

# INSPIRING AND EMPOWERING USERS AND TECHIES TO BECOME GREAT WRITERS AND WHY THAT'S IMPORTANT

Presented by Jo Cook, Astun Technology | OSGeo | @archaeogeek

HI! I'M JO \*WAVES\*

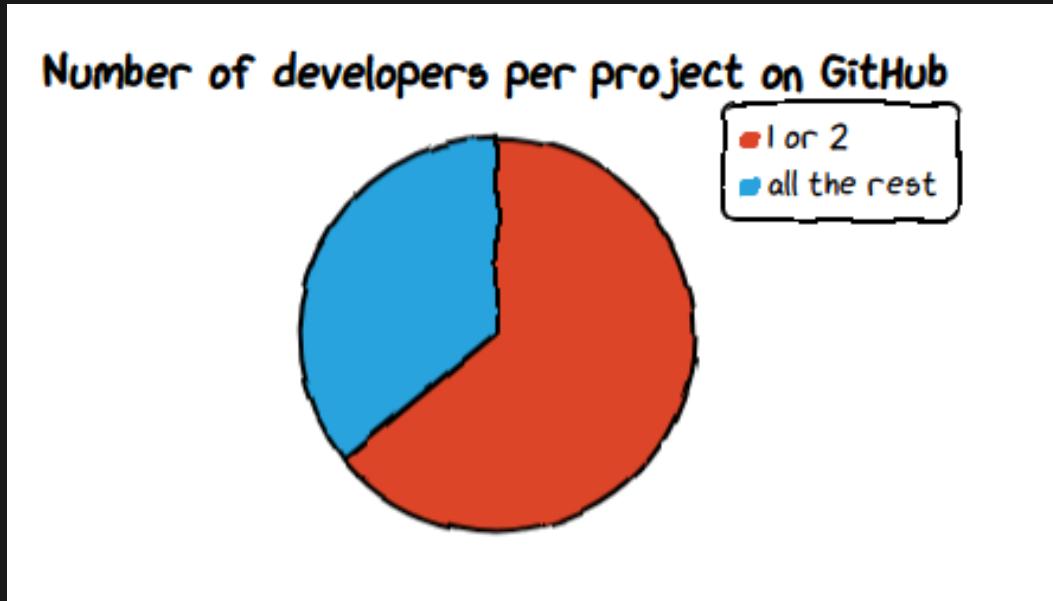
I'M NOT A DEVELOPER

AND I'M ENTIRELY NEW TO #DEVREL

BUT I'M HERE TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT A  
PROBLEM WITH OPEN SOURCE PROJECTS

# STEP ONE: ACKNOWLEDGE THE PROBLEM

# PROJECTS ARE DYING!



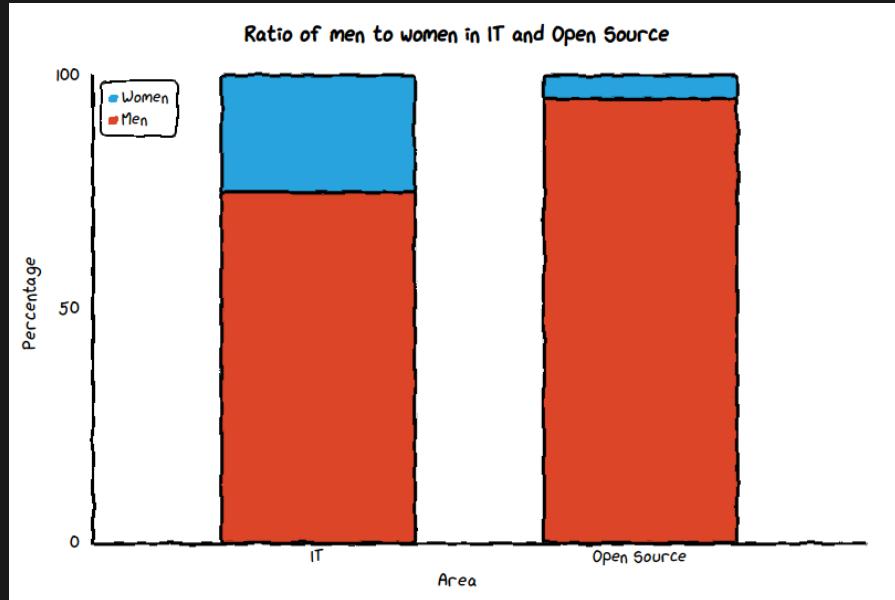
*64% of the most active projects on GitHub rely on 1 or 2  
developers to survive*

*Roads and Bridges: The Unseen Labor Behind Our Digital Infrastructure*

## Speaker notes

Let's start from the premise that many vital projects are run by a very small team of developers, who often have day jobs and are doing this in their spare time

# AND THEY ARE NOT VERY DIVERSE!



*The ratio of women in IT is about 17-25%... but in open source [it's] around 0.1-5%*

*Sustainable Open Source, Jan Lehnhardt*

## Speaker notes

Obvs this is just one diversity metric but at the very least this means there's a pool of talent that can be mined for participation in projects

# DOCUMENTATION IS SEVERELY LACKING!

*Lack of documentation is a highly effective barrier to participation... adoption and contribution*

*Riona MacNamara at Write the Docs Australia 2019 (via @knowledge\_owl)*



# AND YOU GET PEOPLE SAYING THIS:



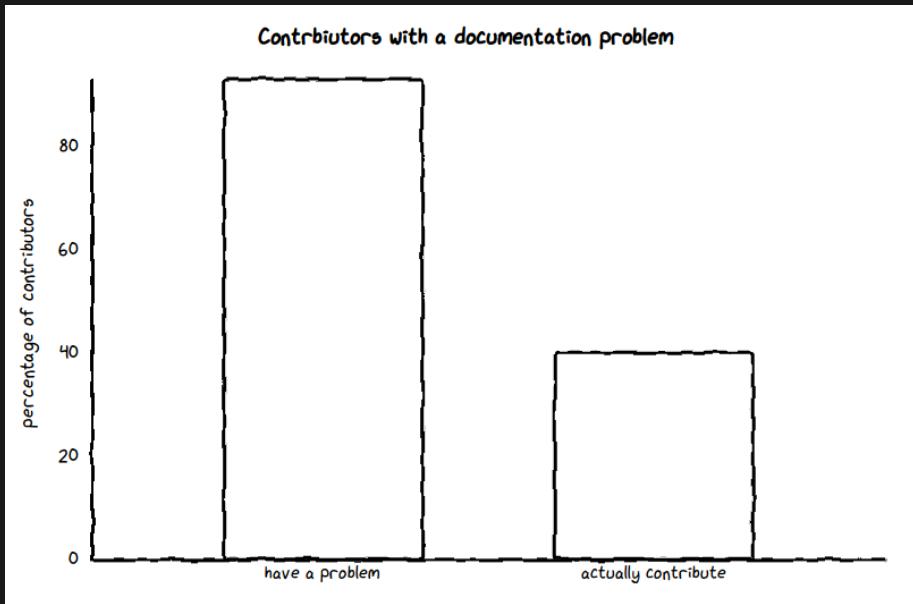
*My code is open source on GitHub, but I don't spend any effort making it easy for others to use it. If you want to figure it out yourself, have fun!*

*Redacted to protect the innocent*

## Speaker notes

Having a wilfully bad onboarding process for your project is not a badge of honour

# YET GETTING HELP IS TRICKY:



*Incomplete or outdated documentation is a pervasive problem, observed by 93% of respondents, yet 60% of contributors say they rarely or never contribute to documentation*

## STEP TWO: RESTATE THE PROBLEM

OPEN SOURCE PROJECTS ARE UNDER-  
RESOURCED, NOT WELL-DOCUMENTED,  
AND DON'T ATTRACT DIVERSE  
CONTRIBUTIONS

# STEP THREE: CONSIDER POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

## FIND MORE RESOURCES

*Long-term support is more about creating time than it is  
about money*

*Roads and Bridges: The Unseen Labor Behind Our Digital Infrastructure*

## Speaker notes

Open source is not inherently flawed, but rather under-resourced (from same report)

# PARTICULARLY FOR DOCUMENTATION

*Documentation is highly valued, frequently overlooked, and a means for establishing inclusive and accessible communities.*

*Github Open Source Survey 2017 <https://opensourcesurvey.org>*

## Speaker notes

Expanding the pool of contributors and encouraging contributions to more than just code makes a project more resilient

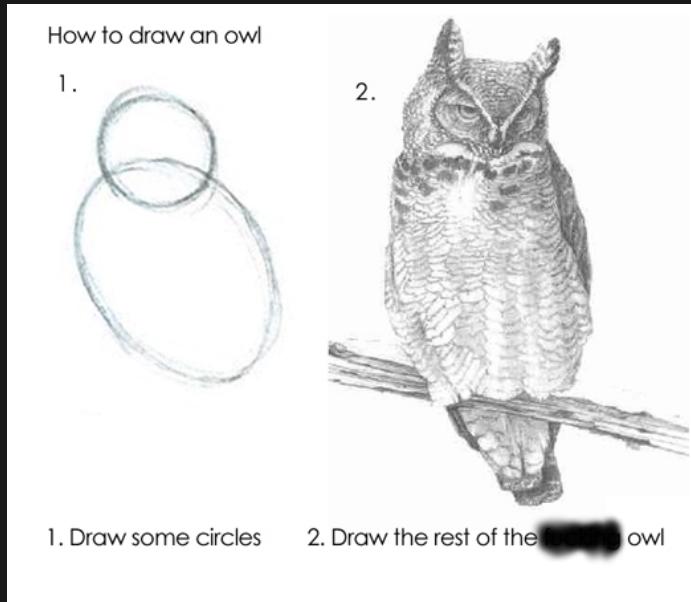
=> ENCOURAGING USER  
CONTRIBUTIONS IS REALLY  
IMPORTANT

AND HERE ARE SOME MORE REASONS  
WHY...

Speaker notes

Not the impolite, entitled, frequently rude ones

# DEVELOPERS MIGHT MISS OUT STEPS



*Step 2: Draw the rest of the \*\*\* owl*

*Internet legend, 2008?*

## Speaker notes

It's easy for people close to the software at its most technical level to miss out steps in quick start guides and how-tos. At a workshop for a mapping library recently, I think 20% of the participants would have given up during the setup stage were it not for the assistants helping out

# DEVELOPERS ARE FAMILIAR WITH MORE TECHNICAL TERMINOLOGIES

*Just clone the dev branch, add the grunt tasks and  
recompile...*

*Slightly made up example*

## Speaker notes

Developers may use overly technical language or phrasing. A Nielsen Norman Group survey concluded that only 5% of the population of 33 rich countries has high computer-related abilities and only a third can complete medium complexity tasks <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/computer-skill-levels/>

# USERS KNOW WHAT USERS EXPECTATIONS AND NEEDS ARE

How are people actually using your project? Is it the way you expected them to?

## Speaker notes

As projects become more successful they gain a life of their own. Users become more demanding, but also help to establish what's important, find novel use-cases, and what needs more documentation love

# USERS WILL ACTUALLY WANT TO USE YOUR DOCUMENTATION

*The current state of \*\*\*'s software is the worst I've ever seen for any framework anywhere...I've repeatedly been reduced to searching through WWDC video transcripts to figure out where someone says something relevant to whatever I'm working on*

*Slashdot, October 2019*

## Speaker notes

Are your docs fit for purpose? Are all the terms searchable (screenshots are bad for this), is it useable by people with different needs and abilities? PS it's not just about open source!

**STEP FOUR: FIGURE OUT WHAT  
PUTS PEOPLE OFF**

# HIGH BARRIERS TO ENTRY



# A STANDARD DOCS TOOLCHAIN:

Install the correct versions of java, python, maven,  
sphinx, sphinx-bootstrap-theme

Become a ReStructured Text ninja

Understand about GitHub Forks, Pull Requests,  
Reviews, and Commits

Then you can submit your first documentation change!

## Speaker notes

It may be a learning curve for a contributor to learn how to submit a pull request, or learn reStructuredText syntax before they actually get to contribute, so ensure you provide instructions or links to guidance as well. Getting documentation and git toolchains set up on windows can be a nightmare even for technically proficient users

# THIS APPLIES TO SOFTWARE IN GENERAL THESE DAYS

*if you want to start building a full-stack web application in 2018, you may need to first install Node.js and the npm package manager, run a slew of npm commands to configure a custom toolchain with a CSS preprocessor and a JavaScript code bundler, adjust OS environment variables to detect all required library dependencies...*

*Using Operating-System-Wide Activity Tracing, Alok Mysore and Philip J. Guo*

## Speaker notes

You're assuming people actually want to use your software as an end in its own right, when it may just be a step towards achieving an entirely separate objective. Users will ensure your documentation gets people through these early painful setup stages

# NEW CONTRIBUTORS FEEL UNWELCOME

*Negative experiences have real consequences for project health. 21% of people who experienced or witnessed a negative behavior said they stopped contributing to a project because of it*

*Github Open Source Survey 2017*

## Speaker notes

Contributors are not an annoyance, or an increased burden, or suitable only for minor tasks

<https://opensource.com/business/16/6/bad-practice-foss-projects-management>

**STEP FIVE: FIGURE OUT A  
BETTER SOLUTION**

# REDUCE BARRIERS TO ENTRY

Allow easy ways for users to contribute

(Preferrably so they don't need to install additional software)

Get their contributions live as quickly as possible

Acknowledge and encourage contributions, no matter how small

## Speaker notes

Reduce the friction for a user to quickly fix a mistake they've spotted, or otherwise contribute. This is better than sending someone to a page for submitting an issue (which is what MDN and PostgreSQL both do). Label low-hanging fruit or good first issues

# ATTRACT AND NURTURE EXISTING TECHNICAL WRITERS

*It is no trivial task to make complex information in the technical domain simple for users to understand and follow*

*<https://idratherbewriting.com/2018/11/19/avoid-being-secretary-for-engineers/>*

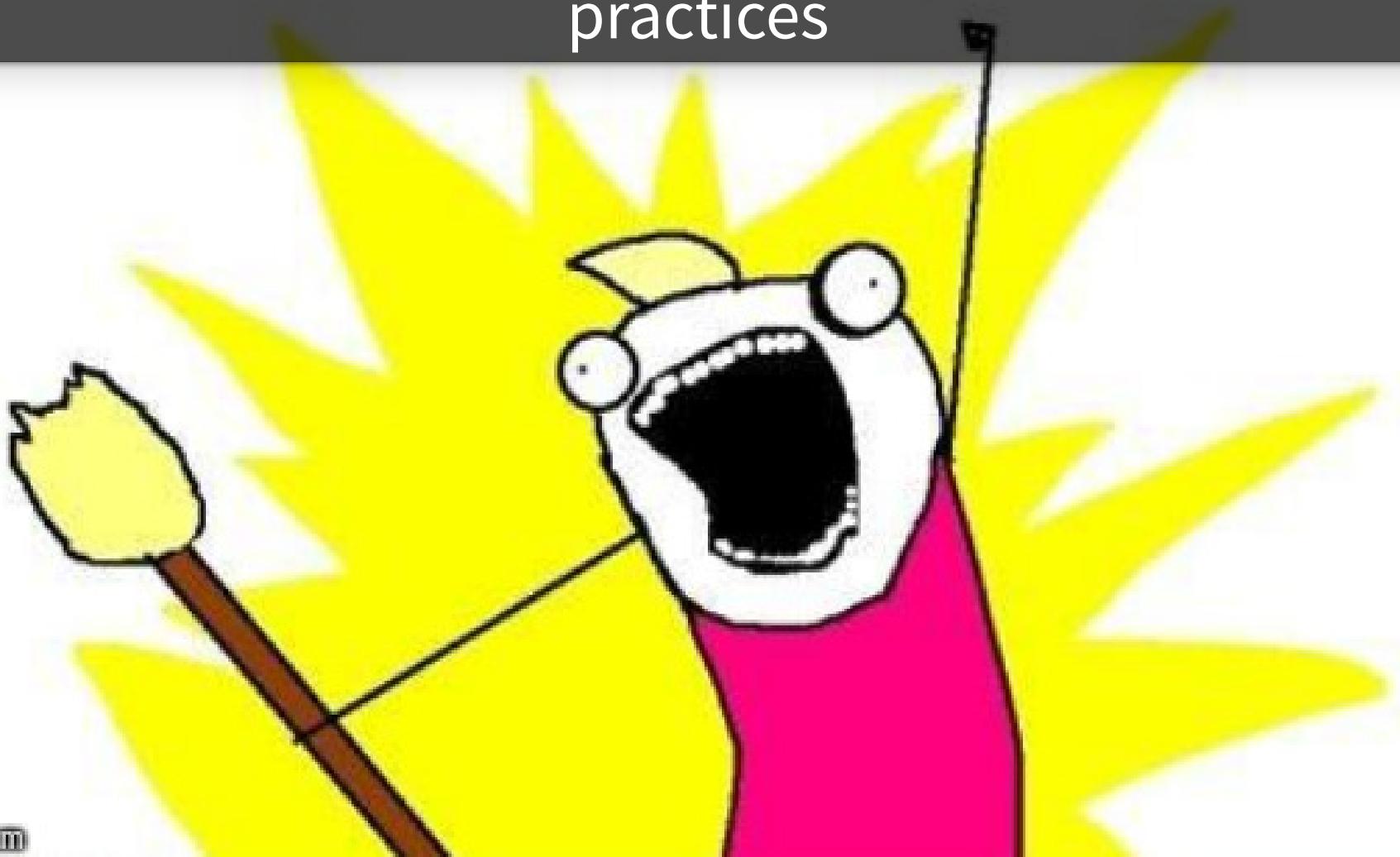


## Speaker notes

Technical Writers != Secretaries, they have subject matter expertise

Provide workflows that make it easier to write good  
documentation

Follow, learn from, and contribute to existing good  
practices



SO, TO SUMMARISE, THIS IS  
IMPORTANT BECAUSE...

ENCOURAGING HELP WITH  
DOCUMENTATION FOR YOUR PROJECT  
ENCOURAGES EMPATHY, AND IMPROVES  
DIVERSITY

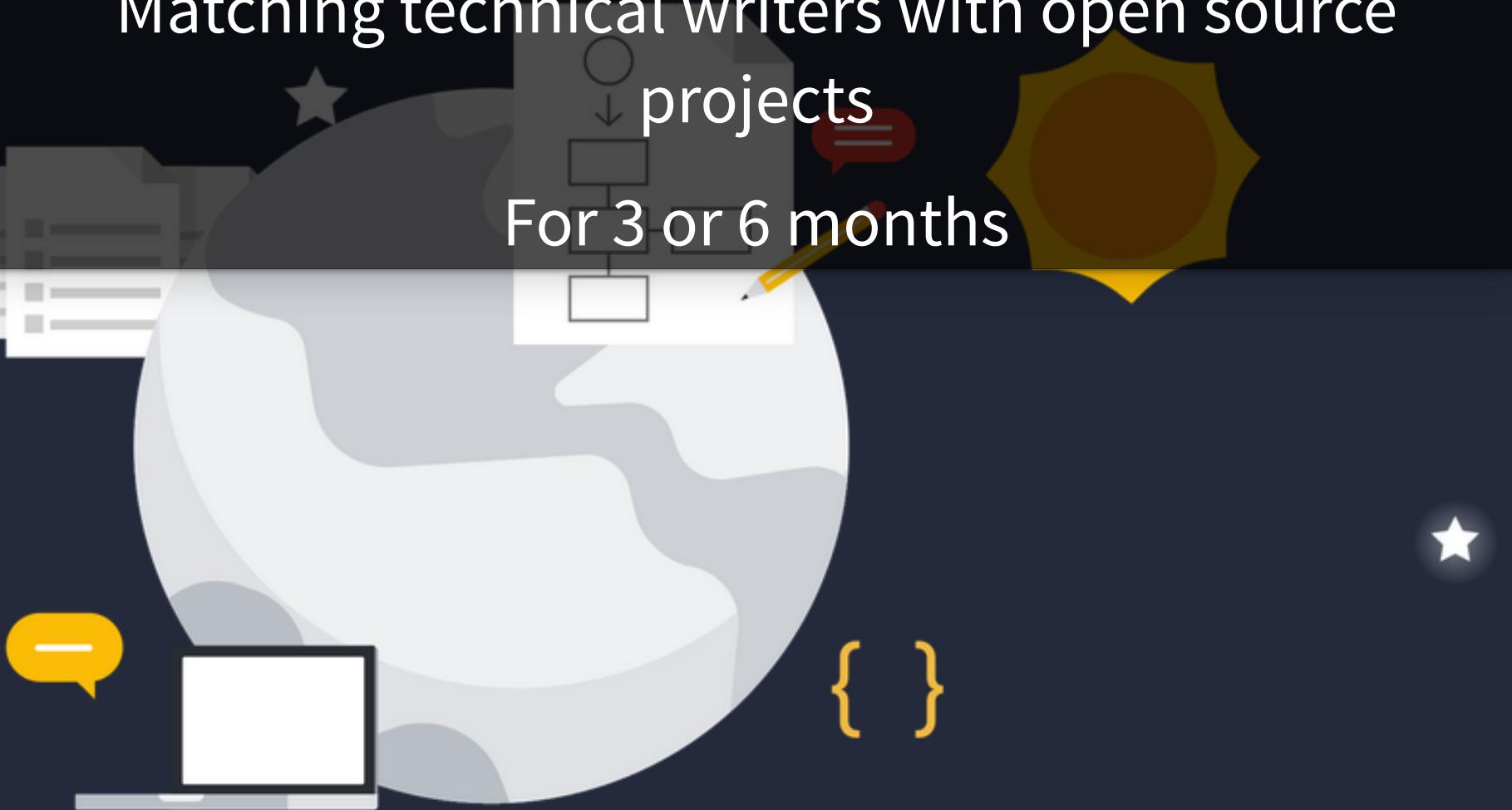
# BUT I DON'T HAVE TIME!!!1!11!



# ENTER GOOGLE SEASON OF DOCS

Matching technical writers with open source  
projects

For 3 or 6 months



Speaker notes

For OSGeo- OSGeoLive Quick Starts and GeoNetwork

SO WE THOUGHT...WHY NOT ABSTRACT  
THAT EXPERTISE AND WORK TO MAKE  
SOMETHING MORE GENERIC?



# STEP SIX: BUILDING AN ACTUAL SOLUTION

# THE GOOD DOCS PROJECT



# AIM #1: IDENTIFY ALL THE ELEMENTS OF GOOD DOCUMENTATION THAT A PROJECT NEEDS

and provide best-practice resources and templates for  
each of them

Speaker notes

Tutorials, how-tos, reference, technical documentation

# AIM #2: AN OPEN SOURCE MINIMAL VIABLE DOCSET

Helping you to create a baseline set of docs for all  
stages of a project from initiation through to maturity

# AIM #3: A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS, USERS AND TECHIES

Practical tips, advice, help for all parts of the process

INCREASING QUALITY AND CONSISTENCY,  
SAVING TIME FOR DEVELOPERS,  
DEMOCRATISING KNOWLEDGE, AND  
GENERALLYMAKING THE WORLD A  
BETTER PLACE

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# THANK YOU!

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@archaeogeek