has been designed in cooperation with Rishab Aiyer Ghosh of MERIT.

What are the means used to get across?

In a desire to get a global response, the survey announcements have been translated into eight languages (other than English) including Dutch, German, Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, Russian and Chinese.

Postings have been made on prominent online discussion boards. Web sites that are frequented by open source programmers have been requested to post links to the survey announcement. These sites are likely to be visited by developers in regions outside as well as within Western Europe and North America.

What has been the response from South Asia till now?

The responses have been forthcoming. But we would like to see more responses to be able to make meaningful comparisons across different regions.

What's your view of the South Asian contribution to GNU/Linux?

Though the South Asian contribution might be currently lagging behind the contributions from the United States and Europe, we have reason to believe that this region would make important contributions.

While there has been an impetus to adopt the software through government initiatives, there is some evidence that developers in these countries are contributing and sustaining the success of the open source effort. Linux makes economic sense for South Asian countries because the hardware requirements are much less onerous than Windows, making it a very cost effective option.

As an aside, one of the criticisms that we hope to disprove is that the developer effort would lag the adoption in these countries, making this an unsustainable way of producing software.

What would the study cost, and who's funding it? What's Stanford's involvement?

INTERVIEW: Why do people contribute code for free?

comp.os.linux.announce: INTERVIEW: Why do people contribute code for free?

The study is being conducted by researchers at Stanford University's Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR). It is a part of a broader study that is titled, Economic Organization and Viability of Open Source Software undertaken by SIEPR's Knowledge, Networks and Information for Innovation Program (KNIIP) which is being supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation through its program on Digital Technology and Society.

How is India's/South Asia's contribution to GNU/Linux seen?

India has a large programmer base. With improvement in Internet access, we are likely to see much more activity from Indian programmers. It is our belief that open source adoption will precede development efforts. Though of course, these are complementary activities and adoption will fuel the demand for development efforts.

We are interested in collecting data that might shed light on the contention, found in Microsoft submissions, that Free and Open Source software is not suitable for government procurement in developing economies, because there is an lack of human capital in those regions with the relevant skills to maintain and improve.

By when will the study be ready?

We are planning to release the study by winter of 2003.

What are you'll expecting to emerge from the study? What would be its utility?

We are hopeful that we would be able to attract respondents from across the globe and hence test if there are cultural differences in organization and contributions and motivations of open source developers. Furthermore, we want to explore the synergies between commercial and entrepreneurial activities that are based upon Free and Open Source code, both in the West and in India. (ENDS)

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Send submissions for comp.os.linux.announce to: cola@stump.algebra.com

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