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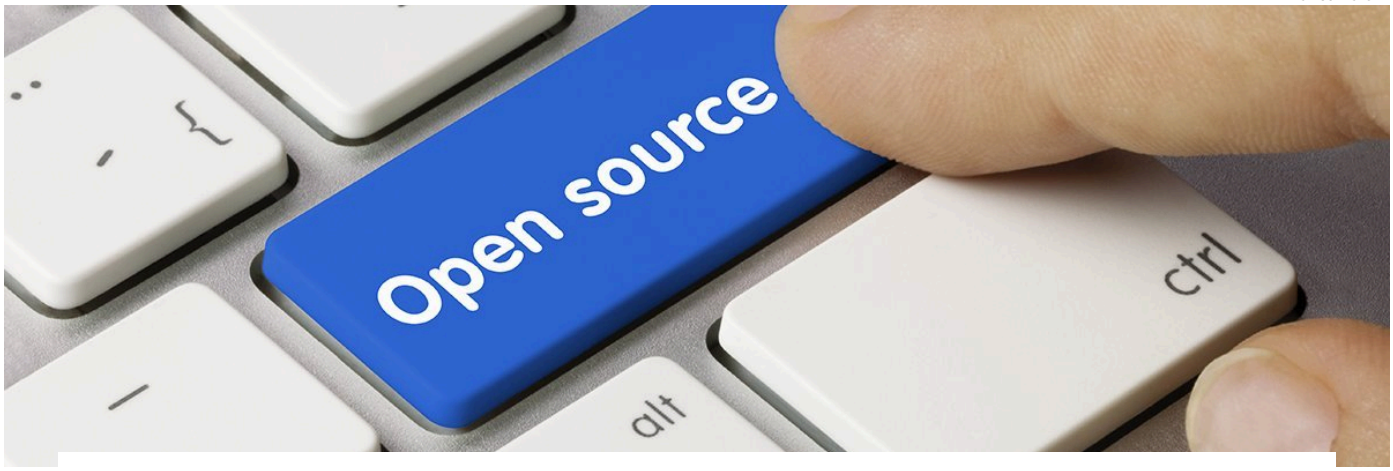

NEWS

UK must push forward greater use of open tech

OpenUK is calling on policymakers to put more effort into building the UK's open source capabilities

By **Cliff Saran,** Managing Editor

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While the public sector has adopted open source technologies, there remains little understanding of it, the latest edition of OpenUK's *State of open* report has warned.

Phase two: The open manifesto urges policymakers to build skills in open source software, enable the UK public sector to do open source software better and ensure artificial intelligence (AI) openness.

According to OpenUK, the trajectory of open source software adoption over the past decade has outpaced public sector understanding. However, the report highlights poor policies and practices that are "often unfit for purpose".

OpenUK called on the public sector to develop skills to curate open source well. Policymakers also need to gain a greater understanding of open technologies to avoid the UK continuing to rely on multi-year contracts from what OpenUK calls "legacy IT providers and consultancies".

To succeed in its aspirations of being a world leader in digital and AI, the UK needs to attract and retain the right tech talent. OpenUK believes this talent can be grown through the support of open source technology and offering those with such skills an opportunity to earn a living.

In the report's forward, OpenUK CEO Amanda Brock said working with people who learn to code in open source and contribute to open source code repositories can help to tackle the UK skills gap. She said these open source contributors have a "living" and globally visible CV to UK and international firms looking to recruit tech talent.

Given the geographic spread of open source contributions, she said this creates employment opportunities both in urban and rural areas.

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- As AI coding tools gain traction in the enterprise, it remains unclear whether AI-generated code violates open source software licenses – but legal claims indicate possible risk.

- Open source software may provide a cost-effective approach to building business applications, as well as ensuring transparency, but there are challenges to keep in mind.

OpenUK's report illustrates the extent to which open source is being used across the public sector, by looking at the number of GitHub repositories across NHS Digital, Government Digital Service, and the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

"The UK public sector embracing open source aligns with government digital transformation goals, driving better public services and fostering a culture of continuous improvement," the report's authors wrote. "By leveraging open source, the UK public sector can address complex challenges more effectively, ensuring robust, scalable and secure digital infrastructure that supports economic resilience and growth."

Jennifer Barth, chief research officer at OpenUK, said: "The numbers presented in this report are a testament to the growing influence and value of open source in the UK. With 3.6 million GitHub accounts in the UK, this is 5% of the population."

She also pointed to the continued robust growth of the UK's AI repositories. "As of January 2024, the total number of UK AI repositories has reached 102, with 11 new repositories achieving over 1,000 stars in the first half of 2024 alone," said Barth. "These figures illustrate the dynamism and innovation within the UK's AI community, bolstered by open source principles."

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