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Can contributing to open source get you a job?



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Could voluntary work on open source projects be a stepping stone to employment? That was one of the intriguing prospects held out at the launch last week of a report with the slightly ominous title of “Skills or Bust”.

The report comes from OpenUK and looks at who makes up the ‘open source community’ in the UK, and how tech skills could be leveraged to drive the British economy forward.

The basic premise, as befits an organisation which positions itself as “the UK organisation for the business of Open Technology”, is that open source underpins pretty much all modern digital infrastructure, and that people can and do contribute to it from almost anywhere. A map shown at the launch, for example, really did show GitHub accounts not merely from Land’s End to John O’Groats, but from the Scilly Isles to Shetland (although with the caveat that only a few thousand of the UK’s 3.2m GitHub accounts are current contributors).

Combine those thousands with the much-discussed IT skills shortage, and the core idea is straightforward: if you contribute significantly to a major open source project, your work might catch the eye of employers and lead to job offers. It's also the theme of a quote in the OpenUK report attributed to Greg Kroah-Hartman, a Fellow at The Linux Foundation: "If you get five commits in the [Linux] kernel you will get offered the job. That always used to be a joke but it's really true."

An area where practical skills can outweigh qualifications

And it does make a certain sense. This is an area where skills and practical experience often outweigh formal qualifications, and contributing to open source projects can be a powerful way to showcase your abilities. When you submit commits to a project like Linux or Apache, you're not just adding lines of code. You're demonstrating real-world skills in coding, problem-solving, and collaboration—all highly valued in the tech industry.

However, the path from open source volunteer to paid professional isn't as simple as it might seem. The biggest hurdle for many is likely to be time and financial constraints. For many, dedicating hours to unpaid coding is a luxury they can't afford. This is especially true for those who might benefit the most from such opportunities, like students, people changing careers, or individuals from underprivileged backgrounds.

Is it any wonder then that some big open source projects are now dominated by contributions from employees, either as part of their job or using the time that some companies give people to work on outside projects.

And while the current UK government talks up reskilling into IT – remember those "so-and-so's next job is in cyber" adverts? – I very much doubt the message will have reached the Jobcentre yet: "How many jobs have you applied for this week?" "Well, I made five commits to the Spongware kernel and had two more accepted into the Upsdown driver."

Can government walk the walk as well as talk the talk?

This might change, of course. Also present at the launch was Alex Davies-Jones MP, the Labour Shadow Minister for Tech and Digital Economy, who was at least open to the idea of volunteering in open source being officially accepted as part of a job search, but even if she's in government is a year's time, she is unlikely to get the final say-so on anything like that.

It's also important to remember that not all open source projects carry the same weight. Contributing to a well-known, widely-used project might get you more recognition than working on a smaller, lesser-known one.

However, smaller projects can offer more substantial roles and the chance to make a more significant impact.

Either way, while contributing to open source projects can certainly open doors and provide valuable experience, it's not a straightforward or universally accessible route to employment in the tech industry. It requires a significant time investment and a certain level of skill, which might not be feasible for everyone.

As with any career strategy, it's essential to weigh the benefits against the practicalities and challenges. Open source contributions can be a part of your career development, but they're just one piece of a larger puzzle that includes education, networking, and other forms of professional experience.

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