SOFTWARE

SAP's bid to woo open source community meets muted response

German software giant says open source is a 'catalyst for innovation' but is unlikely to release proprietary code

Lindsay Clark   Fri 12 Jul 2024 // 09:29 UTC

SAP's bid to cast itself as an open source friendly company is being met with some scepticism from the community, who suggest the projects are largely based on the German software giant's interests.

Earlier this month, SAP published its SAP Open Source Manifesto (OSM), which said that the company — which accrues revenue of around €31 billion ($33.6 billion) largely from proprietary software and support — believes "open source is a catalyst for innovation, enabling global minds to collaborate, share, and advance technology together"."

"We actively participate in the open-source community, contributing code, expertise, and resources to projects that align with our values and vision," it said.

SAP uses standard and fair licensing for its open-source projects to ensure they are easy to use and contribute to, OSM states. It added that SAP also encourages employees to "actively engage with and contribute to open-source projects."

"Open source is a testament to the power of collaborative evolution in technology. At SAP, we are honored to contribute to this movement and remain steadfast in our commitment to its growth and success," it said.

Peter Zaitsev, co-founder of open-source consultancy Percona, welcomed SAP's public commitment to the open source movement and clarity around its involvement.

However, he said he only saw SAP "being involved in the projects which are building blocks for the products that SAP sells, or what SAP uses to operate their infrastructure, so their involvement is primarily focused on their own products and projects."

"This means that the impact from their involvement is limited," he said. Zaitsev, who has also worked as a performance engineer on open source MySQL, added that he couldn't foresee SAP making its commercial products open source or adopting an open core approach, and while the limited feature core product is open source, enterprise add-ons are not.

"I expect they will continue to produce proprietary software and contribute to communities that support that overall approach," he said.

Amanda Brock, CEO of OpenUK, an open source policy organization, pointed out that even the most proprietary of software companies tend to rely on open source technologies for their underlying infrastructure. "Engagement with open source is an inevitability for all companies today, large or small. But there is likely a shift coming down the line – particularly in the EU – as a consequence of the liabilities created by new laws," she said.

Brock explained that while EU's Cyber Resilience Act looks set to remove or reduce liability for code held by so-called stewards – likely to be interpreted as foundations – the same benefits have not been agreed for individuals, projects or entities which also distributed open source software in the EU when they commercialize projects.

"As we all need to eat, most small open source project developers have some income streams related to their software. The liability applies no matter how big or small the provider is or how great or small their revenue," she said.

She added that the law could protect larger software companies and systems integrators, for example, which also distribute open source software.

"We've been warning for some time that many open source software providers will block their code's release into the EU. Many innovators and smaller providers simply cannot stand the risk. That will bring a massive opportunity for larger software companies like SAP as well as SIs to step in as the EU's distributors of open source, to step into the code creators' shoes and to leverage their ability to take on the regulatory liability. In essence, it may create a form of regulatory capture," she warned. ®