The Role of Private Companies in Open Source Projects

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• Tension exists between Open Source projects and the private companies seeking to exploit them.

• The Sharing Economy is a bust. Businesses pay only what they must in order to receive tangible benefits. Open source authors not compensated.

• Properly structured, the needs of a business can be aligned with the needs of a project, particularly a complex one like OpenLDAP.
This Talk Will

• Provide a brief introduction to Symas

• Outline how Symas and the OpenLDAP Project benefit each other

• Discuss the issues of a for-profit business that is closely associated with an Open Source project

• Describe how Symas and the OpenLDAP Project bridged the gaps
Brief

Introduction
Symas Company Overview

• Founded in 1999 by experts in software security, protocols, and server design

• Primary OpenLDAP developer since project inception

• Preferred source for LDAP-related professional services and support

• Contributor to many other Open Source projects
Vision Statement

- Adoption of Open Source Software opens up market for high-quality affordable commercial support
- Opportunities arise for Professional Services contract for extensions, installation, and development which add to revenues, skills, and product capabilities
Most players in the LDAP directory space have relegated their LDAP directory server offerings to life-support maintenance (cash-cow status).

Innovation has slowed and the size and quality of support teams has declined. Symas is one of very few innovators in this space.

The promise of consolidated Authoritative Enterprise Directories has proven to be difficult to achieve given the ongoing proprietary protectionism of the major players.

Symas has remained a source of innovation and development. Where others are protecting their installed base while minimizing ongoing related engineering and support expenses, Symas has continued to invest and maintain a deep and experienced team.
Organizational Structure

- Delaware C-Corporation
- 14 domestic full-time employees
- 3 foreign contractors
- Globally distributed

- CEO
  - Finance
  - Sales/Business Development
  - R&D (CTO)
- COO
  - Support
  - Professional services
Operating Principles

• Innovation is no longer necessarily rewarded with high Returns on Investment

• Properly executed, Open Source projects often compare favorably to both legacy and newer commercial efforts

• There is still a strong case for professional, cost-effective commercial technical support

• Focused on providing technical support that is both so good and so inexpensive that our customers routinely renew year after year
• Symas maintains focus on directory technology

• Most competitors have reduced funding and have fallen behind OpenLDAP in function and performance

• Additional users being driven to Symas as OS providers attempt to drive them toward proprietary/branded products
Target Markets

- Higher education
- Telecom providers and operators
- End customers (broad selection of industries)
- Managed services
Benefits to the Project
Financial/Positioning

- Employs several OpenLDAP Project team members, who are able to work on OpenLDAP during working hours
- Funds OpenLDAP Project infrastructure
- Channels funds from its customers into OpenLDAP development projects (overlays, features)
- Produces enterprise-grade directory packages based on OpenLDAP and sells support contracts
Results

• Development contracts fund customer-specific features and overlays that are contributed to the Project

• Support contracts fund Symas- and Project-originated enhancements, development, and testing
  • e.g. Lightning Memory-mapped Database

• OpenLDAP, as the core of Symas’s LDAP Directory offering, has gained prominence in large companies and telcos as a cost-effective and reliable directory server

• Comprehensive training programs provide knowledge dissemination that could otherwise not take place
Issues
Particularly in OpenLDAP 2.4, customer demands for features, combined with a reticence to upgrade to new versions, interfered with the Project’s release cycles. OpenLDAP 2.4 has had a very long life.

Features were added to 2.4 that would ordinarily have been held for OpenLDAP 2.5. As a result the need for a 2.5 release was reduced.

Features implemented in OpenLDAP 2.5 were back-ported to Symas’s 2.4 tree and offered to customers, further reducing urgency of 2.5 release.
• The demands of a business sometimes caused OpenLDAP Project needs to take a back seat

• Because of Symas’s sponsorship, volunteer participation was not as critical and so the list of contributors shrunk
Remedies

• For health of the Project, a priority has been placed on a 2.5 release
  • This will consolidate features into a single release and provide a path forward
• Drive for additional contributors
Conclusions

- Corporate sponsorship has made possible capabilities and placements that wouldn’t otherwise materialize for an open source project
- Not without its down-side
  - Big-gorilla syndrome
  - Some natural suspicion from community
Questions?

Thank you for your time
What’s the Ideal Situation?

• Groups of motivated contributors develop bodies of well-documented software that satisfy the needs of the community they serve, and they do this in their spare time.

• This software is maintained and improved over the years by a large community of contributors and users who steadily add to the body of documentation and code.

• The feeling of immense satisfaction of a job well done feeds the spirits of contributors and users alike, inspiring them to ever-greater feats of altruism.
OpenLDAP Project Relationship

• OpenLDAP Foundation an independent entity

• Symas co-founder Howard Chu named Chief Architect in 2004. Continued to work on OpenLDAP largely independently, although funded by Symas

• Symas does not influence release cycles or feature set

• Most Symas work product contributed to back to OpenLDAP Project
A body of code is written for a specific purpose, released as open source, and abandoned.

In a more recent phenomenon, “Open Source” is increasingly used as a dumping ground for orphaned closed-source products.

Some (relatively) small number of projects develop a dedicated following and persist over a long period of time.