Chapter 7
Fostering FOSS Communities:
A Guide for Newcomers

Hillary Nyakundi
freeCodeCamp, Kenya

Cesar Henrique De Souza
Universidade de Sao Paulo, Brazil

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore the importance of creating a welcoming and supportive community for new contributors trying to venture into the field of open-source. They cover the best practices for creating a positive and inclusive environment, such as clear documentation, accessible communication channels, and active mentorship programs. Additionally, they delve into some of the key challenges that new contributors often face and also offer strategies for overcoming these obstacles. By promoting a supportive and welcoming community, open-source projects can encourage more people to participate, thereby increasing their overall impact and diversity in society.

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the concept of community in the FOSS context can not be overemphasized. While the publication of a technological asset — be it a piece of software, hardware design, or another kind of intellectual creation — under an open-source compatible license is sufficient to technically characterize the item as an open-source product itself, from a strategic point of view this is only part of the way. Sure, one may make one's work openly accessible as a means to gain visibility or to

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-4785-7.ch007

fulfill knowledge dissemination goals. However, regarding long-term sustainability, the key point of publishing open-source technology is to promote collaboration. As a business model, FOSS implies a reciprocity deal through which one relinquishes privileged access to one's own intellectual property in exchange for the contribution from those who use it — the community.

Forming a community around a FOSS product is thus not only about creating a fan base to celebrate the project or establishing a relationship channel to cultivate customer fidelity. All these are well enough and make sense in the proprietary and open-source industries. Regarding FOSS, though, building a community means nurturing a network of users capable and willing to contribute back to the project. The community is a critical component of the FOSS ecosystem and can be considered intrinsic to the very paradigm of open source.

In order to boost the community contribution, delivering good technology is not enough. Users must be empowered with the means to take part in the product development, which includes encouraging individuals to experiment, criticize and propose changes.

The FOSS movement has come a long way and the real-world experience demonstrates that an interested and capable community can drive long-lasting, sustainable projects. If allowed, many users will find motivations to improve the product. If endowed with the technical requisites, they will be willing to dedicate time and expertise to contribute. The large, active communities around prominent FOSS projects yield practical evidence for this expectative. That said, it is well known that even those extensive communities do not fully reflect the entire potential of the collaboration ecosystem. Anyone who ventured to contribute to existing FOSS projects will likely recognize the perils that face most newcomers, from difficulties in understanding the technical details, and setting up the development environment, to getting acquainted with the management workflow and interacting with other contributors. Such negative factors have a significant influence on the maintenance of the community, and there is plenty of evidence that many potential collaborators give up before even concluding their first contribution. This chapter addresses the challenges and corresponding mitigation strategies that can help newcomers to have an enjoyable and productive experience contributing to a FOSS project.

THE NEWCOMER'S PERSPECTIVE

Free Open Source Software (FOSS) projects heavily rely on the involvement of volunteers from various locations and depend on a consistent influx of fresh contributors to ensure their long-term success and continuity. In order to maintain a sustainable number of developers, it is crucial to inspire, engage, and retain new