The Role of Private Companies in Open Source Projects

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Premise

- 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

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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

Symas's Value Proposition

- 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

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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

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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

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Competitive Position

- 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

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Benefits to the Project

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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

Corporate Myopia

- 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

Resources

- 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

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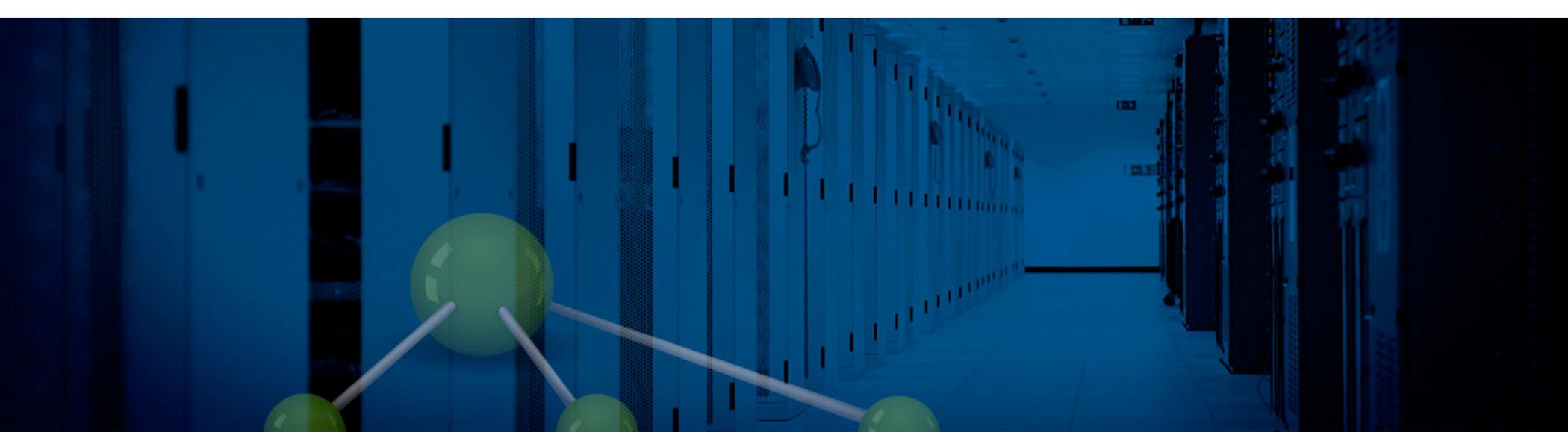
Questions?

Thank you for your time

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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

What Really Happens

- 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

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