

The Power of Public: Recognition and Reputation as Drivers of Open Source Success

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Abstract

The Internet has brought forth fundamental changes in the nature and organization of work. Firms increasingly draw on online labor markets and communities for their production and innovation needs, which allows them to benefit from greater flexibility and innovation by drawing from a more diverse and changing human capital pool (Baldwin and von Hippel, 2011; Altman, Nagle, and Tushman, 2014). Yet, relying on resources beyond the traditional boundaries and organizational structure of the firm also poses challenges in terms of the coordination and motivation of these online “crowds”. Open source communities, a main focus of this paper, epitomize these difficulties as the workforce they rely on is not only external and possibly distributed, but also, to varying degrees, self-directed and not contracted or paid. This paper aims to add to our understanding of the optimal organization of open, collaborative knowledge work by studying and comparing the impact of non-financial and career incentives on innovative productivity through a randomized field experiment in the context of open, collaborative software development. In particular, we experimentally vary the salience and availability of peer feedback, and randomly vary the domain of people who can see the feedback on a large, international open source platform. We thus vary the informational content and degree of publicness of recognition for contributions to projects and, hence, the strength of reputational concerns. By doing so, we aim to analyze the effect of non-financial and career incentives on innovative effort, and how this differs across organizational settings (open source, closed source, inner-source). In this way, we aim to provide evidence-based insights into the effects of carefully designed recognition schemes on collaborative knowledge work.