



Figure 4. Positions and promotions. In open source projects, users are implicitly promoted to contributor status, while contributors are explicitly promoted to committer status.

- recruit and retain the right people,
- reliably set up and execute specific service processes, and
- bring to bear expert domain knowledge and unique intellectual property.

In the open source situation, this is usually labor economics. Technical skills around the open source product are a key part of determining an employee's value to a firm. Anyone who's smart enough can develop these skills because the open source software is available to people outside the firm.

Hiring and firing becomes easier because there's a larger labor pool to draw from, and switching costs between employees are lower compared with the closed source situation. Given the natural imbalance between employers and employees, this aspect of open source is likely to increase competition for jobs and drive down salaries. Lower salaries aren't as much of an advantage to the software vendor as might be expected because in the more transparent and competitive open source situation, such cost savings are likely to be (at least partially) passed on to customers.

The need for committers

An employee's position in the open source project is another key part of his or her value to a firm. The organizational setup varies between open source projects, but in some form, people always play user, contributor, and committer roles. Users use the software, contributors contribute in some form, and committers decide what contributions to accept into the project.

Figure 4 illustrates how a developer might progress through the ranks of a community open source project: A committer typically promotes a user to a contributor role implicitly by accepting the user's contribution into the software. A contributor is typically promoted to a committer position explicitly, through a prior vote of the existing group of committers and a subsequent public

announcement of the contributor's ascension to committer status.

Committers determine where the open source project is headed, strategically and on a day-to-day basis. They can typically resolve technical problems faster than non-committers, and have high visibility to the user community. Most projects are set up so there's only a small inner circle of committers, a larger set of contributors, and an even larger user community.

For an employer, the value of employing a committer is manifold. Through the committer, an employer:

- gets problems with the open source software fixed faster and better,
- can better align company strategy with the open source project and vice versa,
- appears as a more attractive employer than competitors who don't employ a committer, and
- has higher visibility with the user community and can reach out more effectively.

A major goal of any open source service company is to convert freeloading users into paying customers. A committer's visibility with the user community is an important marketing advantage that an employer can use to support this goal.

Thus, committers have a strong negotiation position with their employers. Employing a committer is important for a first-level support and implementation services company, and it's critical for a second-level support service company.

THE EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

Open source software and service businesses make life more complicated for employees. Employees build up less firm-specific knowledge simply because there's less of it. People from the outside can replace them more easily. At the same time, an employee's day-to-day work improves non-firm-specific knowledge of an open source project that can be taken to another employer. So a developer who is fired can find a job faster than before.

Benefits of being a committer

An employee who is a committer is likely to earn higher compensation. Hann and colleagues have empirically verified this for committers to Apache Software Foundation projects.⁶

At any time, the committer-employee can credibly threaten to leave the company, taking significant power and reputation away from the current employer. Employers often pay premium salaries just to employ prominent committers.

But how do you become a committer? Community open source projects tend to be meritocracies, judging developers by their social and technical contributions.