

But I'm not a developer...how can I
contribute to Open Source?

Dru Lavigne
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Outline:

- Current state of affairs
- Assisting novice users
- Taking a closer look
- Practical contributions
- Missing frameworks

Scope of Presentation

- Focus on *BSD, but not limited to the BSD projects.
- Content can be applied to any Open Source project.
- Points raised should be considered at both the personal and community levels.

Current State of Affairs

- Effective process exists for managing contributions from developers and documenters.
- Users who don't program or write are often unsure how to best contribute.
- Frameworks are needed to support other areas of contribution.

Points to Keep in Mind

- The success of any project isn't necessarily driven by technical merit.
- Projects are populated by people of varying abilities--"soft skills" are important.
- A successful community provides mechanisms which allow any member to make a worthwhile contribution.

Novice Users

- Are still struggling with that initial learning curve.
- Their enthusiasm over new discoveries often contrasts with the “old hat” mentality of the rest of the community.
- Many feel intimidated and too inexperienced to contribute.

As a Novice User...

- Become aware of the available resources:
 - Mailing lists, IRC channels
 - Documentation, how-tos and FAQs
 - A test system
 - Quality books
 - A local user group!

As a Novice User...

- Don't be afraid to use resources:
 - However, do yourself and others a big favour by researching for answers before you post a question.
 - Follow the posting rules for your chosen forum.
 - If you don't understand the answer, politely ask for clarification.

As a Novice User...

- Never underestimate the value of your perspective.
 - You're not the only new user out there.
 - Not all documentation is user-friendly—post a clearer explanation as you find it.
 - When you do find clear documentation, take a moment to send an appreciative email to the author.

Assisting Novice Users...

- As your technical skills improve, don't forget what it was like to be a new user.
 - RTFM is not helpful; a concrete reference to appropriate documentation is.
 - Try not to let a bad or harried day result in a rude response.

Assisting Novice Users...

- It's not so much what you say as how you say it.
 - What you say in a public forum continues to have a ripple effect long after you've forgotten it.
 - Don't make others feel stupid for asking a question.
 - Steer others into their own explorations.

Taking a Closer Look...

- Attitude has impact.
 - Watch your own posts for negativity and fanaticism.
 - Take a step back if you find yourself constantly saying “this won't work” or “things will always be this way”.

Taking a Closer Look...

- Examine the prevalent atmosphere of your own community:
 - Are “outsiders” welcome?
 - Is there an obvious gender skew?
 - Is a blind eye turned to inappropriate remarks or discriminatory behaviour?
 - Do you actively participate or lurk in the woodwork?

Taking a Closer Look...

- What are your project's goals?
 - Are users encouraged to maintain an all or nothing attitude?
 - Are non-contributors denigrated or encouraged to participate?
 - Is there an established framework in place to accept contributions?

Taking a Closer Look...

- Has your initial enthusiasm devolved into a general apathy?
 - Do you find bugs without reporting them or submitting a patch?
 - Do you scour the Internet to cobble together a solution, then not share the results so others don't have to reinvent the wheel?

Taking a Closer Look...

- Will Open Source continue to get better if no one:
 - Submits feedback and feature requests,
 - Files bugs or creates patches,
 - Donates money or hardware,
 - Provides missing documentation, examples, support, & advocacy?
- NO!!!

Taking a Closer Look...

- Pick a project and contribute!
 - Take a closer look at the 100s of Open Source applications running on your own systems.
 - Visit their homepages, Freshmeat or Sourceforge.
 - Literally 1000s of projects are in dire need of documentation, beta testers, and exposure.

What can I do?

- Do grammatical errors, undocumented switches and outdated manpages drive you batty?
 - Investigate the submission process of your project's documentation project.
 - Submit tutorials and how-tos online.

What can I do?

- Frustrated by the lack of documentation available in your native language?
 - Translators are a much needed resource.
 - If your community doesn't have a translation project, enquire about starting one.
 - Always obtain permission before translating existing documentation.

What can I do?

- Bugged that your place of work or school doesn't use Open Source?
 - Install what you can on the systems available to you.
 - Show others what they're missing.
 - Start an informal group which meets at lunch or after hours.
 - Carry a supply of give away CDs.

What can I do?

- Tired of reading bad press concerning Open Source?
 - Write opinion pieces and product reviews that highlight the positives of Open Source.
 - Give a talk at your local high school or college and demonstrate the benefits of being involved in Open Source.

What can I do?

- Would your dream job involve installing and testing software?
 - Install CURRENT on a spare system and join the CURRENT mailing list.
 - Find a project that is looking for beta testers.
 - Install a port and document its features in a how-to.

What can I do?

- Are you an avid reader?
 - Most publishers offer free books to those who write and post reviews.
 - When you're finished with the book, donate it to your user group's lending library.
 - Have too many technical books? Start a revolving library.

What can I do?

- Love to talk and help others?
 - Find a forum, mailing list, or IRC channel and look for opportunities to assist new users.
 - Organize and/or volunteer at a local installfest: even if the venue isn't specifically about your project, see if you can obtain a booth.

What can I do?

- Want to see Open Source promoted in business?
 - Research and create a list of vendors in your area that support, use, or promote Open Source.
 - Find or create an organization that promotes Open Source in your community.

What can I do?

- Want to see more articles but feel your writing skills aren't up to par?
 - Some online magazines may still be interested in editing your submission.
 - Most online magazines are in dire need of HTML formatters and proofreaders.

What can I do?

- Just don't have the time?
 - Use your coffee money to buy a CD subscription for yourself and a friend.
 - Commit yourself to make a dent in a project's donation page.
 - Sponsor someone's admission fee to a conference.

Looking to the Future...

- A successful community encourages participation.
- Frameworks to organize contributions should naturally occur as needs are defined.
- Communities that only encourage technical proficiency suffer from a lack of non-technical contributions.

Looking to the Future...

- Consider the following non-technical frameworks:
 - Organized media campaign ensuring articles promoting a project are placed in magazines and ezines.
 - Contacts within local government and business.
 - Lobby for funding and support of big name companies.

Looking to the Future...

- Committee to research benefits of standardization or Common Criteria certification.
- Committee to develop a standardized curricula and certification program.
- Organizing the creation and distribution of white papers and promotional material.
- Commissioning of usage surveys.

Conclusion

- Our ability to make contacts and to encourage others to contribute their talents directly affects the success of Open Source.

References...

- Resources for the Open Source advocate:
<http://www.theopensourceadvocate.org>
- O'Reilly's User Group Program:
<http://ug.oreilly.com>
- November issue of
<http://www.sdmagazine.com>
- Bookcrossings:
<http://www.bookcrossings.com>