

Why have an open source program office?

Meet the open source program office

As more organizations realize the advantages of using and contributing to open source software, many are searching for ways to integrate open source technologies and strategies into their organizational practices and business strategies.

But these organizations have also learned that success with open source requires careful planning, consistent effort, and steady guidance. Simply directing developers to an open source project and hoping for beneficial outcomes will not help an organization reap the benefits of open source.

Most organizations that are serious about open source technologies recognize the need for building and supporting internal open source program offices (OSPOs) that nurture the organization's open source efforts, guide internal stakeholders who have questions about open source, and align the organization's open source activities with its business strategy.

These OSPOs might be located in an organization's engineering, legal, or even marketing and communications teams. This brief examines some of the most common functions OSPOs perform for their organizations, regardless of their organizational setting.

Functions of an open source program office

No two OSPOs are alike but most perform a common set of organizational functions.

Aligning organizational goals with open source participation

Organizations should never enact an open source strategy for its own sake. They should choose an open source approach because it helps them solve specific technical and organizational challenges. An OSPO assists with aligning an organization's open source activity to its priorities, ensuring that the organization's participation in open source projects best serves its mission and vision. An OSPO helps an organization articulate the rationale for its financial investment in open source communities, software projects, and standards bodies. It also helps the organization define key metrics for judging the success of the organization's open source strategy.

Advocate for the organization's open source strategy

Organizations committed to succeeding with open source are those in which every department—from engineering to sales to marketing—understands the benefits of working collaboratively with upstream projects. OSPOs help organizational leaders consistently and clearly communicate the value of the organization's open source strategy, both to internal stakeholders and to external publics. They assist organizations with open source-related communication strategies, encourage their organizations to adopt open source tools, and educate their organizations' associates on open source benefits and best practices.



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Maintain open source license compliance and provide legal oversight

Organizations must ensure they comply with the licenses governing the software applications they use—no matter how that software is licensed. Working with open source licenses is not inherently riskier than working with any other type of software license, but organizations approaching open source for the first time may have questions about differences between open source software licenses and proprietary ones. An OSPO plays the important role of answering these questions, ensuring the organization complies with the various licenses that govern the open source software it uses. This work typically involves conducting software licensing reviews for all active, existing, and incoming code (as well as other openly licensed materials)—and helping the organization select tools that make this work easier for stakeholders in various departments.

Guide the organization's work in open source communities

Communities serve as sources of critical technical innovation for an organization working with open source software (see "[Frequently asked questions about open source software communities](#)"). Simply put, collaborating with projects upstream is the best way to reap the innovative benefits of open source projects. Organizations with successful open source strategies routinely contribute to open source projects, and OSPOs ensure their organizations conduct this work effectively. This might involve helping developers understand a community's communication preferences or coaching them as they make their initial contribution to a project's code base.

Facilitate relationships with project leaders, foundations, and standards bodies

Being a good open source citizen means doing more than contributing high-quality code to a software project. It also means taking an active and supportive role in open source communities in ways that help those projects grow and thrive. This might mean, for example, taking part in project governance processes or participating in—or sponsoring—a foundation that oversees the successful stewardship of a project. OSPOs help organizations determine the most valuable ways to invest their time, energy, and capital in open source projects.

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