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OpenUK - why open source programs need better integration and community

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EXCERPT:

OpenUK's Phase Two Open Manifesto suggests ways to strengthen open source programs while managing costs. The focus needs to be on integrating communities rather than just spending or new offices.

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The UK has made substantial progress on a few high-profile projects, such as front-end code for government sites, cloud infrastructure, and a new framework for evaluating large language models. But there are significant opportunities to do a better job.

At a launch event for the manifesto, OpenUK Chief Research Officer Dr. Jennifer Barth says

" *Embracing open source aligns with the government's digital transformation goals, driving better public services, fostering a culture of continuous improvement, reducing costs, allowing people to share what they're working on and to create in similar ways and to allow access and build for people all over the country. By leveraging open source, the UK public sector can address those complex challenges, and ensure robust, scalable, secure digital infrastructure, and we're leading in this, but we need to show it.*

How not to do it

Simply throwing money at open source projects may look good on paper. However, this scattershot approach fails to capitalize on the real value of building an open source community. One perfect example has been the £250,000 grants the government made to promote energy savings by building open source software across six disconnected projects.

Richard Hanson-Granville, Technical Director at Heatweb, says the grant helped them build an open source hardware and software solution that has helped eliminate 50,000 tons of carbon by increasing efficiency. This is good, but these results have mostly been limited to improving Heatwebs direct projects rather than supporting efforts more broadly.

The company is one of the oldest manufacturers of heating equipment for thermal stores, which recently rebooted as a net-zero consultancy for the heating industry. The challenge is that they have considerable technical expertise in the heating world, but less experience building community around open source. Granville argues this will be essential for industry-wide collaboration on practical net zero solutions:

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Engineers and consultants use these tools to fix heating systems, but these could be improved considerably. For example, improving the support for quality control requires coordination between heating engineer users, software developers, and IoT device engineers. The various projects operated in separate silos. He says:

> *Everyone had their little pet project, and there was no kind of view they should try and build a tree, and everyone should be given missions to build branches, not to go and create another plant and plant and plant over there. So you end up with a field of little plants.*

Granville argues they would have benefitted the most from open source experts helping to coordinate efforts from the different grant recipients and the broader community of various kinds of experts:

> *They could have someone in government that is interested in something other than just handing out the money because that seems to be entirely what it's driven about. It's like, 'We have money to give out for open source, and we want to get to net zero. We want to do this and that.' But there is no central thinking, no planning. There is nothing to coalesce around on a sort of communal basis because if it's communal systems, communal energy has got to be government-driven.*

Focus on integration

Businesses, universities, and governments have been setting up open source program offices with the dual function of helping businesses do open source internally and facilitating engagement with others outside of the company. But OpenUK CEO Amanda Brock argues the UK needs a better approach than simply beefing up an Open Source Program Office (OSPO):

> *The OSPO concept is dead. You can quote me on that. I'm not going to be very popular because there are a lot of people who've bet their careers on the OSPO. The OSPO is*

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She says an essential goal is to move away from building a bigger program office to developing a strategy to weave open source processes into the way the government does IT and funds innovation:

" *What we're asking for is not to set up an OSPO. We know that if Labor wins tomorrow, they do not want to set up new departments and new offices. What they want to do is see things integrate… What we want to do is build a horizontal skill set across them. Build champions across those different verticals to engage and to enable better open source practices. And we don't just want to see that in the public sector as something that will cascade out to all of the subsidiary parts of it, which we do want to see. We also want to see a shift in how the UK public sector invests. We've had a world-leading open source first policy for over a decade, but that decade of policy has not been backed with processes that make that funding work.*

As part of this, it is essential to look beyond the technical aspects of open source as a licensing process and consider the community-building aspects. Calling something open source only requires you to put it on GitHub with an appropriate license. But it does not require you to have collaborators, take contributions, or build documentation to ensure that the future of that project will be there.

Brock suggests we need to change what it means to be open within the funding process to include these other aspects. We also need to build new measures for these community-building aspects that are considered in government funding efforts and could have benefits for everybody, not just the UK.

Building on success

One promising example of this approach is the Inspect AI evaluation platform for large language models (LLMs), which the UK AI Safety Institute released about a month ago. This open source platform has about £8.5 million of funding. The team contacted OpenUK to grow the community around the new ecosystem. The project has commitments from the top LLM providers and has paved the way with teams in other countries on safety evaluations.

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prescriptive regulation, that will create regulatory capture, where only a handful of big companies can comply. Instead of doing that, they're doing what the tech sector does. When the tech sector has a tech challenge it meets that with tooling. It enables compliance through tooling. Effectively, it's enabling legal solutions through technology. But what's really important is that it then has this opportunity for others to build businesses around that open source platform.

My take

High-profile examples like the work on AI safety provide good examples of how we can use open source to improve collaboration on important issues like meeting net zero and sustainability goals. It's one thing to talk about collaborating, but building and coordinating the technical infrastructure could go a long way toward building on some of the most cost-effective approaches more effectively.

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