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Luca Slendebroek

Making open source visible: Amanda Brock, CEO, OpenUK

The UK's open source workforce is invisible; it's time to change that

Tom Allen

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Image: Amanda Brock is CEO of OpenUK

Open source software drives the global tech sector, but its contributions are rarely recognised.

To change that long-standing status quo, industry body OpenUK is running its second ever State of Open Con event next month. We talked to CEO Amanda Brock to find out more about the UK's open source market.

Computing: 2023 was a big year for open source. Meta released an AI model that, if not precisely open source, was at least free for commercial and non-commercial use, and previous poster child Hashicorp dropped open source for 'source available'. How was 2023 for you?

Amanda Brock: 2023 was a busy year for me, and a breakthrough year for OpenUK. OpenUK launched our first State of Open Con, one of the world's most diverse tech conferences with circa 800 attendees, 130 speakers and 40-plus partners, which convened the global open tech sector in London.

Personally, I spoke about open source software, AI and policy in 18 cities ranging from Geneva, to Seoul, San Francisco and Vancouver. The OpenUK research team produced four cutting-edge reports focusing on the economics of open source, opening up AI and developing the skills needed for the future UK tech workforce through open source software contributions.

Tell us about OpenUK's heatmap. What does it illustrate about the UK?

The contribution heat map brilliantly demonstrates the locations of those making contributions to open source software from across the UK. What I think may be most interesting right now is that we see these contributions in rural areas, all the way north to the Shetland Islands and out to Barry in Wales, as well as hubs in areas like London, Cambridge and Edinburgh. It validates OpenUK's thinking around skills development.

There is the opportunity for people who know how to code to be taught and mentored in making contributions to well used open source projects. Those contributions will form a living CV and that will enable them, as they progress, to obtain jobs in the global tech sector.

Not only will this build out the skills missing in our workforce but it will generate more income into the UK, particularly in rural areas. Large tech sector salaries could have a huge impact on these communities.

Are current open-source licences sufficient in the new age of AI and platforms, or does it need a rethink?

The holy grail of open source has always been making money out of something you have given away. The licences are based on a 25-year-old definition, which was of itself based on the existing Debian principles. Key to the definition is the free flow of open source without commercial restriction, allowing anyone to use it for any purpose. I don't believe that or the licences approved to comply with it need to change.

However, open tech - including AI, not only open source software - may need to recognise that there will be shades of open tech. I'm always going to advocate for open source, I believe in what it delivers - but recognising that being open, but to a lesser extent, may be necessary in certain situations is something we need to acknowledge. The issue here is about clarity in our

communications, expectations and the technology's direction of travel, and of course in the impact of the lack of free flow that only open source software allows.

Companies that move from open source software built with community contributions to shared or distributed source will always be seen to break a social contract. Those wanting to commercialise need to be clear on business models at an earlier stage and not be disingenuous. These shades of open and how we manage them will form a key plenary discussion at State of Open Con when we consider the future of open source.

I don't believe we need a new open source definition for AI, but we may need some new licences.

You've spoken at length about the need for global regulations for AI, and the weakness of sovereignty-based and top-down approaches. Are we getting any closer? Can legislation ever keep up with the pace of AI development?

Legislation cannot keep up with tech development. We have seen that with the internet and social media. However, we can see a new and more flexible approach to regulation, one that like tech itself becomes more agile. If it's not cross border it isn't going to work and it will be interesting to see the Korean Summit in the next few months.

We will be hosting a number of UK government departments at State of Open Con, taking part in our AI Policy Zone Consultation Room. They will undertake direct consultation with some of the open source community. No government in the world has done anything like this and we are grateful to see the Home Office and other departments acknowledging the importance of the open source software community in this way.

It's a great step forward in AI risk management for the policy makers to have unfettered access to the community, enabling them to respond directly and to be heard. We had an event in the Commons last week where over 40 voices were also heard. We need this to build understanding amidst the noise of the last few months, where many with no clue of the nuances of open source were offering opinions.

You've also spoken a lot about the importance of diversity and inclusion in tech. There seems to be a bit of a backlash

now. How can organisations stay focused amid the naysaying?

I am not sure about naysaying, but it's always the risk, the pendulum swings in both directions and there is still a lot of cost cutting where decisions about what matters have to be made. EDI and ensuring that the people creating our tech are as diverse as those using it are not, however, a luxury. Whilst we have made great strides forward we still have a long way to go and not wasting the work done to date on EDI and sustainability must stay high up our agendas.

Finally, what do you hope to see in 2024?

Most international businesses in open source are funded from the Bay Area. That generally means they flip into US corporations and don't show on local lists. The flourishing locally headquartered businesses - like Snyk in the UK - are invisible. They hire from a global talent pool that has always worked from home and are hired not on their location but their skills. So, by nature, it's a sector that collaborates globally.

That means the UK has an invisible workforce that forms a part of the global, not local, tech sector. These folks are the crew of the submarine under the digital economy.

One of the key potential opportunities for the UK in 2024 is to build on this talent pool: to enhance it, to increase its size and to use the power of open source to develop practical skills for the UK's future tech sector. Individuals can use skills they have been taught or self taught in a practical way by contributing to open source projects. That will allow them to gain practical experience whilst building a globally visible CV and becoming employable within the global tech sector.

Reflective of the UK's status as number one in Europe in open source software, many of those Bay Area leaders are convening in London in a couple of weeks for our second State of Open Con.

Computing *is proud to be a media partner for State of Open Con, on 6th and 7th February at The Brewery in London.* Click here to see the agenda *and* here for tickets *- we'll see you there.*

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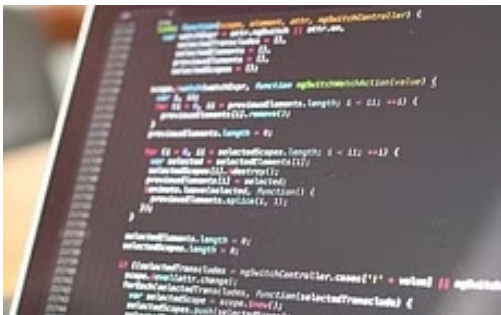
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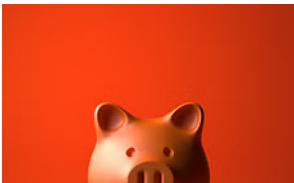# Open source can't win: Complacency has its price

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