A Study on Julia Luison

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Julia Luison, current Corporate Vice President of developer division at Microsoft, was born in Shanghai in 1970. In 1992, Luison joined Microsoft after graduating from the University of Washington in Electrical and Computer Engineering. Luison started her career as a developer in Microsoft Access, then worked in Visual InterDev, later participated in the development of Visual Studio. She then was in charge of Visual Studio Business Applications, and now manages a variety of Microsoft products including Visual Studio, .NET and Azure. Having worked for Microsoft for over 25 years, Luison is an inspiration to women in technology, and a significant contributor to Microsoft’s movement to embrace open source.

Five years ago, a Microsoft software developer needed an approval from their vice president to look at open source codes, mentioned by Luison in an interview. However, five years later, many Microsoft products and services are open source, can be accessed by anyone. Before the big shift to open source, Microsoft was seen as “everything Windows”, but with the contribution of Luison and her team, Microsoft is rapidly adapting to being open source, as well as developing software and services on all platforms, which I believe are the current trend and future direction of software engineering,

Luison’s first strategy is to provide integrated tools across all platforms. From her point of view, her customers are software engineers all over the world, and her job is to meet their needs, help them deliver better projects. As developers need to make use of various tools to meet their goals, they would also need a tool that can achieve many things. This kind of tools can not only save developers time to learn and be familiar with new tools, but also saves companies the time and money of hiring different developers for different tasks. In other words, such software would be beneficial to both developers and companies, who are the customers. With this strategy, Microsoft made their products, Visual Studio, .NET and more, cross-platform and integrated with all of the most popular programming languages.

Luison’s second strategy is embracing the open source ecosystem. More and more software and systems are becoming open source, many programming languages are open source, as well as the tools that developers use. The open source community is growing bigger and bigger, and this is where the customers are. In an interview, Luison talked about what is the “real open source”. There are many open source software and projects on the internet, some of them only publish new releases on the internet. However, developers still work in a rather private environment when they are working on a new release, and not making much public communication with the open source community. Instead, the idea of a real open source software means the codes and the development process should be visible to everyone, as well as maintaining active communication with the open source community, which is what Microsoft is doing today. The Visual Studio Code repository on GitHub has over 55,000 commits in the master branch, almost 1000 contributors, all communications can be seen by anyone, and anyone can send pull requests to this repository.

This new development model brings us to the role of open source developers, or developers in general, which is both the customer and the contributor. As customers, developers are able to submit any feedback or problems directly to Microsoft, and actually see how the problems are handled in GitHub, which brings Microsoft closer to their customers, respond to customer feedback more quickly, improving the software and customer satisfaction. On the other hand, being able to bring up problems and contribute to the code as an individual, developers actually became the contributors of the software, helping the software become better and cope with new situations.

Because of the new development cycle, Microsoft has active and effective open source community engagement, which is beneficial to both developers and Microsoft. As Microsoft take in customer feedback and improve their products, they allow users to produce desired outcome easier and more efficient, benefiting customers. In the meantime, Microsoft’s products would attract more new users and develop more loyal users. By winning customer usage, more people become more likely to choose other Microsoft products compared to other companies’ products when they are in need of other types of software, benefiting the company.

Although Microsoft did not have an early start in the transition to become open source, this movement is seeing significant results. Comparing to before, the company has been shipping out products faster and better since switching to the new development model, according to Liuson. In addition, the company has seen a rapid increase in the number of users, utilizing and contributing to the software, from less than 2 million monthly active users to today’s 14 million. Looking from another perspective, Microsoft’s products are becoming more and more widely used in industries, from Facebook switching some major projects to Microsoft’s TypeScript, to Microsoft’s Azure cloud platform supporting Samsung, eBay, Dell and more. It is clear that embracing open source has accelerated Microsoft’s development in a positive direction.

According to Liuson, Microsoft’s current open source movement is contributing to their long-term goal, which is to embrace the world, embracing different operating system, programming languages and communities. The company aim to value more on customers and communities, meeting and helping customers by reaching into every community. In other words, Microsoft make itself come to customers, meeting customers’ needs face to face, instead of the other way around.

In this essay on Julia Luison and her strategy for Microsoft to embrace open source, a short biography about herself is provided, then her strategies are explained and discussed with some of my own thoughts and interpretation. In addition, Microsoft’s development due to the new strategy is assessed, and their future transition towards open source is presented.