Why volume is (almost) everything

FINDING CODERS

If you're starting from scratch, you'll need a lot of users to attract a strong development community. **BY JON "MADDOG" HALL**

I have a friend who has been working on an open source project for about three years. Lately, he has become a little discouraged because few people seem to be helping with the project, so we discussed some of the issues.

First of all, most of his users are not programmers. Some users do provide input, test changes, and verify bug fixes, but few users contribute even the smallest piece of code.

His user base is also relatively small. Although the potential number of users could be in the hundreds of thousands, he has intentionally limited the number until the code reaches a more polished state.

I told him that when I first met Linus in May 1994, the Linux kernel had just reached the v1.0 stage. At that point, someone calculated that there were over 124,000 people using and contributing to Linux.
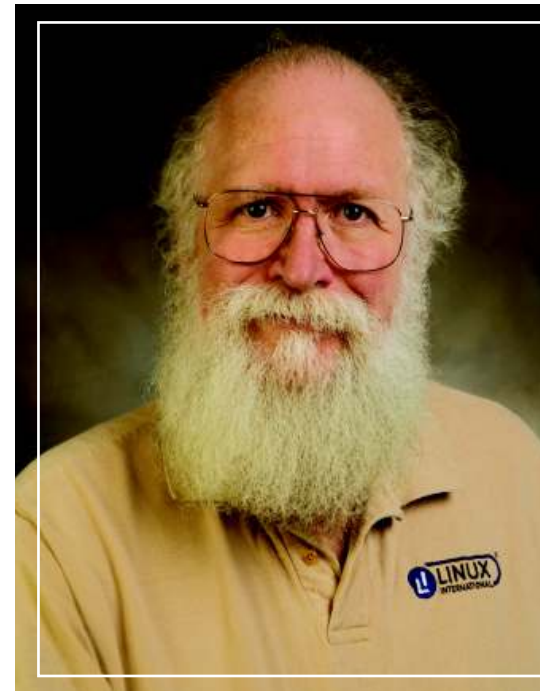
My friend's face turned a little pale. Then I told him my formula for success in free and open source software:

"If a million people are using your code, then at least one-half of them will feel something is wrong with it. A quarter of that half million might have the time to change the code, if they have the skills. One tenth of that 125,000 will not only have the time and skills, but also the inclination to do some coding. A small percentage of those 12,500 people will not have any children, so they will be able to concentrate enough to complete the effort. Finally, three patches will come in from three different people, and you will reject two of them because you do not like the solution or coding style."

Now, I say this with my tongue in my cheek, but this formula still highlights an important point: To reach a small number of potential contributers, you might need a relatively large user base.

For this reason, it is absolutely necessary for Free Software people to go out and spread the gospel of Free Software to anyone who will listen.

"World Domination" is more than just saving money for your government and bringing better technology to your business. World Domination is about having a big enough pool of interested,

skilled, motivated people to keep a large number of projects going.

Some other considerations for building a strong development community are:

- *Ease of immersion* – A new programmer who is overwhelmed by having to go to many different pages, read eons of mailing lists, and learn to fit a culture that is specific to the project might not ever get comfortable enough to contribute. Consider adding a "newbie developer" section to the project site to provide background information for potential coders.

- *Inclusion* – More often than not, the lack of inclusion is a reason why potential programmers don't stay. Interacting with others is an important part of any project leader's skill set. Be sure you "spread the glory" by acknowledging contributions and recognizing good work. At Digital, I once commended a senior programmer for doing a good job, and this person actually broke down in tears. Even after several good raises and bonuses, my colleague had never been praised for doing a good job on a specific piece of code.

If you have a great project, do not be afraid to market that idea. Be up front about where the project is and where you are going. Sell the vision, and do everything you can to build a strong team of contributors. Hopefully, you will attract enough community to make your project self-sustaining. ■

James Thew, Fotolia

Free Software