Successful Open Source Collaboration: The Mozilla Experience

Frank Hecker
frank@collab.net

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Mozilla in a Nutshell

• Project began in 1998 with Netscape decision to release browser source code
• Cross-platform open source web browser, email/news client, HTML editor, etc.
• Currently at 0.9.2 release, moving to 1.0
• ~100 core developers, >1000 contributors
  – from Netscape, IBM, Sun, Red Hat, public
Mozilla Project Characteristics

• Corporate-initiated and funded project
• Graphical client application
• Many contributors are not developers
Aspects of Mozilla project

• Technical: code, documentation, design
• Procedural: bug reporting, code review, commit access approval, module ownership
• Infrastructure: code repository, bug system
• Political: governance, institutional influence
• Legal: licensing, IP ownership, etc.
• Social: peer recognition, offline meetings, contributor recruitment, project evangelism
Success factors: Technical

- Ship something, get feedback, repeat
- Design for add-ons and customizability
Success factors: Procedural

- Must approach from viewpoint of person trying to get work done on limited time budget
Success factors: Infrastructure

- Key components are version control (code repository), issue tracking, discussion forums
- Use technology that is familiar to contributors
- Make sure accessible by everyone
Success factors: Political

- Align authority with responsibility
- Acknowledge institutional interests, but first loyalty must be to project and contributors
Success factors: Legal

• Keep licensing simple
• Decide up-front on IP ownership policies
• Use formal agreements where risk exists
  – E.g., for write access to repository
Success factors: Social

• Promote inclusion
  – E.g., move off-line discussions on-line
• Specialize roles to increase opportunities
• Build “pyramid of participation”
Summary

- Mozilla project initiated new phase in free software/open source development
- Rich source of “lessons learned”
- Created enabling technology for next generation of collaborative software development projects