

Executive Summary
How Open Source software works:
“Free” user-to-user assistance

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May, 2000

MIT Sloan School of Management Working Paper #4117

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(1) About 25% of questions posted on CIWS-U are not getting any answers either by public postings or private email. The proportion of unanswered questions seems pretty constant over time. On surface inspection, we cannot see any difference in clarity or quality between the questions being answered and those not being answered.

(2) Questions that did get answered were generally answered quite quickly (about 50% by the next day).

(3) Re the value of answers received: The good news is (see the data below) that most people feel they are getting helped. The bad news is, 39% of "Other seekers" (generally people with less experience) say that the answers they received "did not solve their problem."

<i>What was the value to you of the answers you received?</i>	<i>Frequent Seekers</i>	<i>Other Seekers</i>
Solved my problem completely	23% (n=3)	17% (n=34)
Gave me information that helped solve my problem	69% (n=9)	44% (n=87)
Did not solve my problem	8% (n=1)	39% (n=77)

(4) Most questions on CIWS-U are answered by a few "frequent information providers." About the top 100 providers are responsible for 50% of the answers posted between 1995-9. Mark Slemko was the top hero with about 2,500 answers posted in the period 1995-9.

(5) In the CIWS-U "system" Questions and Answers are matched up by information PROVIDERS. They do this by finding questions they want to answer when reading or scanning CIWS-U. Their reading cost is high (many hours per year), but should not be charged to question-answering - Information providers say they are reading CIWS-U primarily to learn rather than to find questions to answer.

Respondents' reasons for reading Usenet

(7-point scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

<i>Reasons for reading</i>	<i>Frequent Providers (n=21)</i>	<i>Other Providers (n=68)</i>	<i>Other Seekers</i>	<i>Frequent Seekers (n=13)</i>
To learn	5.90	5.75	5.29 (n=191)	6.38*
To answer	4.95*	4.00	3.72 (n=189)	4.167
For fun	4.29	3.97	2.90 (n=190)	3.46
For break	4.81**	3.99	2.66 (n=188)	2.69

* Significant difference at p <0.01

** Significant difference at p <0.05

Issue this raises for Apache: Will information providers continue to answer if the amount they learn by trolling CIWS-U drops over time? A comment by Eric Raymond (Cathedral and Bazaar) on his experience with help from users of his open source program, fetchmail, is interesting in this regard.

"Actually_ the list [of fetchmail beta-testers] is beginning to lose members from its high of close to 300 for an interesting reason. Several people have asked me to unsubscribe them because fetchmail is working so well for them that they no longer need to see the list traffic! Perhaps this is part of the normal life-cycle of a mature, bazaar-style project." (Raymond 1999, p. 46-7)

(6) After information providers have found a question they want to answer, the cost to actually answer is pretty low. Info providers report that it takes them only 1-5 minutes to answer a question - because they typically only post what they already know (in other words, they did not newly solve things or look up things to help information seekers). (Frequent providers are the more expert ones and generally create an answer in a minute or less.)

(7) A final puzzle: The number of questions posted on CIWS-U per month has not increased nearly as rapidly as the number of sites using Apache. (Average # of questions per month has only gone from about 200 4 years ago to about 400 per month now.) Has Apache gotten easier to use over time? If not, where are most people getting the help they need?