



Open Source Skills Report 2026

Thought Leadership:
Open source careers:
building, showcasing, and
sustaining developer skills



1.3 Thought Leadership: Open source careers: building, showcasing, and sustaining developer skills

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Understanding the careers of open source software developers and engineers has been a key focus of my research over the past eight years. One recent study we undertook for Southampton Web Science institute, focused on software developer careers explored the experience of non-traditional groups - women and those from the global south ([Taylor et al. 2020](#)). A second study for [DIGIT](#) explored the organisational location of open source work and how that is navigated by developers and companies ([Taylor et al 2022](#)). These studies provided some interesting themes in relation to developer skills, skills in the broadest sense, both technical (coding, bug fixing, testing, systems administration etc.) and professional (team work, communication etc.). The studies highlighted various focal points at which we need to understand skills as they develop across the life course – first the process of **building** or developing skills in education and at the early career stage; second the way in which skills are demonstrated and **showcased** in the process of acquiring jobs; and finally the processes of continuing to build and **sustain** skills through out working lives and careers.

Building Skills – What is interesting about software developers, at least in the UK, is that whilst many transition from undergraduate or post graduate degrees in computing, a significant group come from other, mainly STEM, disciplines ([See UK HESA data](#)). This second group have learnt their software skills outside the context of a university degree. What we also know is that software developers often learn their software skills ‘on the job’ or are ‘self-taught’ making extensive use of online resources (technical documentation, forums and online communities, videos etc) to learn new languages and skills even where they have done a formal computing degree (Stackoverflow 2025). It’s also interesting to track where and how specific open source software skills are acquired. The developers that we spoke to in our research had a mix of educational backgrounds and had encountered open source in a variety of different contexts, developing their skills at school or in education, or later through engaging with particular tools and communities to help them build things, attending hackathons and conferences, and in work contexts being supported to learn contribution protocols.

Julia was VP engineering for a mobile app company which required a good knowledge of REACT native. During her working life she explained that she had learned most of her skills on the job. After dropping out of a computer science PHD she had worked for a succession of tech startups and games and mobile app companies in the US and Europe. Whilst Open source development was not central to these roles, it was still a key dimension of her skill set that she picked up along the way. As she explains: *‘In the internship, I was still very much learning iOS development because I didn’t take any iOS courses in school and so it was largely me pairing with another Engineer. But I’m pretty sure we did... I know specifically on a testing library that we were using we found a bug and he was like, “Let’s just go and fix it; this will be an experience for you”, and so we ended up doing that, like contributing’.*

Showcasing Skills

However they learn their software skills, developers go on to join an array of companies in various software roles – these range from small local start ups, to large global technology corporations ([Stackoverflow 2025](#)). Some bypass employment and go directly into freelance work for clients often mediated by platforms. Others manage a combination, holding multiple roles or wearing a number of hats ([Taylor 2023](#)). How they get these jobs, particularly when they are self taught, is another important question. How do they showcase their skills for prospective employers or clients?

Employers and policy makers routinely identify a digital / technical skills gap ([Thomas et al. 2025](#)). Indeed part of this policy report makes the point that it is open source skills that are particularly needed and which employers find hard to source. In our research the open source developers talked about their experience of being ‘in demand’. Many we spoke to described being actively headhunted by companies looking to bolster their open source expertise – the research was done in 2022 and 2023 when open source programme or project offices (OSPOs) were on the rise across commercial tech companies. One mechanism for this recruitment was companies researching public Github or Gitlab contributions to identify prospective employees.

Jakob had worked as a software developer for commercial companies for over a decade whilst doing open source in his spare time. For several years he used the 10% days that his company offered to contribute to a particular open source project. *‘I started to contribute back to the core of the module and more and more contributions. And in the end, I was invited to be a committer to the project. That project accepted the external contributors to be committers. I liked it. I found the community to be really helpful and friendly’*. Eventually he was approached by a recruiter from an open source company that was aware of his work through his community role and contributions and was looking for a person to contribute full time. For him this was a ‘no brainer’ since he would be paid to do open source

Adedayo was a Nigerian developer with a computer science degree who had been working in open source communities since he was at school. He had joined his local open source community hub and spent time there in a ‘helpdesk role.’ *‘That was how I started like, you know, helping people out, I was contributing to people’s project, talking to them about issues, talking about processes, telling them ‘oh this is my experience’*. His early internships and part time work whilst studying was in startups that were primarily open source and after his military service he went into a full time stack engineering role which he said was a direct result of his Github profile *‘I didn’t do any technical interview so I just basically got the job because of what I was already doing, what I had, because of open source, right’*

Sustaining Skills

The final piece of the skills jigsaw is the question of how those skills were sustained in the context of different types of job and organisation and engagement with software communities over the course of working lives. In our research, developers talked about their active participation in open source communities at various points in their career.

Researching the structural context

The brief examples outlined above really only begin to shed light on the complexity of developer careers and journeys. They certainly make a case for understanding at a micro level how skills are built and sustained over the life course for individuals and they hint at the role played by demographic factors in shaping experiences. What needs more attention (and more research!) is the structural context to these careers. Skills development and career decisions do not take place in a vacuum. They are shaped by the priorities and resources of contemporary education systems, by government policy and support for technology and innovation and structures shaping labour markets (digital platforms for example are largely unregulated labour market intermediaries). In other words, how open source skills are built, showcased and sustained is not an individual ‘problem’ or even an organisational one, but is contingent on the governance of technology that shapes priorities, resources and cultures. Understanding the mechanisms that link the macro (structural) and micro (individual) levels will help to ensure that open source in the UK and beyond is a thriving and sustainable ecosystem.

Hannah was in a developer relations role for a company that was working mostly in open source. She had left university with a degree in Information technology and learned coding during her early, relatively low skilled internships and jobs in commercial companies. She discovered open source several years later attending a Hacktoberfest, as she was starting to develop her own games app. She went on to set up and maintain a successful open source community around this app. That experience changed her career path. Following redundancy from a digital health company with a stressful long hours culture, she realised the importance for her of open source principals, and owning her code. For her next job she sought out a role focused on open source technologies. *‘I was specifically looking to swap technology tracks to Ruby on Rails. I was looking for a company that felt safe and felt right, and I was only interviewing at companies that had either good reputations or I knew people who could tell me about them. ...[Company] it’s very, very open source and the culture is very open source’*. That focus has continued to her current role where she supports open source communities.

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