

# Steven Deobald

+1 306-671-7179

steven@deobald.ca

December 4, 2024

Hello Jonathan and the GNOME Foundation team,

Nirbheek first mentioned that the GNOME Foundation was looking for an Executive Director two days ago, when he found out that I'm looking for my next role. I was a bit surprised to learn the Foundation has been operating with an interim Executive Director since July. GNOME is still my daily desktop, but I haven't followed its development or politics closely in quite a few years.

During our conversation, many challenges were mentioned. It sounds like there are financing difficulties, structural complications, and some interpersonal tension. These are all natural points of friction in any organization — even more so for open source foundations — but it sounds as though each is now cause for real concern. A look through the Foundation's last few years' worth of tax filings suggests that there is some immediate work required.

My resume contains the strict timeline of jobs and titles I've held over the past two decades, but Nirbheek's introduction email did a good job of summarizing: I started my career as a hacker and increasingly found myself leading teams and, eventually, organizations.

## **Commercial Cooperatives**

I started Nilenso Software in 2012, largely out of curiosity. I wanted to see if a worker-owned model could work in a software company, in a country where cooperatives are uncommon: India. Our little 20-person team was successful in growing the company, hiring great developers, finding deeper and more meaningful work, and bootstrapping our own democratic processes. By 2018 I'd also managed to hire my replacement and move on, to see if Nilenso could fly on its own. It did.

Nilenso still exists today, guided by those who work there. I gave a keynote two years after Nilenso was legally incorporated that is still reflective of much of my vision for the company:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7K3E1Q\\_MBk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7K3E1Q_MBk)

Building a business that outlived me (or, rather, my participation) is one of my proudest achievements. It's an experience that has influenced every organization I've managed since.

## **Volunteering at Nonprofits**

After Nilenso, I spent time volunteering while working on two related startups. I manage the volunteer software team at Pariyatti, a 501(c)(3). I'm also the Centre Manager for Atlantic Canada Vipassana Meditation (ACVM), a small Canadian nonprofit that organizes secular 10-day meditation

courses. These courses are free for students — entirely financed by donation and operated by a team of 20+ volunteers. I've led teams organizing software conferences before, but this is a new logistical undertaking for me. I'm not formally educated as a cat herder, but I am capable, it seems.

Although I've been volunteering with related nonprofits for ten years, my serious commitment to Pariyatti's open source projects spans the last five years and ACVM for the past two. It's clear to me I would apply the many lessons I've learned over the past 5-10 years working with nonprofits to a leadership role at the GNOME Foundation.

## **Open Source & Startups**

Despite plenty of volunteer hours, I spent most of the past five years building commercial open source companies. I joined the XTDB team to help with branding, marketing, and distribution ... but ended up guiding the product, open source licensing, and business model. Along the way, I published a collection of technical essays. For example:

<https://www.deobald.ca/essays/2021-03-28-strength-of-the-record/>

The XTDB architect and I went on to start Endatabas, where I spent countless hours fundraising with VCs. We didn't find the \$3 million we'd hoped for our seed round (2024 was not a great year to start an open source database company), but I can say I have learned to set my fragile ego on the shelf and ask people for money.

Both at XTDB and Endatabas, community engagement was a daily activity. Even for commercial open source, we understood that the projects wouldn't survive without a healthy community of hackers and supporters who loved the product.

These years spent writing, researching, fundraising, and managing people (inside and outside these organizations) would have direct application in the Executive Director role.

## **Solutions**

The problems the GNOME Foundation now faces are solvable. They are also worth solving and I believe they could even be fun to solve. I would love the opportunity to speak to you about it.

All the best,



Steven Deobald