

[Open-ish: Knative Steering Committee Brings Open Foundation Role into Question](#)

It was a surprising email to see from Donna Malayeri, on behalf of Google which you can read here:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/knative-dev/YmL2vgMC4rc>

The core of the story comes from a long-asked question about Knative, a Kubernetes-based platform which allows the running of serverless workloads. The question is “whether Knative would be donated to a foundation, such as CNCF” to which the succinct reply is “Google leadership has considered this, and has decided not to donate Knative to any foundation for the foreseeable future.”

To the folks in the Knative community and those utilizing the framework, this feels like a bit of a “duly noted” response, complete with infused sarcasm.

The Open Foundation Role

Moving a project under an open foundation such as the ASF (Apache Software Foundation) or CNCF (Cloud-Native Computing Foundation) is a step towards adding more support, open governance, and community-focused guidance within the development and expansion of the platform. Open governance being the key to what is worrying for many contributors and users of the projects.

Open foundations do not decide the ultimate success of an open project. What an open foundation does is introduce radical transparency to the process of how the community and platform are managed. This is a profound step for many project owners and has proven to be a boon for the success of products and ecosystems. That said, many open source platforms have succeeded

Why Knative Makes Sense as an Open Foundation Donated Platform

Being a platform built on top of another open foundation managed platform (Kubernetes) would seem like a rather apropos trigger to move to the CNCF alongside Kubernetes itself. With Knative gaining steam among it’s close community and expanding beyond to new consumers, this is an interesting time in the development of the ecosystem.

At the same time we ask about the opening up of the governance of Knative, it makes sense to note that Istio, a popular open source service mesh framework for Kubernetes, is also not being donated to an open foundation. This opens up the real question that we should ask...

Why Open Source Without Open Governance?

One may describe it as having your cake and eating it too. An open source project which leverages the development and adoption flywheel effect of a growing open community of contributors may also want to keep the reins tightened in order to stay focused on the vision of the project, and the execution of that vision in the form of product management.

Have these projects turned down open contributions in favor of a closed committee’s decision? We saw this happen inside Docker, but that was about a commercial entity which was built on top of an open platform. Neither Knative nor Istio are in the Docker model. Have there been open source projects which have flourished at scale without the governance and guidance of an open foundation?

It's a good question.

I would ask two questions around whether this is a temporary hold which will eventually lead to the donation of the project:

- Does Google have a commercial interest in the retention of committee control?
- Does retaining governance increase the chance of successful growth of an open project at this phase?

I've been doing much more research into how to introduce idea-meritocratic methods into open source projects and open communities. Linux is very much an idea-meritocratic project. All inputs are taken in and a core set of contributors decide on whether to take those ideas and inputs in. In a democratic process, the majority would decide over the favor of any single or small group of contributors. The challenge in that is dealing with conflict resolution and reducing risk of spreading the project into areas which may hamper success of the core platform. That said, Linux has done this while being in the open under the Linux Foundation. Proof that an idea-meritocratic method done with radical openness and transparency can lead to a successful, scalable project.

The outcome of this current stance will be interesting to watch. It's also possible that many of the folks in the open source community are more worried that this is Google and not that it's a non-foundation project.