What do maintainers need from funders and others? We asked Maintainers to find out.

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FOSDEM 2025 - DevRoom: Funding the FOSS Ecosystem

RISE | Bitergia | Creighton UNIVERSITY

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Funding open source is hard

The funding problem exists … for many years now.

Progress: OpenCollective Funds, GitHub Sponsors, TideLift, GitHub Secure Open Source Fund, Sovereign Tech Fund, …

With making funding easier for organizations, the **big question** now becomes:

- ## Which projects get funding and is funding is the right kind of support?

Microsoft recently wrote, *"It would have been wonderful to see financial goals of maintainers on their sponsor's pages, as well as other types of sustainability 'asks.'"* (source)

- They sought this information from projects to better assess who to give money to and how much.

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What do maintainers actually need?

Maintainers know best what they need, so we asked them.

We describe our scientific method in the [paper](#) that we linked in the abstract. In short, we interviewed 10 maintainers.

One key takeaway:

- Funding may cause problems in a project and not be the solution in some cases.

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Researchers

Johan Linåker

Senior researcher at RISE Research Institutes of Sweden and Adjunct Assistant Professor at Lund University
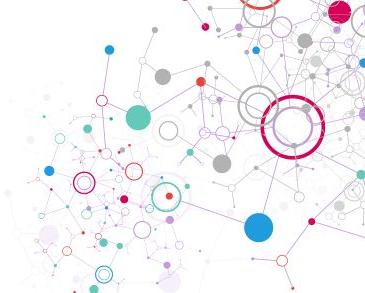
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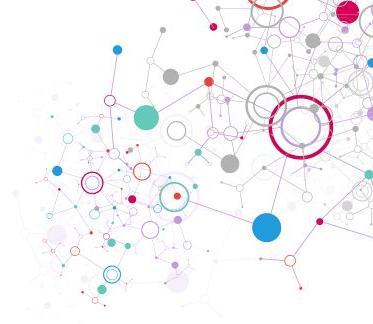
Open Source Strategist and Director of Sales at Bitergia

Kevin Lumbard

Assistant Professor of Computer Science at Creighton University

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Why do projects need money?

Supporting Open Source Community Health

- An Open Source Software project's capability to stay viable and maintained over time without interruption or weakening

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What is does a healthy project look like?

- **Productivity**

  There is an active development of the project.

- **Robustness**

  The development is open and spread out on several (independent) individuals.

- **Openness**

  Users of the project can influence and contribute to the development of the project.
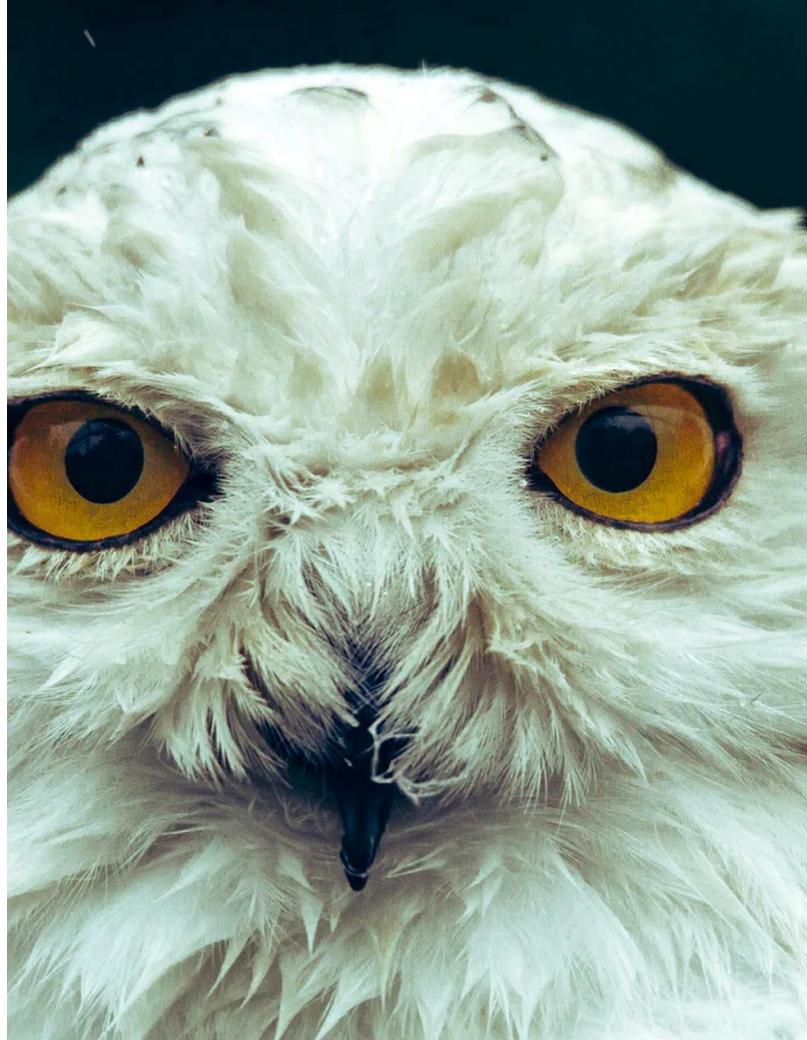
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Linus' law

"Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow"

- Requires that enough eyeballs actually reaches the codebase

- Free-riding, for both good and bad

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The Tragedy of the commons

- Commonly exemplified through Hardin's open pastures (Hardin, 1968)

- May be considered as a Common Pool Resource (CPR)

- A resource system that is non-exclusive, and subtractable (Ostrom, 1990)

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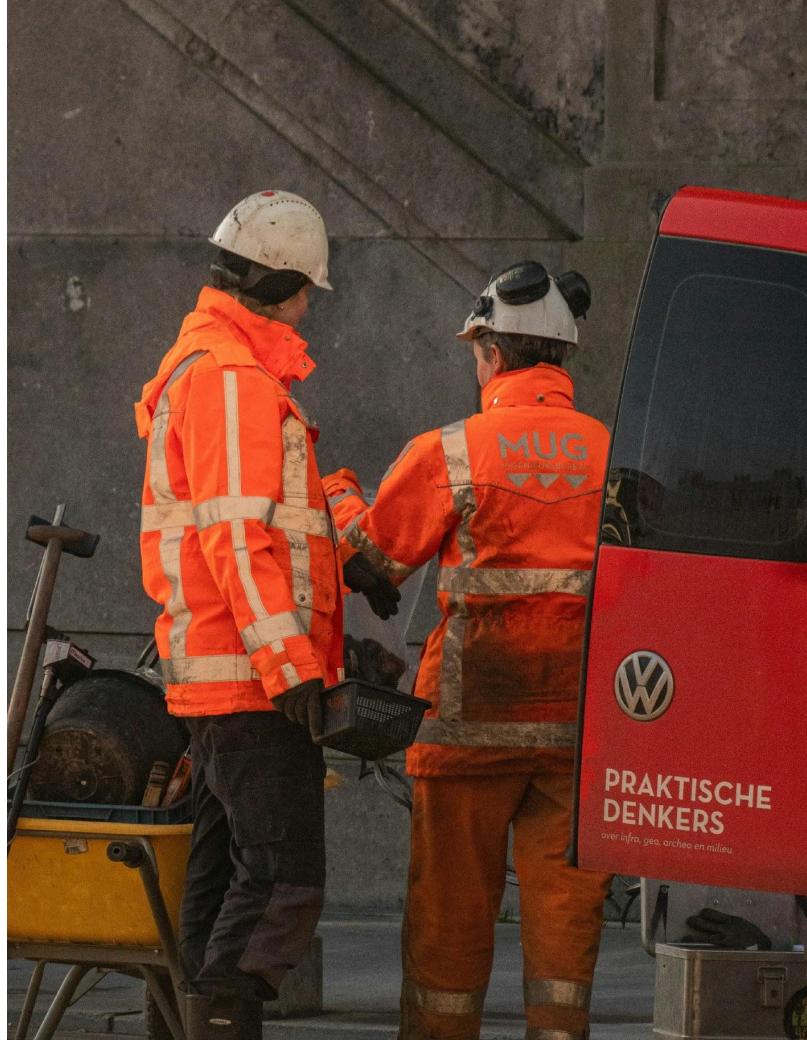
Brain-time as a Common Pool Resource

- "Brain-time" and maintenance effort is subtractable

- Maintainers are humans, not robots

  - Burnout, changed family or working conditions

- Companies must adapt to stay competitive

  - Refactorization, new products, changed business model

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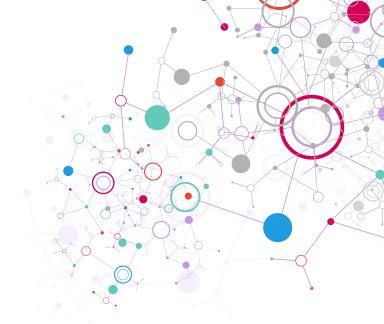
Maintenance labor

- The human activity invested by these individuals into the development and maintenance of these OSS projects

- Can originate from and added by

  - the maintainers (i.e., Maintainer Labor) of the OSS projects, or

 - from the contributors (i.e., Contributor Labor) within the community.

Human Infrastructure

- The arrangements of organizations and actors within an OSS community that must be brought into alignment, e.g., through governance, processes, and culture, for the OSS project to be viably maintained

So, what do maintainers actually need?

Maintainer Support

Work-life balance and prioritization

- Managing social expectations and peer-pressure

- Balancing of workload with capacity

- Finding time through funding

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Contributor Support

Contribution Support

- Embracing episodic contributors

- Low-cost contributor support

- Distributing knowledge

Community Building

- Mitigating toxicity

- Promoting inclusiveness

- Marketing and community activities

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Funding Support

Employment
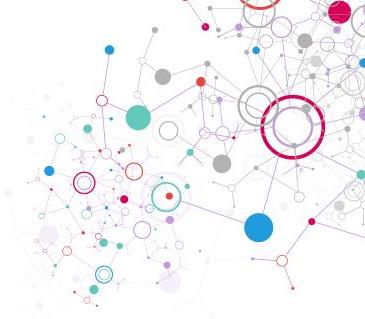
- Full-time employment dedicated to projects

- Partially-dedicated employment

- Entrepreneurship, a common but risky endeavor

Sponsorships

- Sponsorship, a diverse and limited source of income

- Marketing and accounting infrastructure

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Summing up…

Maintenance labor as a Common Pool Resource

- Maintenance labor, both from the maintainer and contributor side are depletable resources

- Contrasting against volunteer energy as discussed by Atkisson and Bushouse (2024)

- Sustaining the availability of labor or energy from either source requires sometimes distinct or overlapping human infrastructure support

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Enabling maintainers to focus more on projects

- Non-code contributions, such as helping out with support, community management, and marketing are specifically highlighted as important contributions.

- Resource Funding is seen as a means of enabling maintainers and contributors to create a healthy work-life-balance, while also improving the project health.

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Funding only works when a project is prepared for it

- The funding mechanism must match the needs and desires of the maintainer.

- Maintainers ideally say how much funding they need and how they plan to use it.

- Indirectly funding projects by providing other support may be more suitable - please ask.

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Reference

Full paper: https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3674805.3686667 (open access)

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Our Work with CHAOSS