Open Repositories 2013 - Main Track Session Proposal

Sisyphean Task or the Holy Grail? Satisfying Demands of Higher Education through Community-Driven Open Source Projects

Abstract

What elements are essential to successful community-driven open source projects? How much governance and overhead is required to develop and sustain an open source project? What are the factors that enhance or limit the pace of development, the growth in the development community, community adoption and longevity? Many open source projects don't start out worrying about sustainability or longevity, but successful projects often require considerable effort to succeed over time.

This presentation and panel discussion will explore the use of community-driven open source projects to achieve the needs in higher education and review some of the many factors that may influence viability for community-driven open source projects. Specific projects will be discussed, along with a description of incubation strategies, governance approaches, growth challenges, ongoing support models, sustaining vibrant developer communities and lessons learned.

Community Driven Development - A Model for Success?

The community model may offer some distinct values that support a successful model for open source development. At the core of every community-driven open source project is a common shared purpose. The community members engage in the community as peers that choose to offer their unique contributions toward achieving the shared purpose. The extent of commitment to this shared purpose and how the community is stewarded through time to engage in this purpose are critical success factors. Communities also operate differently from other organizational models, sometimes creating a unique set of challenges. Governance roles are determined by the community, shared and rotated. Community decisions are made primarily through alignment. Viable communities strive and grow through enrollment in the shared purpose. We will highlight several active open source projects and discuss how the community model has often proven to be a success factor.

Level of Governance – Small, Medium or Large?

Does the level of governance affect the success of an open source project? Community-driven open source projects may start with little or no governance, or may start with a specific structure and decision-making process. Small or lightweight governance models may rely on a single individual or a consensus to drive decision-making, with little formal oversight. Medium-sized governance models may involve the creation of a small governing body, a level of structure to

support decision-making, and some level of oversight and management. Large governance models may involve the creation of a separate organization such as a non-profit entity, a formal board or other elected decision-making body, and a sponsorship or membership organization to engage the broader development and user communities. We will review the governance approaches of several open source projects, review the challenges and lessons learned, and discuss options for “rightsizing” governance.

Does Size and Complexity Make a Difference?

We can provide many examples of successful and non-successful projects of varying sizes and complexity. But we maintain that the size and complexity of the effort does warrant more consideration in how to approach almost every facet of the effort. Communication, governance, infrastructure, growth plan and perhaps most importantly what is achieved on what timetable are all impacted by size and complexity of what the community is undertaking. The extent of the community itself and the services space are also size factors that have impact. We will explore projects that can illustrate how size and complexity have impacted their projects, look at the different solutions employed to meet the challenges imposed and discuss lessons learned.

The Two-Headed Monster - Maintenance & Growth

A viable project is one that has mastered the delicate balance of maintenance and growth. This problem is prolific and not one specific to community-driven open source projects. Due to the structure of open source projects and the speed at which a direction can take, we believe this problem deserves early attention if the goal is viability. The difficulty in striking the balance appears to be directly proportional to the degree that a project adheres to a “Use, Reuse, Reproduce” philosophy. What we will show is when this problem needs to be considered and how successful projects are using this philosophy or other strategies to slay the monster.

Conclusion

The Higher Education arena has an array of problems that may best be addressed through Community-Driven Open Source projects. All projects are not created equal neither in what they are trying to achieve or size or complexity. Successful projects do have similar qualities, values and approaches that we believe can be used, reused and reproduced to foster success in further projects. Our goal with this session will be to discuss those common factors with a panel of people representing successful community-driven open source projects.