Grafana Labs switches open source licensing to stem strip-mining tactics

Public cloud providers have been accused of strip-mining open source products, offering them as managed services, cutting a valuable revenue

Open source software company Grafana Labs has relicensed its core open source projects from the Apache Licence 2.0 to the [Affero General Public Licence (AGPL) v3](#).

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The creator of Grafana Loki and Tempo and contributor to projects such as Graphite, Prometheus and Cortex, described the move as balancing "value creation" and "revenue creation", while maintaining an open source philosophy.

In the past, some open source software providers have changed their licensing, such as the server side public licence (SSPL) from MongoDB, which charges cloud providers a fee for providing the software as a service on their platforms. But [cloud providers have often found workarounds](#).

For instance, soon after MongoDB introduced SSPL, AWS introduced [a compatible database, Amazon DocumentDB](#), which, it said, implemented the Apache 2.0 open source MongoDB 3.6 application programming interface (API) by emulating the responses a MongoDB client expects from a MongoDB server.

Grafana Labs hopes the approach it takes will both help its revenue stream and avoid the situation that MongoDB found itself in with AWS's introduction of DocumentDB.

According to Grafana Labs, AGPLv3 is an OSI-approved licence that meets all criteria for free and open source software. In a blog post announcing the change, [Raj Dutt, co-founder and CEO of Grafana Labs, wrote](): "Ensuring we maintain these freedoms for our community is a big priority for us. While AGPL doesn't 'protect' us to the same degree as other licences (such as the SSPL), we feel that it strikes the right balance. Being open source will always be at the core of who we are, and we believe that adopting AGPLv3 allows our community and users to, by and large, have the same freedoms that they have enjoyed since our inception."

Dutt described enforcement of the new licensing strategy as being "about carrots, not sticks".

He added: "While we will enforce our licence terms, we fundamentally believe that our best route to building a good business is simple: make great open source software, take feedback from users/community, help people be successful, earn enough trust that they'll give us time to explain and educate them on the value of our commercial offerings (Grafana Cloud and Grafana Enterprise Stack)."

Dutt admitted that the company took a similar approach with Grafana Cloud by offering a free tier, and then enticing organisations that did not commercially engage with Grafana Labs to buy into the full Grafana Stack. But he added: "Over time, a large percentage of users will still

never become commercial customers, but many will."

Commenting on the changes, Amanda Brock, CEO at OpenUK, said: "Grafana has carried out a well-managed licence shift to AGPLv3 that moves them away from Apache to the GPL 'copyleft' family, but keeps them in the parameters of open source."

Brock said Grafana's approach remains open source, unlike the change in licensing made by Elastic and Mongo.

"Having learned the lessons of recent approaches to licence changes, Grafana acknowledges the importance of community to any open source project," she added. "Their approach shows respect to that community and its contribution to their project and respect for the values of open source in understanding that it is not their place to redefine open source to suit their – or any investor's – business."

In the past, open source software providers found their subscription-based revenue stream curbed when AWS began offering cloud-based versions of their software.

Brock pointed out that AWS is regarded by Grafana as a "strategic partner", but added: "I am slightly concerned that the revenue-sharing model, pioneered in 2019 by Google and picked up by AWS, is discretionary on the part of the cloud provider, but do feel that for now, in the existing model of cloud, it is the way forward for open source providers.

"I fully support Raj's call to revenue share/strategic partnerships and have been suggesting for some time that we will see much more of this in 2021."