

Are Open Source Programmers Programming Their Way Out of a Job?

Imagine a world where everything is free. Many open source programmers believe in such a world, they work nights and weekends and then give their work away. Wouldn't it be cool if not only programmers, but lawyers, carpenters and everyone else worked for free too? That would be cool if that was how the world worked.

This article was written using a program called Open Office. Along with the more famous Linux, Open Office is one of many programs that are free and downloadable off the Internet. Open source and free software may be good for users and businesses, but is open source *good for programmers*? When open source means “free software” it may actually be *a raw deal for programmers*.

While a lot of open source programmers are paid and work for companies like Red Hat or IBM, a lot of the programmers volunteer their time and are *not* paid. I can't really address the issue of *why* they work for free, since I don't fully understand their motivations. I did send an email to a famous Linus asking for an opinion about open source programmers compensation and motivation, but received no response. Wouldn't volunteering for organizations like UNICEF be more rewarding than writing free software for the middle classes? Just ask'in!

Consider our fictional friend, Freida. For months, Freida spent much of her free time working on Plumware 5.0 – an open source, freely downloadable and free to use software application for plumbers. Late one Sunday night the pipe on Freida's kitchen sink broke, resulting in dish water all over the kitchen floor.

After consulting the online yellow pages Freida called up Jake the Plumber to fix her drain pipes. After the work was done Freida and Jake exchanged the expected small talk as Freida got out her check book. During the chitchat Freida mentioned she worked on Plumware 5.0 and asked Jake if he used it, and what a coincidence, it turns out he did use it. Jake was almost going to give Freida a discount, but he had just bought a boat. So Jake charged Freida the full amount for his services and left with check in hand.

Am I anti-open source? Hell no I like Open Office, Thunderbird and Firefox and pretty much anything free. Any *emotional* accusation that I am anti-open source deserves a preemptive response: *don't get emotional about it*.

The Microsoft Connection

There *must* be a Microsoft connection, after all we are talking about software here. Certainly Microsoft has been harmed by open source. Linux, MySQL, Open Office, every download potentially means a lost sale of Microsoft Windows, SQL Server and Microsoft Office. The same is true of all the other software that is now free that Microsoft was hoping to sell. Microsoft's latest SEC filing shows the software giant is getting worried about open source.

Take China. Not literally, think of all the lost Microsoft sales now that China is standardizing on Linux. That is many, *many* millions of dollars in lost sales. Sales that would have gone to an American company, with American employees and investors. Sales that would have benefited American programmers. It also means lost revenue for the tax man, so no new roads for those poor Seattlites stuck in traffic. A ton of money, that would have found its way to America, will now not be coming. The same trend is occurring around the world. Billions of dollars will now

no longer be benefiting America programmers.

Motivation

Of course there is one area where I do understand a little of the open source programmers motivations: *must... destroy... evil... Microsoft... empire...*

While I certainly did not agree with Microsoft's business tactics of the 80's and 90's, I'd rather work at Microsoft as a programmer than at The Home Depot stocking shelves. Besides, the past is the past. Microsoft has settled, paid fines, changed its contracts and itself; Microsoft has paid its debt to society. If Sun Microsystems can forgive Microsoft (they settled their Java differences a few months ago) then anybody can.

Are Open Source Programmers Stifling Competition?

Microsoft's past practices have stifled competition, but now there is a new kid on the block. The new kid is open source. Why would any company (or anyone) develop an software when there is a decent and *free* application that does the job already out there? It would not make economic or business sense. How can anyone compete against *free*?

Eventually companies and people in general are going to wake up to all this, not just free, but really good free software out there and buy less commercial software. It is happening already, companies are buying less software. The same thing is happening to the desktop. People that used to buy programs now download free software. If people and companies *buy less software*, how are programmers going to get paid? Just to make this point especially clear let's put it in bold, with italics and in its own paragraph:

Less purchasing of software means less cash for software developers.

That is just simple Economics 001 (which is way simpler than Economics 101).

Free Software For All

Just how much free software is out there? Check out SourceForge.Net, probably the biggest open source website out there. Their "Software Map" shows 90378 projects. Ninety thousand projects, now that is a whack of projects and a whole lot of software! These projects are in various stages of development, but many have working versions of the software ready to download. Many are for Linux but many are also for Windows and for MAC. The vast majority are available under the "GNU General Public License" or "Open Source Initiative" licensing schemes, meaning free to use. There is also thousands of freeware programs available through other websites, such as download.com.

Much freeware and free open source is supported by donation. The idea of support through donations is itself a topic worth examining. At least it is worth having a paragraph devoted, or shall we say *donated*, to.

Donations

My response to requests for donations: pass. It would not be fair for me to pay when others do not. Especially when others use the software more or perhaps earn more than I do. Either charge

for the product or give it away. When freeware and open source programmers become tax deductible I'll consider making a donation.

Offshore Outsourcing

In 2003 the programmer unemployment rate hit over 7% and hasn't improved much so far this year. There is a perception that a big part of the problem is that the jobs are going overseas and there has been a lot of press recently about this phenomenon. Some claim bitterly about this issue, see for example www.yourjobisgoingtoindia.com.

Other people argue offshore outsourcing has not had a large impact on the number of programming jobs in this country. But there is no denying the facts: there is plenty of growth in programming jobs, it just happens that this growth is not occurring in America.

Certainly there has been an impact, but it may be the combined impact of offshore outsourcing *and* open source software that are driving programming wages down and programmer unemployment up.

The SourceForge.Net - Offshore Connection

It is quite interesting, almost a *conspiracy theory* level of interesting, that SourceForge.Net is “*Powered by SourceForge(tm) collaborative software development tools from VA Software*”. Why is this so interesting? A look at VA Software's website provides the answer. VA Software specializes in enabling offshore software development:

“Make Offshore Safe” - “Sending applications and product development work offshore carries both risks and rewards.”

“With globally distributed and outsourced development becoming more common, process improvement initiatives have become critical for improving project manageability, coordination, and development efficiency.”

While researching this article, VA Software's website stopped responding – possibly in an attempt to thwart my attempts at gathering information about their company? Or just coincidence and everyday paranoia on my part? You decide.

So the very company that is sponsoring so much open source and free software development is also helping companies move software development offshore. Talk about a one-two punch!

Oh, and guess what software the overseas developers are using? That's right, overseas programmers and companies are heavy users of free open source software.

In the End

We will always need more software, at least that is how it has been since the very first program was written. In the past software was, how shall I put this, not really of the highest quality, driving the need for more (hopefully better) software. But these days software is pretty decent. The truth is, if no *new* software were to become available then *I could make do with what I have*. Maybe we'll still need new software, but perhaps less of it than we have in the past. Less software, less money for software developers.

No doubt the fact that American companies are doing more with less has also had something to do with the decline in wages and rise in unemployment for software programmers. But it seems logical to me that with all this free open source software and freeware floating around that *the value of software*, and by association, *the value of programmers*, must be dropping and will continue to drop. Free open source software might just be contributing to the decline of the great American Programmer.

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