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OpenUK - why open source skills require a community mindset



By **George Lawton**
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EXCERPT:

OpenUK Phase Two Open Manifesto report advocates building skills in open source software. This requires learning how to engage with community as much as writing code.



OpenUK has published Phase Two of the **Open Manifesto Report** to guide the incoming UK

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One big takeaway explores the potential of building skills through open source contributions from the UK. This means helping coders navigate the journey to becoming contributors to create a living and globally visible CV. OpenUK argues that this will increase employment opportunities across the UK without having to leave and stem the flow of tech talent out of the UK.

The UK has a leg up in this regard, with more GitHub accounts per capita than any other country. The goal is to foster community rather than invest in a new curriculum. At a launch event for the manifesto, OpenUK CEO Amanda Brock says:

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What we're looking at is how to engage champions across the UK to help individuals who have been taught to code make their first contributions and become more and more involved in community projects on the basis that we think it will achieve value for them, i.e., they will get a job and be paid to do that work.

A big challenge is that embracing open source requires a conceptual leap from thinking about it as akin to free code shared on the Internet to an ongoing process of collaboration and community building. It can be hard to understand this nuance to people looking at it from the sidelines. Brock observes:

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One of the problems we always have when we try to explain open source is that it's super nuanced. I was in it for six months, working day in and day out at Canonical, before I really got it. So, it's not that I'm criticizing anybody for a lack of understanding. It really does take time. It takes time to get the basics right and then to understand the nuance, which is critical to it.

One big issue is that open source is often conflated with code shared on the Internet. Policy and business leaders frequently split software between open source and closed, which muddles discussions. The important distinction is that the opposite of open is proprietary. This is an issue because much code is shared but without the appropriate licenses or community engagement. Brock explains:

Navigating the deeper structure

Dawn Foster, Director of Data Science at the CHAOSS Project, stumbled into the open source community while working at Intel years ago because of her familiarity with Linux. This opened her eyes to the deeper structure underpinning the open source community. She explains:

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I started realizing that there's all this structure behind these open source projects. There's governance, there's community that allows these projects to not only function, but to produce really top quality software out of these what seem like amorphous communities from the outside, so I started getting more and more fascinated by it.

Now, at the CHAOSS Project, she is developing tools to measure the health and sustainability of projects that can guide better decisions. This is important as organizations and individuals seek to build on this foundation. Foster says:

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I think it's really important for us to think strategically about the long-term sustainability of these open source projects that we rely on. We build our businesses on top of them, we build our livelihoods on top of them. And some of them have, you know, very few maintainers or, you know, fundamental problems with the software itself.

Foster finds the networking aspect of working with the open source community gets underestimated, but it has been crucial in getting new jobs while living in the UK:

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Every job I've ever had, with the exception of one job, I've gotten it based on the people that I knew, who knew the work that I did through open source and in a lot of those cases, those, frankly, those people were in the US, and I got jobs where I could work from the UK because those people knew who I was.

Connecting community

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Liz Rice, Chief Open Source Officer at Isovalent, says it's important to recognize that there is a spectrum of people paid a salary to work on proprietary software and people who are not paid and are doing passion projects in their free time and contributing to open source. For example, companies involved in cloud-native technology pay developers to contribute to and maintain open source projects because they recognize this value.

However, this recognition of the value of maintaining open source is not universal, and developers need to develop negotiating skills to communicate this. Rice explains:

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I had a really interesting conversation with a maintainer a few weeks ago where he was basically saying, 'It's really hard because I've got, and he named a very, very successful bank, and they're using my project, so, I felt like I really need to do the work that they need.' It's like you've got a bank who has an urgent need for you to do work for them. They're basically asking you to ask them to build that. Don't just do it for free in your spare time. They have seen value in the work that you're doing. Maintainers around the world need to be taught how to sort of recognize those signals.

It's also important to recognize that contributors can feel burdened to do free maintenance work after starting a project while working at a company. Brock says:

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People often misunderstand that when an individual contributes, even in the course of their employment, if they create something that then needs to be maintained, the burden of that travels with the individual, not the company. They are the maintainer. So if they work for Red Hat one day and SUSE the next, that travels with them, not necessarily the company, and it's a heavy burden.

It's important for contributors to learn to think twice before committing to something that may create a huge maintenance burden for them over time. Brock notes that this is one of the things they have thought about when asking for support in building out the community in the UK.

Cultivating a fellowship mindset

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end up moving to the US or Europe, where they see more financial value and less dilution of the founder's control and sense of purpose. Hutton says the UK needs to reconnect with ancient values of fellowship and purpose as part of how we operationalize capitalism:

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This manifesto and what sits underneath are very profound kinds of values that have deep roots in the European enlightenment and the Western traditions and need to be asserted to sit alongside kind of the properties with proprietary software and individual agency. It's blending the two that actually gets at the sweet spot. So how do we get to how do you operationalize this capitalism?

Well, you have to build institutions. That has to be a part of the ecosystem in which your companies are housed. You certainly have to be well aware of power imbalances and when we have to attack overly powerful monopolists. You have to have a strong sense of who you are and a strong sense of purpose.

My take

The OpenUK manifesto focuses on improving the incoming government policy. There is also a big takeaway for businesses to think about how to increase their open source skills. Much of our modern infrastructure is built on or uses open source tools underneath the surface. There are tremendous gains to be had from learning how to engage with this community as a practice as opposed to just using the software.

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