

Who Should Steer Your Open Source Projects?

—
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About Us....



- Located in the San Francisco Bay Area
- 10+ years in Open Source Community Management
- Spend way too much time obsessing over soccer games



- Located in Stockholm, Sweden
- 10+ years active engagement in Open Source
- Spend more time than Ray obsessing over **FOOTBALL** games



So should we all move to a Foundation?

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▲ TiDB – cloud-native, distributed SQL database written in Go (github.com/pingcap)
72 points by philonoist 9 months ago | hide | past | favorite | 65 comments

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TiDB has four main components:

1. SQL front end nodes 2. Distributed shared nothing storage (TiKV) 3. Meta data server (PS) 4. TiFlash column store

1 and 3 are written in Go 2 is written in Rust and uses RocksDB 4 is written in C++

2 & 3 are graduated CNCF projects maintained by PingCAP.

Disclaimer: I work for PingCAP

eikenberry 9 months ago | prev | next [-]

VC backed database company with a CLA on their "open source" project. Red flag. Is there a community fork yet?

...

* 5 points by rpaik 9 months ago | root | parent | next [-]

> I think the best way would be something similar to the Linux Foundation. Companies in need of a certain type of database would pool resources to develop and maintain it.

Disclaimer: I currently work at PingCAP and previously worked at the Linux Foundation.

Foundation (whether it's the LF or others) isn't a panacea either. It's fine when projects get started and there are plenty of willing member companies, but for many projects, companies often lose interest, need to cut down on open source related investments, etc. and the project funding dwindles. The reality is that the member companies need to both fund and provide software developers for projects, and it's difficult to expect them to keep the same commitment for more than a few years these days....

<https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=42585025>

How do Open Source Foundations work?



- Funding from member organizations (and sometimes from individual donors)
 - Technical contributions also mostly come from member organizations
- Governance and leadership via community-elected boards and steering committees
 - e.g., Product/roadmap decisions by technical committees
- Foundation staff for project operations
 - Incl. managing project's Intellectual Property (IP) matters such as copyrights, licences, patents, etc.



Longevity/Sustainability of Foundation-based Projects

Foundation Hosting ≠ Guaranteed Funding

Projects can struggle if member companies reduce or withdraw support



Diverse and Reliable Funding

Recurring support from multiple member companies and sponsors

Lack of Contributor Diversity

Over reliance on one (or a few) companies leave the projects fragile



Broad Contributor Base

Companies encourage developer participation as part of their day jobs

Shift in Company Strategy

Company may deprioritize the project or attempt to alter directions, eroding community trust and engagement



Transparent and Inclusive Governance

Building trust through open decision making and shared ownership

Longevity and Sustainability Need Shared Commitment - Not Just Foundation

Things can still go wrong with Foundations

Funding / Sustainability

The Matrix.org "Crossroads" (Feb 2025)



Even established foundations reach financial "crossroads" exemplified by Matrix.org shutting down free bridges to close a critical funding gap

Foundations can't print money.
Member organizations must still actively sustain the project

Governance / Integrity

The NATS and CNCF Incident (May 2025)



Tensions arose regarding the "integrity of open source" and "the commercial steward's rights", sparking a public debate on project control

The incident serves as an "extreme example" that foundation governance is not immune to ugly disputes

What about Commercial Company-based projects?



- Funding (the company) comes from investors (e.g., VC's), revenues, etc.
- Contributions mostly come from company employees
 - The company has direct control over most of developer resources
- Product/feature priorities decided by company's product team
- Community members may not have the final say in project's direction, but they can help shape it.

Successful Company-led Open Source Projects



- Strong company stewardship can drive long term success for projects
- Company leadership enables focused decisions, faster progress and a coherent roadmap
- Continuous funding and dedicated contributors keep the projects evolving and reliable
- Stable licensing ensures minimal disruptive changes, supporting long-term user and community confidence (*There have been only~20 license changes in the past decade*)



How can you influence company-led open source projects?

- Active engagement in the community
 - This should not be limited to code in the project's repository
 - Your advocacy and insights are just as valuable
- Don't hesitate to be (constructively) vocal and to reach out to people at the company
 - Company employees are also members of the community so they're your fellow community members
- Even if you are not a paid user, the value you get from the software & community will also be relevant to commercial customers

Some closing thoughts....

- It's overly simplistic to say one model of funding open source projects is better than others.
- The success or failure of open source projects is not determined solely by their funding or business model.
- As community members, we share the responsibility of ensuring that open source projects—including those under foundations—stay true to open source principles.

Q&A