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UK open source ecosystem can bridge growing tech industry skills gap

By Solomon Klappholz published 2 days ago

The UK open source community is the "the submarine under the digital economy", according to OpenUK

(Image credit: Getty Images)

Increased support for the UK open source ecosystem could play a vital role in boosting skills for high-demand areas of the technology sector, according to a new report from OpenUK.

The ecosystem champion's *State of Open* report suggests that driving engagement with the open source industry will unlock employment opportunities in high growth sectors and fuel growth across the broader tech industry.

The third phase of the report, titled *'Skills or Bust'*, highlights three key areas which must be addressed by government and industry stakeholders if the tech sector is to truly capitalize on the valuable resources available in the open source community.

The three key areas include, making sure the UK can stem the flow of its skilled workers to the US, training developers in the engineering skills that are in demand, and closing the skills gap the UK has regarding commercializing innovations.

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OpenUK emphasized that the UK government has an opportunity to support open source talent and cement a higher-skilled domestic tech sector.

Describing open source software as "the submarine under the digital economy", the report underlines the role of open source underpinning the whole UK technology ecosystem, be that internet, cloud, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), or blockchain.

The report builds on Phase two's focus on enterprises, to take a deeper look at the UK-based individuals who make up the global open source software workforce – a group that contributed 27% of the UK tech sector's GVA in 2022.

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The research includes analysis of GitHub data with insights on the UK's open source community, which consists of 31,800 developers distributed across the country.

According to OpenUK, this community includes 8,200 UK-based contributors to open source projects in the last year. Notably, the report shows that 1,700 were first time contributors, equivalent to around 20.7% of all contributors.

The report also features a survey on the demand for tech and open source skills in the UK.

OpenUK found 77% of UK companies are desperately seeking individuals with programming skills.

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Of these programming skill sets, backend developers were the most sought after (51% recruited), followed by cloud engineers (36%), and development operations engineers (16%).

Furthermore, OpenUK expects the demand for these roles to continue as these are set to be the top roles for future recruitment.

The report acknowledges the UK is widely recognised globally as a producer of highly skilled engineers who are employed by the tech sector, but stresses the levels of workers with engineering and development skills needs to increase to keep pace with soaring demand.

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Phase two of OpenUK'sreport found the UK is not producing the same scale of commercially skilled individuals, specifically in product development and go-to-market strategy.

Talent flight from the UK to the United States was a key factor behind lagging skills capabilities, the report noted.

Another limiting factor is a lack of people capable of commercializing the potential of open source technology. OpenUK points out not everyone in the open source 'submarine' are engineers and developers, but provide non-coding skills.

This skills gap is one that drives the persisting skills gap between the UK and US, with the UK being somewhat reliant on Silicon Valley for its specific business expertise.

What is to be done?

The report is clear, if the UK is to achieve its tech ambitions there needs to be a "significant change" to develop a better understanding of those who will occupy a considerable portion of this workforce.

Amanda Brock, CEO at OpenUK, said the open source community has been traditionally neglected by the UK government.

"Although the Open Source Software submarine powers our digital economy it's been overlooked by the UK for a decade. The contributors who crew that submarine – the UK-based open source workers – are a respected and influential part of the global tech sector," she said.

"Many are homeworkers, with in-demand skills that let them work and grow as leaders in that 'global submarine', bringing Bay Area salaries into the UK.

"It's time to surface the submarine and show that with the right focus and investment, we can build this sector out and use the contribution to Open Source projects to develop more skilled workers whilst keeping that talent here in the UK, across our cities and rural areas.

"This has the potential to stem the historic talent flight to the US which has stunted the UK's success. Collaboratively we can deliver the dream of being the next Silicon Valley."

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Staff Writer

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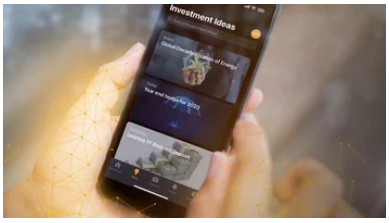

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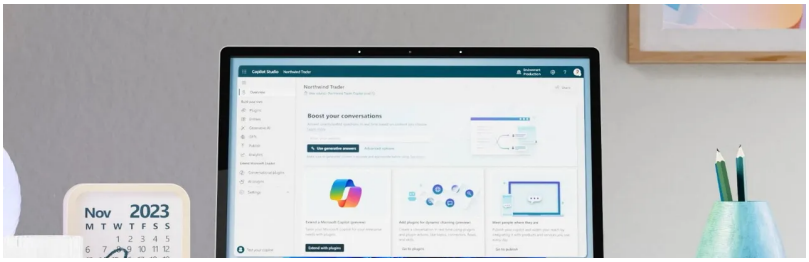

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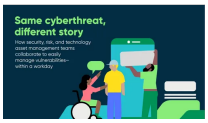

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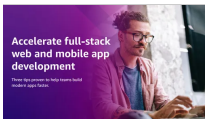

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