Enterprise open source Toolkit

Why every child deserves a laptop

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The advance of technology in the last 10 years has given us a gift.

We have the opportunity to rebuild the collaborative social structures that have been lost in our communities. But this is not about simply rebuilding what we came to accept before; instead, this is a chance to build a new social fabric, and to build it in a defining way. A fabric that connects people as neighbours even though oceans may separate them.

Geographical and political borders are losing their relevance. The young people of today will be living and working in a world that is very different from the one we know. Competition is increasing. Our work and ideas travel around the world in an instant. Our young people will be competing and collaborating on a global scale. They will need a technology education that not only gives them the resources to perform their work, but gives them the tools they need to help them create.

The open-source model is built around the idea that technology is transparent, allowing the best ideas to win in an open, collaborative environment. Also fundamental to this model is the idea that open-source development should contribute to a body of knowledge that others can learn from and build upon. It's a philosophy that celebrates sharing, and one that gives back more than it takes.

One of the most exciting projects I've seen in many years, and one that demonstrates the opportunities offered by the open-source model, is the One Laptop Per Child project.

The goal of this project is stunning in its scope. To put laptops directly into the hands of millions of children around the world. To give them access to the wealth of information, educational applications and teaching resources available online today. And to give them a tool to help them communicate, create and share.

One Laptop is a non-profit organisation led by Nicholas Negroponte, designed to create extremely low-cost laptop computers that can be powered without electricity and run free, open-source software. Red Hat is proud to be a key contributor.

In creating the laptop, the design challenges the organisation has had to consider are significant. For example, how to provide power and network access in areas of the world where electricity and running

water may not exist. How to ensure the device can run on as little power as a human can generate manually. How to create a display screen that can be viewed in direct sunlight. How to design a device that can withstand some of the world's harshest climates. How to produce it at such a low cost that even the most impoverished nations can afford it. And how to design a laptop and the software it runs on so it can be put directly into the hands of children.

In the past year, I've seen the One Laptop organisation and the Red Hat team work hard to overcome these challenges. The laptops will use human power for electricity, whether by hand cranks or pull-cords, and they'll use mesh networks to connect to one another and to the internet. The device will be specially designed to protect it from harsh elements such as heat and sand, and to reduce the need for service. There are no moving parts inside the laptop and the case will be sealed when closed.

To encourage curiosity and open learning, the system itself must be open so children can see technology work from the inside. The laptop's software will be open source. It will run an operating system that is Linux-based, a smaller version of the Fedora operating system. It will also feature an entirely new interface and desktop suite for children.

I believe One Laptop has the power to level traditional barriers to access. So no matter where in the world you are — even in the poorest and most remote areas, where even basic necessities are scarce — every child has the opportunity to connect, learn and participate in a global society in ways that were once impossible.

More than ever, I believe the philosophy of open source is changing the world.

We believe a key part of our mission as a company is to strengthen the social fabric through the democratisation of content. To encourage an environment where the work we create is free from conditions of artificial control. Where individuals can access global sources of information — bypassing the traditional gatekeepers. We now have to work to keep open other sources of content: music, text, images, video — even ideas.

The lessons we have learned about the power of collaboration can now translate beyond building software. It is time for us to take our process and share it with the world. To change lives through teaching people how to build and connect ideas, as the open-source movement has learned to do. We believe the open-source community can play a prominent role in developing the necessary tools and promoting the means of collaboration. I am honoured that our company has been able to serve the One Laptop Per Child initiative and contribute to open-source software globally, and look forward to new, collaborative opportunities on the horizon.

Biography: *Matthew Szulik is chief executive officer of Linux distributor and services company Red Hat*

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