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CockroachDB scuttles away from open source Core offering

Distributed database biz doesn't like bigger customers using the free version of its software

Lindsay Clark   Mon 19 Aug 2024 // 11:05 UTC

CockroachDB, the distributed transactional system with a mostly PostgreSQL compatible front end, plans to retire its free open source "Core" product in favor of a new Enterprise licensing structure for self-hosted users.

After the introduction of version 24.3 in November, the 2015-founded database company is set to introduce a different license structure it claims will offer users the robust database features found previously in the self-hosted Enterprise license.

While abandoning its partly open source model, it will remain "source code available" to "help foster innovation across the ecosystem," CEO Spencer Kimball said in a blog post.

There will be no change for customers using cloud platform, he noted.

In 2019, CockroachDB – formerly Cockroach Labs – said it would use MariaDB's Business Source License (BSL) 1.1 as the basis for its approach, allowing users to run the Core product on as many nodes as they wanted, so long as they did not commercialize it. Additional features would be available on the enterprise product, the company said in a post archived here.

In the latest missive, Kimball explained that the free Core version was designed to "provide everything an individual user or startup would need to reach scale."

However, that was not how it ended up being used. "Two trends have emerged in the usage of our Core product. First, startups and other small businesses have often shown a desire to use Enterprise features not available in Core. And second, a growing number of scaled businesses are compromising on using the full capabilities of CockroachDB, eschewing the Enterprise license for free usage of Core," he said.

Although all users would be moved to the Enterprise product, CockroachDB Enterprise Free would be available without charge to individual developers, students, academic researchers, and businesses under $10 million in annual revenues. The company would allow users to view the source "so the ideas behind CockroachDB can help foster innovation across the ecosystem," Kimball said.

Despite CockroachDB seeking a compromise, some see a remarkable volte-face.

In 2022, Jim Walker, then CockroachDB principal product manager, told _The Register_ the company was steeped in the open source movement. Earlier releases had been under the Apache license, while co-founders Kimball and Mattis were behind the popular open source GIMP photo manipulation tool, which resulted from a college project, he pointed out.

Peter Zaitsev, co-founder of open source database consultancy Percona, said: "Finally, CockroachDB has completed its transition away from open source. As many VC-funded open source companies have done before, CockroachDB started with a real open source license (Apache 2.0), then in 2019 relicensed to BSL. Now, the company has taken the next step towards becoming yet another Oracle in having proprietary Enterprise and Cloud versions, with a free tier available."

He said the move confirmed users need to be cautious about open source projects where the vast majority of contributions come from those within one company who "don't welcome or encourage contributions and code in a fair and equitable way."

"This highlights the long-term value of community-managed projects like PostgreSQL that offer users protection from single vendor shenanigans," he told _The Register_.

Amanda Brock, CEO of OpenUK, an open source advocacy organization, said summer might be when vendors "quietly shift an open source project to a proprietary license."

"Unlike last year's Hashicorp license change, it is not really a surprise to see CockroachDB move to the proprietary 'public source' licensing model," she said.

"Cockroach has been a longstanding open-source-license-grumbler, so it is not surprising to me that they have failed to build a solid business model on top of their open source licensed product." ®