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Who cares?

Chris Holt | 2007-01-23

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In my ongoing investigations as a newcomer to the free software movement I've been digging around looking for case management application frameworks that would work for social services organizations... not law firms. I have begun to look at the plethora of software available and the number of free software projects under development. The numbers are staggering.

[Sourceforge](#) for instance has about 140,000 existing projects and about ten times that number of developers... (looks like 10 per project) Over a million developers is a large capacity, but why do they pick working on one project over another?

My first choice for investigating this was to go to [Wikipedia](#), which really has become the first place I look for info before Google. And it's a good example of the spirit behind the free software movement anyway.

What does Wikipedia say about this: "Eric Raymond observed in his famous essay "[The Cathedral and the Bazaar](#)" that announcing the intent for a project is usually inferior to releasing a working project to the public." So much for just throwing the requirements

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out there.

I went to that essay and found another obvious point Eric makes, “When you start community-building, what you need to be able to present is a plausible promise. Your program doesn’t have to work particularly well. It can be crude, buggy, incomplete, and poorly documented. What it must not fail to do is (a) run, and (b) convince potential co-developers that it can be evolved into something really neat in the foreseeable future.” So I guess the idea is to start with something sexy.

All of this makes sense if I wanted to start a free software case management project; but I’m unlikely to start this, as some of my readers have suggested I do, unless I’m sure it will take off and actually work. And, for that, I’d need to lay the proper foundation.

I’ve looked at another study [An Empirical Investigation of Code Contribution, Communication, Participation, and Release Strategy in Open Source Software Development: A Conditional Hazard Model Approach](#) by Param Vir Singh, Ming Fan, Yong Tan of the Information Systems and Operations Management unit at the University of Washington in Seattle, and they say a number of interesting things in their investigation around why developers contribute to one free software project or another.

Some of the salient points from their study of over 200 free software projects include the fact that the top 20% of developers contribute 80% of the work.

In their summary they state they also find “that a group of developers that is about 50% larger than the core group is responsible for 80% of the communication. On average, the top 30% developers contribute about 81% of the messages.” This isn’t really surprising in that experience breeds the ability to contribute more effectively and communicate on what is needed. It’s also indicative of the fact that a core group of committed developers is much more



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likely to produce a successful project than an ad-hoc collection of semi-committed developers. Nothing earth-shattering in all this but interesting to note how the 80/20 rule applies in the free movement as it does in the proprietary domain.

So, Fabrizio Capobianco, who American Venture Magazine just named to its 2007 “40 Under 40” entrepreneurs for his work as CEO of [Funambol](#), has a fair bit to say about the success of free software projects on his [blog](#). Funambol very successfully develops a software development platform for mobile applications on a free software basis.

To paraphrase Fabrizio one has to think “big”. I.e., small markets are not so intriguing and one has to set standards for the development. I see the first part of that as the “sexy” part that will make developers interested and the second part will enable developers to have some useful experience, after all what’s the point in building a non-standard application that has little skill transferability.

And, as far as a sexy free software project goes... case management would be it. The social impact that a life changing, life enhancing and large scale case management application would have on the NGO world, has to be attractive to developers. Not only does it fit with the spirit of Ubuntu; but every development may save a person’s life and, at the least, help them make a better life for themselves. How much better would our society be if non-profits could share information and work more collaboratively to better the lives of those in their care.

Anyway, I will continue my investigations and, by the way, I’ll be at the Demo ‘07 tradeshow in Palm Desert on the 31st of January, if anyone wants to chat about this.

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(and free
software will still
win)

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Biography

Chris Holt: Chris Holt specializes in consulting for Government and NGO public health and social services organizations about software to assist with case management and patient management systems. Check out his site at <http://www.intuitech.biz>.

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Connection

Submitted by [BenTremblay](#) on Mon, 2007-02-05 20:57.

Alas, there's no way of sending inter-member messages on this site. And you didn't have an email address listed.

I just read your blog entry "Tactical Collective" (No contact info on your blog? Also, GReader and BlogLines both report no feeds.) ... very interesting. I'm developing a "discourse-based portal" that I intend for getting NGOs' talking points out in a way that makes salient information more discoverable ... "Participatory Deliberation" is the buzz phrase I've been using.)Speaking of which, are you aware of The Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters? I'm anticipating something which responds to that imperative but w/o being constrained to things environmental.)

regards

p.s. I found your post here very interesting. I'm trying to find a FreeSoftware licence that will enable some sort of remuneration to

finance an "OpenSource" information base.

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When you look to see how the system works
Likely you will find that it does not.

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Thanks

Submitted by [Chris Holt](#) on Fri, 2007-02-09 06:18.

Hey Ben

You can get me at christoph.holt@gmail.com
I'll check out your links here and thanks....

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