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More cash for coders: GitHub's Stormy Peters on open source funding

'I'm passionate about making sure that people can have a career in open source software'









Image: Stormy Peters, GitHub

The issue of paying open source developers properly for their work feels like it's really coming to a head.

Certainly it was the subject of some heated debate at OpenUK's *State of Open Con* in London last week, not least that instigated by open source veteran Bruce Perens, who said the collective failure to address the problem had enabled a corporate takeover.

Stormy Peters, another open source practitioner of long standing who spoke at the event, was also keen to address the vexed issue of developer compensation.

Currently, hundreds of thousands of open source developers create popular and useful projects that big companies depend on, but compensation generally does not flow back to the original developers unless they get hired by a company to work on the software.

"One of the things I'm passionate about is making sure that people can have a career in open source software. I would love to see more of that funding flow back to them," said Peters, who is VP of communities at GitHub. "The the funding models haven't been there yet, it's still like 20 years ago."

She continued: "I think the software would be better because if I suddenly was getting paid to work on my passion project. I could dedicate more time to making it reliable and secure and helping all of those companies use it well."

Channeling cash to coders

GitHub, used by over 100 million developers worldwide, including 3.4 million in the UK, is trying several approaches to help fund open source contributors, including Github Sponsors. This lets individuals or companies donate to projects or maintainers in supported regions.

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While millions of dollars have already flowed through Github Sponsors, the company wants to refine it further to target the projects that really matter. In part this will make it easier to scale, Peters said. It should also mean that "every open source software developer does not have to be a social media expert", so maintainers and developers of vital software can focus on what they are good at, rather than having to be part-time fundraisers.

"We're aiming at letting them work on their software and make a living off of it." Peters told *Computing*. "We want to tie it to dependencies or some kind of norm or usage."

In other words, the more important or widespread the software (think OpenSSL or Log4J) the more reliable its support should be. Complications remain though. For instance, how do you fairly compensate less visible project members, such as document writers and marketing folks? What about projects based in territories currently unsupported?

Seeking to lead by example as it works through these difficulties, GitHub channels money to all of the several thousand projects on which it depends - those that have signed up to accept money at least.

The role of OSPOs

Companies most likely to follow this example, or indeed take their own initiative, are those with open source programme offices (OSPOs) to oversee their use of open source software. Peters set up "the first or maybe the second" ever OSPO at HP in 2000 and has promoted the model ever since.

"OSPOs are usually the ones that lobby within their company to get the funds to support the projects that they depend on."

Planned are tools to help companies work out which open source projects they depend on, with a simple button to allow them to contribute.

Another initiative promoted by GitHub is its Accelerator project, which aims to help successful open source projects explore monetisation models like starting a company or nonprofit organisation. GitHub Copilot and codespaces are available for free to educational projects and qualifying projects.

Peters pointed to the 65,000 public repos advancing AI on GitHub, some by developers and maintainers who are working hand to mouth.

"You shouldn't have to go get a job doing something else when you have a brilliant idea of your own that all the Fortune 500 companies are using. We should make sure that we're producing new funding models and career opportunities for people."

Asked what she thought about Perens' idea of having third-party companies to manage the channeling of funds based on contributions, and making that independent of tech giants like GitHub-owner Microsoft, Peters said, "I love that he's starting the conversation, I think that's how good ideas happen bringing them to conferences like this and getting a lot of feedback from people."



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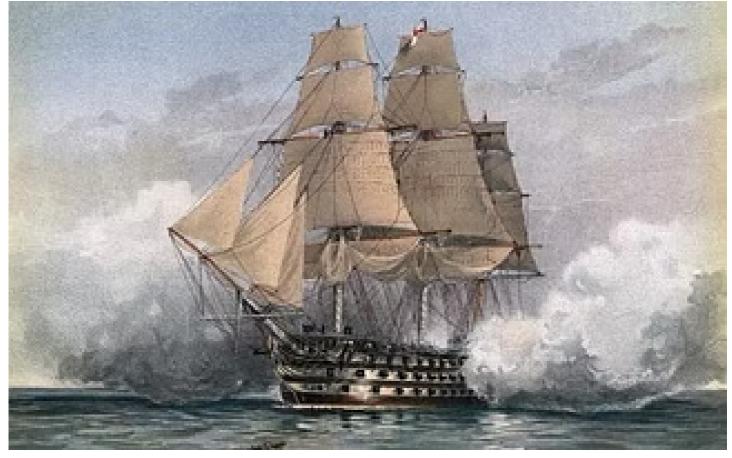
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