



Robertson, R.J. (2006) Steven Weber (2004) The Success of Open Source. [Review] Library Review, Vol. 55, no.9

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This is an author produced version of a paper published in Asian Journal of Latin American Studies, 19(3). pp. 43-65. ISSN 0022-216X. This version has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof corrections, published layout or pagination.

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R John Robertson Book Review for Library Review

The Success of Open Source  
Steven Weber  
2004  
Harvard University Press  
Cambridge, MA and London, England  
ISBN 0674018583  
£10.95

In *The Success of Open Source*, Steven Weber sets out to examine why and how the Open Source movement has survived and succeeded in its approach to software creation, ownership, and communal development despite appearing to contradict fundamental principles of modern economics. He approaches this task using the tools, techniques, and perspective of political economy, and succeeds, not only in effectively carrying out his chosen analysis, but also in presenting it in an enticing and accessible manner. The book has a clear layout, good margins, and chapters are well structured with useful sub-headings.

The book consists of eight chapters, and, beginning with a brief introduction to Open Source's distinctive view of property rights, the first half of the book covers the origin, history, and philosophy of the Open Source approach. The second half of the book uses examples from the movement to examine and explore in detail how and why this distinctive approach to property and collaborative development works on a micro-level and a macro-level, how it supports successful business models, and how it interacts with legal systems based on a more traditional approach to property rights. Weber then concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of the success of Open Source for wider settings.

Weber explores and interacts with Open Source through examining how the movement is able to motivate participants, co-ordinate their efforts, and deal with complexity. He draws out the different responses to these problems within the Open Source community and contrasts them with approaches based on traditional approaches to property. He then traces the Open Source community's self-understanding through examining and critiquing the communal metaphors it has adopted (as articulated in Lessig's *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* and Raymond's *The Cathedral and the Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source by an*

*Accidental Revolutionary*) and through clearly outlining and analysing critical developments and conflicts in the community's history. In the concluding chapter Weber sets out the conditions under which Open Source's approach to property and distributed development might work for other domains and enterprises.

Weber's book deserves the glowing response it has received within and outwith the computing community, and provides, a careful, thought-provoking, study of an important phenomenon of the twentieth century. For those reasons alone it is worth reading. Beyond this general audience it will obviously appeal to those interested or participating in the Open Source movement. For the information professional, in particular, it offers helpful insight into the advantages and limits of sustainable models of cooperative effort that do not depend on remuneration or hierarchy. This is particularly pertinent as libraries increasingly expose for other's use metadata they have created about digital or physical assets, and are involved in the management of digital assets. In the first of these settings, information professionals, like Open Source developers, find themselves producing something for the public good, giving away their product (metadata) with no guaranteed return. This book may help them manage expectations (theirs and others) and articulate, in economic terms, why giving away their commodity might make sense. In the second setting information professionals are increasingly called on to administer, arbitrate, and communicate about digital rights. Many of those they interact with in this capacity, especially in an academic setting, will have been influenced by the Open Source movement or have parallel attitudes to collaborative work – this book may assist a more nuanced articulation of opinion and greater understanding of the issues.