

Balancing Technology, Organization, and Process in Inner Source

Bringing Inner Source to the TOP

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Companies that develop different variants of essentially the same product resort to software platform development in order to reduce the amount of redundant work, through reuse. Software platform or product line development enables companies to reduce the time-to-market without too much additional cost, while making their products more robust and give them a common look & feel. The problem is however that a platform group can become a bottle neck in the organization, especially when multiple product teams are using the same platform.

To overcome difficulties of platform development, companies deploy key practices from successful Open Source communities in order to decouple platform and product groups with respect to their release timing. This approach is also known under the term Inner Source [1]. The idea is to get a corporate software developing organization into the habit of releasing early and often, lowering the threshold to access assets, resorting to patches rather than doing workarounds, and having a clear sense of ownership.

Difficulties arise in platform development due to differences in focus and mission within the organization. The mission of product groups is to bring their products to the market in time and with the appropriate level of quality. To reach their goals they may have to make trade-offs between taking (the penalty of) a shortcut and losing market share. The mission of a platform group is different: they have to stimulate reuse of software, e.g., through the commodification of features originating from product delivering teams. Taking shortcuts is hardly an option for a platform group. Therefore, they are less flexible in their release schedule, which may already be a compromise of many different demands from various product groups.

The key principles of Inner Source are certainly a good way to overcome many of the issues associated with traditional platform development. There are cases that show that the approach helps organizations with their platform effort, but we also believe that the focus has been very much on **process** (open source software processes, practices, and software product line methods) and **technology** (open source web-based collaborative platforms, incorporating subversion, mailing lists, etc., etc.), while neglecting the **organization** (the people, their management, cultural aspects, etc., etc.). The position taken in this paper is that neglecting organizational aspects of Inner Source limits its powers. It is proposed to discuss opportunities to balance Technology, Organization and Process in the current Inner Source practices, i.e., to make Inner Source TOP. The authors will share best practices in this area, with the intention to come-up with a concrete proposal for Inner Source.

1. <http://www.itea-cosi.org/>