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THE NEWSPAPER OF SILICON VALLEY

Sprinting for open source



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

Michael Bernstein, left, and Bob Barter were among 14 programmers who wrote code for five straight days in the sprint at the Santa Clara offices of Cignex.

FIVE STRAIGHT DAYS OF NEAR-NON-STOP CODING PROMOTE IDEA THAT SOFTWARE SHOULD BE FREE



mikecassidy

silicon valley dispatches

Plone, which helps organizations run Web sites, has been adopted by a wide range of outfits

You like to hike? Go to Yosemite. You like to snorkel? Hawaii. You want to spend a week crammed in a room of programmers slinging code? Silicon Valley is the place.

So, there they were, lovers of the open source software Plone, coding as fast as their fingers would fly in what those in the know call a sprint. Five straight days of near-non-stop coding.

"If they decide to do something, they will not rest until they finish," says Rajesh Setty, chief executive of Cignex Technologies, which hosted the sprinters.

No, it's not some kind of weird cult. OK, it is, but not in the Charles Manson sense. The 14 programmers who traveled to Santa Clara to push the code forward wanted to do some good while indirectly helping their businesses.

This month's sprint and others like it worldwide are part of the open source movement — the thinking that software should be built by a community of the civic-minded and be available to use for free.

The sprints are also a reminder that while communicating online is wonderful, seeing eye-to-eye still counts.

"This is our face-to-face time, a chance to code side-by-side, to get a beer together," says Joel Burton, a sprinter and chairman of the Plone Foundation.

Look, everybody parties differently. And a sprint is a bit of a party. These folks know each other from the Web — from collaborating remotely on Plone — but that's different.

"Drinking beer in cyberspace just isn't much fun," says Chad Whitacre, a sprinter from Pittsburgh.

The Santa Clara event attracted programmers from nine U.S. cities, Sweden, Norway and, of course, Silicon Valley.

Yes, there's a business purpose behind the party. Cignex

and some of the sprint participants make their money helping other businesses figure out how to best use software.

Even if the software is free, a company like Cignex can make money by building applications on top of the free stuff so the system meets a company's specific needs.

And suffice it to say, different Plone users have different needs. Plone, which basically helps organizations run Web sites, has been adopted by a wide range of outfits — everything from Oxfam America to Toys in Babeland, a sex-toys retailer.

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—JOEL BURTON, CODE SPRINTER AND CHAIRMAN OF THE PLONE FOUNDATION.

Burton's Washington, D.C., business, for instance, works with government agencies doing "important, but not very glamorous work, like convincing Americans to eat their vegetables." At a sprint, he might sit next to Rob Miller, of San Francisco, who runs the Web site for the annual Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert.

"The Burning Man people want to do things that the government hasn't thought of yet," Burton says.

That's a safe bet. But as the sprinters work to solve a problem for Burning Man, they might come up with a solution that also works for those pushing broccoli.

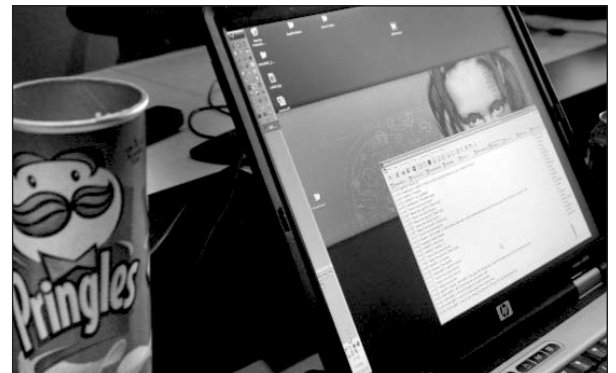
That sort of learning is important to companies like Cignex, which is one reason Setty had five Cignex programmers take part in the sprint. His company also put up \$40,000 to fly other sprinters in and put them up for the week.

"Now they are just across the table," Cignex programmer Sameena Tabassum says of the top Plone experts. "We are able to present them with a business problem that we are facing so they are able to give us a solution."

Which is, of course, why she sprints. It is why everybody sprints, right?

Well, that. And the beer.

Hey! Have an only-in-Silicon Valley story? E-mail mcassidy@mercurynews.com or call (408) 920-5536.



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

Snacks are close by the laptop of Tom "Spanky" Kapanka as he and other software engineers write code at Cignex in Santa Clara.

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CIGNEX

URL: www.cignex.com

Tel: 408.327.9900

Email: sales@cignex.com