

For Josh Software, Open Source is the Backbone of its Business

Despite being unfavourably compared to Java, many high-profile consumer Web firms are using Ruby on Rails to build agile and scalable Web applications. It is estimated that almost 211,295 websites have been running Ruby on Rails as of March 2013. And this has proved to be a launch pad for several businesses. Josh Software is one such successful business, that originated out of its founders' sheer passion for open source software and Ruby on Rails. **Saurabh Singh** from *Open Source For You* spoke to **Gautam Rege, co-founder and director, Josh Software**, about how he fell in love with Ruby on Rails, and how the initial infatuation has now blossomed into something far more long term!



Gautam Rege, co-founder and director, Josh Software

Ever wondered how to make money out of something that is available for free? Well, Josh Software's success story is a case study in how open source software can convert a business idea into a money-making enterprise. Josh Software works entirely with Ruby on Rails. This is the only open source software that the company has banked on ever since it was formed in 2007. Gautam Rege, co-founder and director, Josh Software, proudly states, "Today, we have made Josh Software a one-stop shop for everything to do with Ruby on Rails. The company is involved in building Web applications working exclusively with Ruby on Rails." Though the team behind Josh Software

doesn't want to restrict itself to just open source software, it doesn't want to make any compromises by adopting proprietary software either. Says Rege, "As a company, we look at all new and emerging software, especially those in the open source spectrum."

Open source software and the hardships linked to it

So why was open source software like Ruby On Rails selected? Says Rege, "We realised that the need of the hour, when we started, was to have systems going online— systems that were flexible. Rails emerged as a natural choice when we were researching our options. Rails as a framework lets you quickly build applications that are flexible, scalable and efficient. And then we fell in love with Ruby!" The fact that Ruby as a language is so malleable that it can be adapted into doing what programmers want, and that it is so easy to learn, is what led Josh Software to build its business on this platform.

But the journey was not as smooth and easy as it sounds today. The team has had its share of hardships. Rege remembers, "Although the first couple of years were really tough for us to get work, I am glad that betting on an open source language in an open source Web framework has eventually paid off." The majority of its clients are funded start-ups, and such businesses often want to get things done fast. Rege recalls how important the 'proof of concept' was some years ago. Companies would look for the fastest way to build something and once the concept was proven, one needed to restart from scratch. "Now, Rails comes with a 'proof of concept' mechanism that can be automatically enhanced to become the 'real' thing. Start-ups are more compliant and look for new emerging teams that get things done fast without burning a big hole in the pocket. With open source software, you get so much that is already made that you don't need to restart from scratch. You can easily get a product that gets built to concept, to implementation and to scale, all in one go."

Even if the road was not smooth in the beginning, Josh Software has eventually achieved success over a period of time. Its clients in India include companies like Tehelka, the Times Group and ClearTrip; in the US, it has worked with start-ups concerned with education, electoral compliance, travel and media.

Convincing his customers about using an open source framework was both easy and difficult for Rege. “There are broadly two types of customers—the first type are technically sound, and the second are not tech savvy but are looking for a solution,” he says. “The former already know the benefits of Rails. The latter have to be persuaded, of course! The selling points of Rails far outnumber its negatives. Rails as a framework helps us to sell to customers because, since it’s open source, it builds things faster. Rails is open source, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that the framework we use to build a particular piece of code is also made open. Some components that we build, which are very generic, can be actually extracted and released since the libraries are contributed back to the community. They are not actually a client’s intellectual property and code. Once people get over their reservations related to this aspect, it is fairly easy for us to sell the fact that open source software actually works,” he adds.

“Also, we have worked with Linux, which is quite a well-understood concept; so we can use analogies to prove how useful Rails can be even in non-technical terms,” he adds.

Yet another issue (if this can really be called an issue) with open source software is the frequent updates that it gets. Frequent updates are both helpful and a drawback, says Rege. “With the frequent updates, you need to be aware of what’s happening and make the changes. Of late, because of semantic versioning and people’s awareness in maintaining the sanity of the open source framework, we do not face issues. We do not see the backward compatibility problems that existed a few years ago,” he reveals. He advises that once you have an open source framework and you find a vulnerability, as a developer, it’s in your good interests to report back the issue. In case you don’t report it, this vulnerability could be used as a weapon against the framework. “Exactly a year ago, there was a spate of security issues in the Rails framework. One thing led to another and there were almost six security patches that were released in a span of three weeks. It was advisable for everyone to update,” he says. These are basically what you call mini hiccups, and are a part and parcel of the open source framework. But then, in a ‘closed’ environment, a vulnerability may be found but never reported!

Getting the right talent is an issue

Getting the right kind of talent for an open source venture in India is still an issue, despite the fact that open source

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technology is getting popular across the country. Rege is worried about the fact that Ruby is still not taught in colleges. “When hiring, we look at people who have programming built into them, who have the josh (pun intended) and know what they want to do,” he says. “So, it has been difficult to find talent, but once we find the right kind, it is very easy to retain them because there is enough juice in Ruby to actually retain people,” he adds. Josh relishes hiring freshers and grooming them into the Ruby way of learning things.

The joys of paying back a community that helps you

Companies looking to earn money out of open source software should be very active within the community, and that clearly is one of the success mantras for any open source business. Rege says, “Any open source software has some sort of code or library, and contributing back to it really helps a lot. Once you contribute back to the community, it automatically builds credibility. Once you have credibility, people will come to you for business.” The more you work with open source, the more the commitments you have, the better you get at it, because people will help!

As Rege says, “One must never be ashamed to ask. Always try to raise questions that make people think. The Ruby community is very receptive, so if you raise a question there will be a lot of people who answer in a way that will help you learn well! There are open source forums like Stack Overflow where you can ask questions (or answer them) and people will revert to you. The more involved you are in the community, the more you get back from it.” He feels that the fear of somebody trying to copy or plagiarise doesn’t really exist any more.

As a company, Josh contributes code and is very active in ensuring that the community grows. It is one of the sponsors of RubyConf India, a conference that attracts around 450 people every year. This year, the event will be held from March 22-23, 2014, in Goa. The company also hosts a weekly meet called Open Source Friday, at its office in Pune. “It is not an add-on activity, but something that we are doing to ensure that the community grows. Here, people can come, discuss, talk and share anything to do with Ruby and beyond,” says Rege. 