Chapter IV

Perceptions of F/OSS Community:
Participants' Views on Participation

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Abstract

The role of online communities is a key element in free and open source software (F/OSS) and a primary factor in the success of the F/OSS development model. F/OSS communities are inter-networked groups of people who are united by a common interest in F/OSS software. This chapter addresses holistic issues pertaining to member participation in F/OSS communities, specifically considering their reasons and motivation for participating. It collates the relevant literature on F/OSS community participation and presents the results of an empirical study into members' perceptions of their own participation. We identify primary reasons for participation such as problem solving, support provision, and social interaction and rank their importance by the participants' preferences. We then separate development and support activities and compare the community members' perceptions of the two. Finally, we draw conclusions and discuss the potential for future research in this area.

Introduction

The vast expansion of the Internet and the proliferation of electronic communication techniques have brought about many changes in the way people live and work. It has allowed people from around the world to communicate freely and easily by breaking down many of the geographical barriers that once stood in their way. These technological developments have also led to the transposition of social activities into a new electronic form. Several authors (Gattiker, 2001; Rheingold, 2000; Ribeiro, 1997; Schoberth, Preece, & Heinzl, 2003; Smith & Kollock, 1994; Wellman & Gulia, 1995) have written on the subject of the online or virtual community. A huge subject area in itself, this literature examines how social behaviour adapts when the Internet is used as a communication medium. Free and open source software (F/OSS) is also intrinsically linked with the development of the Internet. The relationship is symbiotic, as much of the underlying software that makes up the Internet is F/OSS, and yet F/OSS relies on the Internet for the dissemination of software, and communication between developers and users. This is where these two concepts of virtual community and F/OSS meet. However, F/OSS communities differ from other types of virtual communities because of their emphasis on software. Likewise F/OSS development differs from traditional software development, largely due to the use of the Internet as a development forum. F/OSS community is therefore a unique phenomenon, the details of which can appear undefined and illusive.

An investigation into the social aspects of F/OSS communities must take into account the views of their participants. This chapter attempts to do just that by first analysing the literature on the subject of F/OSS communities, specifically addressing issues of motivation in detail, and then presenting the results of survey research on community participants' perceptions of their own participation.

Background

There has been a significant amount of research conducted which has attempted to properly define what is meant by the term *online community*. Rheingold's (2000) work on what he called "the virtual community" presents a definition stating that these communities are "social aggregations" which are created only when there is sufficient social interaction. The emphasis in this definition is clearly on the social theme. Along with this definition, Rheingold provides a large list of the reasons why people might become part of a virtual community, which is too lengthy to describe here in detail. However, reasons range from finding friends to conducting commerce and from playing games to chatting. Since Rheingold's work, however, the types of virtual community, or online community as they are often referred to, have become more distinct. The majority of Internet users are now familiar with

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