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Is open source bad for your career?

A SAP exec suggests developing non-proprietary software may eventually put some ISVs out of a job. Canadian Linux users respond to a controversial hypothesis
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While open source software accounts for just one per cent of the total revenue for today's software market, SAP Labs Inc. researcher Dirk Riehle says the industry's continued movement toward openness will have a negative impact on both the job and salary prospects of the average software developer.

More in ComputerWorld CanadaOpen source insecurities: Get past the mythsRiehle, the leader of the open source research group at Palo Alto, Calif.-based SAP Labs, presented his arguments on the economics of open source at the recently held Free Software and Open Source Symposium (FSOSS) 2007 at Seneca College's York University Campus in Toronto.

Riehle's contention is based on the fact that greater accessibility of open source projects will equal more experienced developers in the marketplace. In turn, he said, open source projects will see more competition for job openings as well as lowered salaries.

To improve job and salary prospects, Riehle argues software developers would be better served to become core contributors to "community open source" projects such as Linux, Apache, and Eclipse, rather than "commercial open source" companies like MySQL, Red Hat and SugarCRM. Riehle refers to core contributors on a community projects as "committers," which he basically defines as a developer who helps shape the project's growth, and in turn, will be in high demand from recruiters.

"Most projects don't give committer status away lightheartedly, because the existing slate of committers has to choose someone to be part of themselves, and have a say in where the project is going," Riehle said. "Companies will hire committers to provide services and consulting because of their wide visibilities and also to ensure that a particular open source project is in line with its company's plans."

In commercial open source projects, he said, the company employs nearly all of the core committers, limiting the opportunity for new contributors to be hired. Riehle said that technical skills around an open source project are a key part of determining a developer's value to a company. Because anyone can develop these skills outside a company, he said, hiring and firing becomes easier because of the larger talent pool.

Calling all developers, where are you?

"Largely, he missed the prime economics that there are not terribly many developers out there right now because of a big drop in computer science and IT enrollments at colleges and universities," John Nash, president of the Ottawa Canada Linux Users Group, said.

Ultimately, Nash and other developers like him believe Riehle is presenting a simplified view for the future outlook of software development — disputing Riehle's argument that all but the most talented programmers are doomed to a life of endless job searching and low paying jobs.

"Riehle's stance assumes there are an infinite number of people who know a certain open source product, but if you look at the number of people who've actually seen the source code of a major open source project like Linux, FireFox or WordPress, the number is very small," Rob Walling, a software developer and owner of New Haven, Conn.-based consulting firm The Numa Group, said. "I'm sure you could find a few people who have messed around with the internals of these systems, but good developers are hard to find no matter where you look."

Walling agreed with Riehle that "committers" are certainly going to be attractive to prospective companies, but he maintains that most developers can combat this by differentiating themselves.

"Any time a developer can differentiate him or herself they will positively impact their job prospects," Welling said. "Some do it through their blogs, others write books or speak at conferences, and others contribute to open source projects."

Open season

For Russell McOrmond, policy coordinator of the Canadian Association of Open Software (CLUE), Riehle's stance

that open source will diffuse the knowledge about developers focuses on the issue from too much of an industrial-era model of thinking. With this analysis, he said, the focus will be on the software and the value that it adds to the customer.

"But looking at it from a post-industrial analysis, the focus will be on the firm or individual providing the service, with software simply being the conduit of this service," McOrmond said. "Like different products have different values in an industrial economy, different service providers will have different economic values in a services economy. Some companies/individuals will be able to command a larger amount of pay, and some will be able to command less."

One of Riehle's primary arguments is the industry will see a shift away from commercial open source to a community open source model. He sees large system integrators such as IBM Corp. being the driving force behind this move as they will provide implementation services around the open source software.

Shane Schick's ComputerWorldWhy open source has always deserved a censusAnd while McOrmond acknowledges the move away from firm-lead software products — and the increasing focus on the quality of service offered by companies around said software — he disagrees on how the industry will get there and on what impact it will have the open source community. "I see so many software needs which are simply not able to be met by traditional industrial-era firms, allowing so much expansion for the growing free and open source marketplace once the customer breaks free of existing industrial-era vendor dependencies," McOrmond said.

And for small software developers and firms, McOrmond said, that means more job and project opportunities. "Software works best when it is molded to meet the needs of the individual interacting with the software, rather than when the individual is molded to meet the needs of the software," McOrmond said.

This suggests, according to McOrmond, that rather than large firms producing mass-marketed software as a product, the future will be in a much larger number of integrators who will interact with a growing pool of FOSS software projects and only to those components that their customers want.

Walling agrees, saying he's seen this emerging trend first hand in his own ASP.NET firm — a Microsoft Corp. Web application framework that programmers can use to build Web sites, applications and services — The Numa Group.

"Through the use of open source tools, we are able to build larger, higher quality, and more complex applications for lower cost than we could a few years ago," Walling said. "There are advantages all around; to the customer, the system integrator and the end user. It's a great situation."

Embracing the move to openness

Whichever model prevails between commercial and community open source, Walling said, open systems will continue to grow compared to their proprietary counterparts.

"We've seen open systems win over and over: Beta and VHS, Mac and Windows, and the current flood of open application programming interfaces (APIs) that have led to great applications to the detriment of the previous kings," Walling said. "I'm sure the people who make the Thomas Guide were not happy about Google Maps, or even MapQuest back in the 90s, but it's turned out to be a lot better for the consumer."

Adding to this, Walling said, the proliferation of open source presents more freedom for developers to veer off into new directions — often times leading to new skills they wouldn't traditionally learn on the job.

"A couple of years ago, if you wanted to learn Ruby you had to do it on your own time," Walling said. "The developers who did so are sitting pretty as the need for Ruby grows and there are very few people with two years of experience."

And as open source continues to drive the adoption of new ideas and innovations in software, he said, so too will the career aspirations of those who pursue it.