

Free as in Burned Out

Who really pays for Open Source Software

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FOSDEM 2026



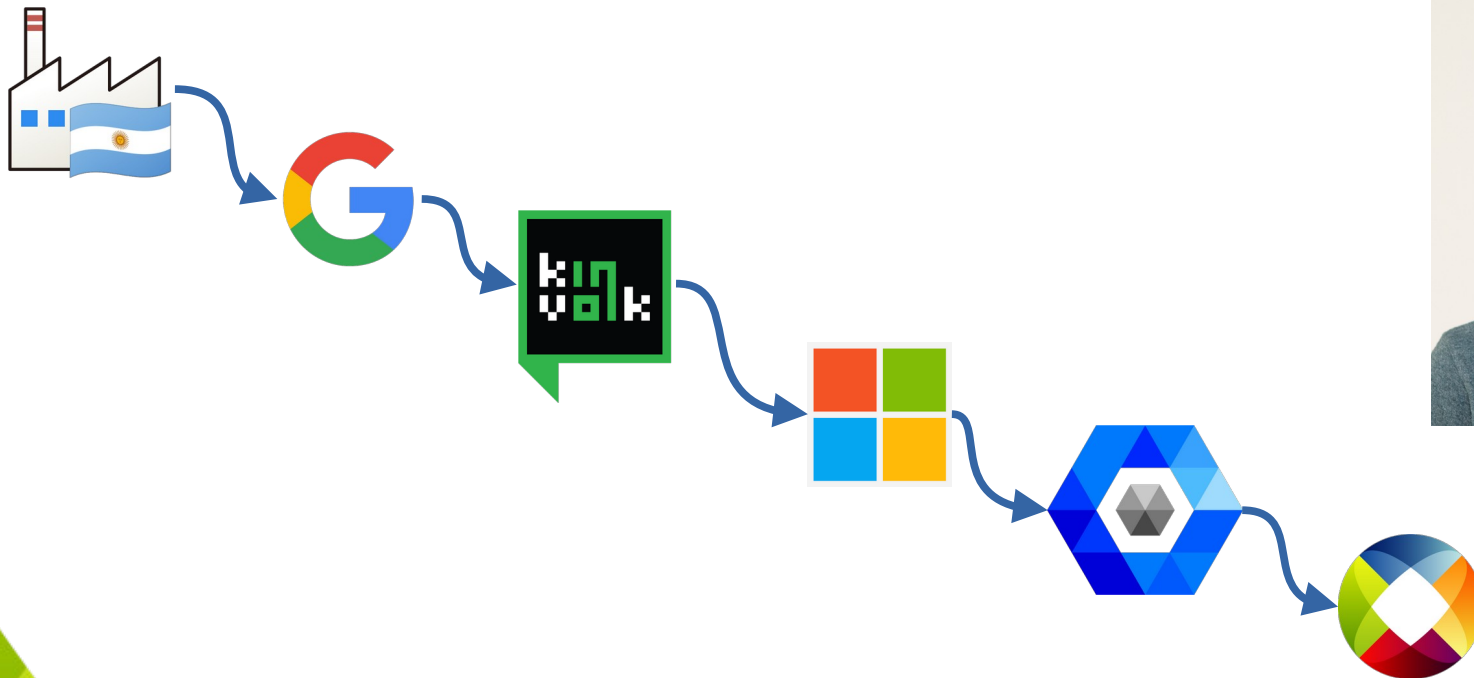


About me

- Born in Argentina, living in Germany since 2012
- Using and contributing to FOSS for 25+ years.
- Debian Developer since 2005.



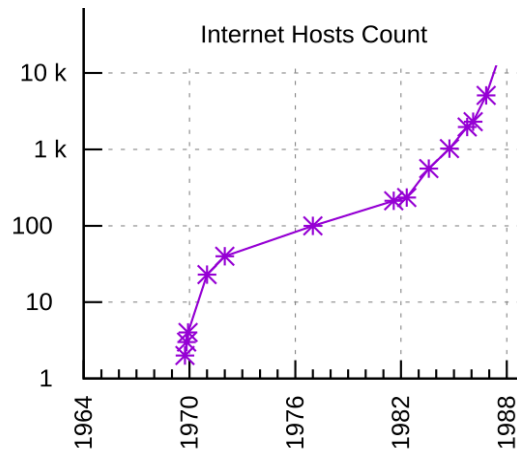
About me



The problem



40 years ago



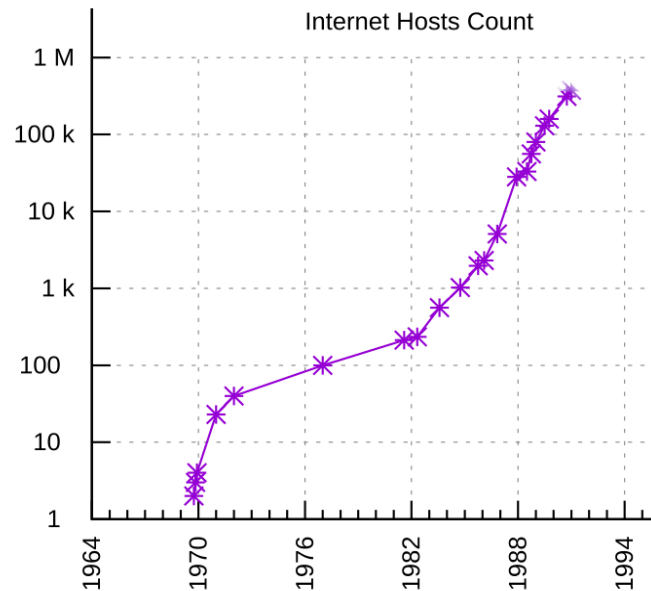
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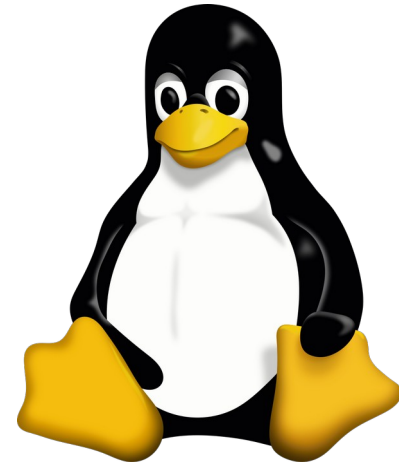
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35 years ago



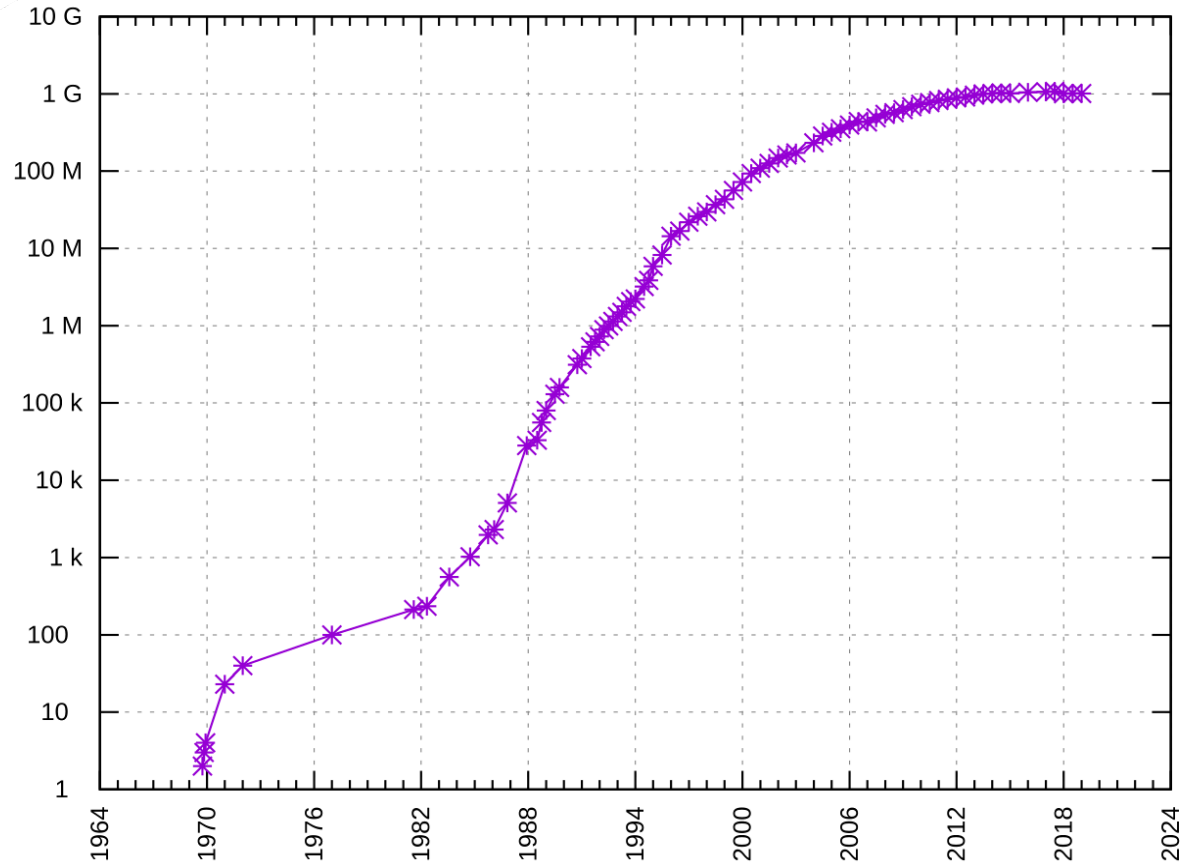
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Internet Hosts Count



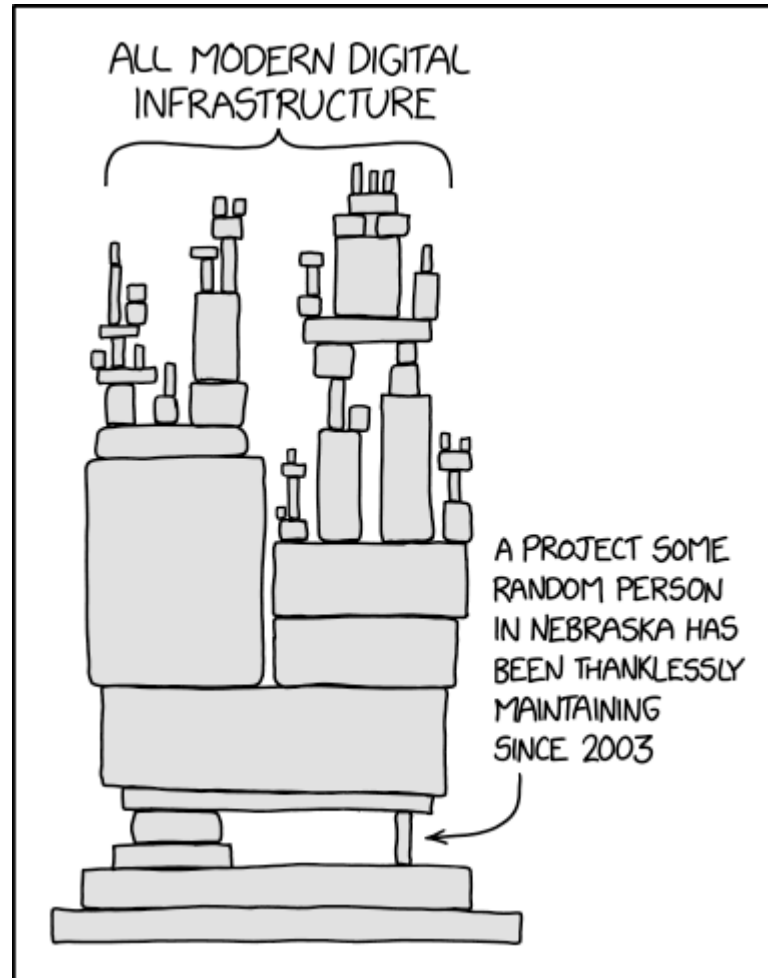
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Open Source has “won”



Or has it?



Source: xkcd.com CC-BY-NC 3.5



The illusion of “free”

- People today are used to “free” services.
 - That are monetized through ads and selling your data.
- We have become used to getting things for free while still demanding high quality out of them.



All taking and no giving back

- There are hundreds of millions of potential users.
- But today's *users* have become *consumers*.
 - They expect SLAs, fast responses, accountability.
 - They don't feel obliged to give anything back.





Burnout



The risk of burnout increases when there is an imbalance between the energy our work demands of us, and the resources available to replenish it.



Major burnout contributors

- Developers are struggling to make a living.
- Toxic behavior from community members wearing developers down.



The fact that you can download a piece of software for free doesn't mean that it doesn't have value.



We need to stop framing maintenance as a moral virtue instead of just work.



Maintainers are increasingly treated as if they were vendors, without vendor protections.



What if we don't fix this?

- Critical dependencies might get abandoned.
- Security vulnerabilities stay around and get exploited.
- Less experimentation, more risk avoidance.



Making money with FOSS



Charge for features and support

- Someone needs to pay the development cost upfront.
- Hard to get steady income.
- One of the first things that get cut.

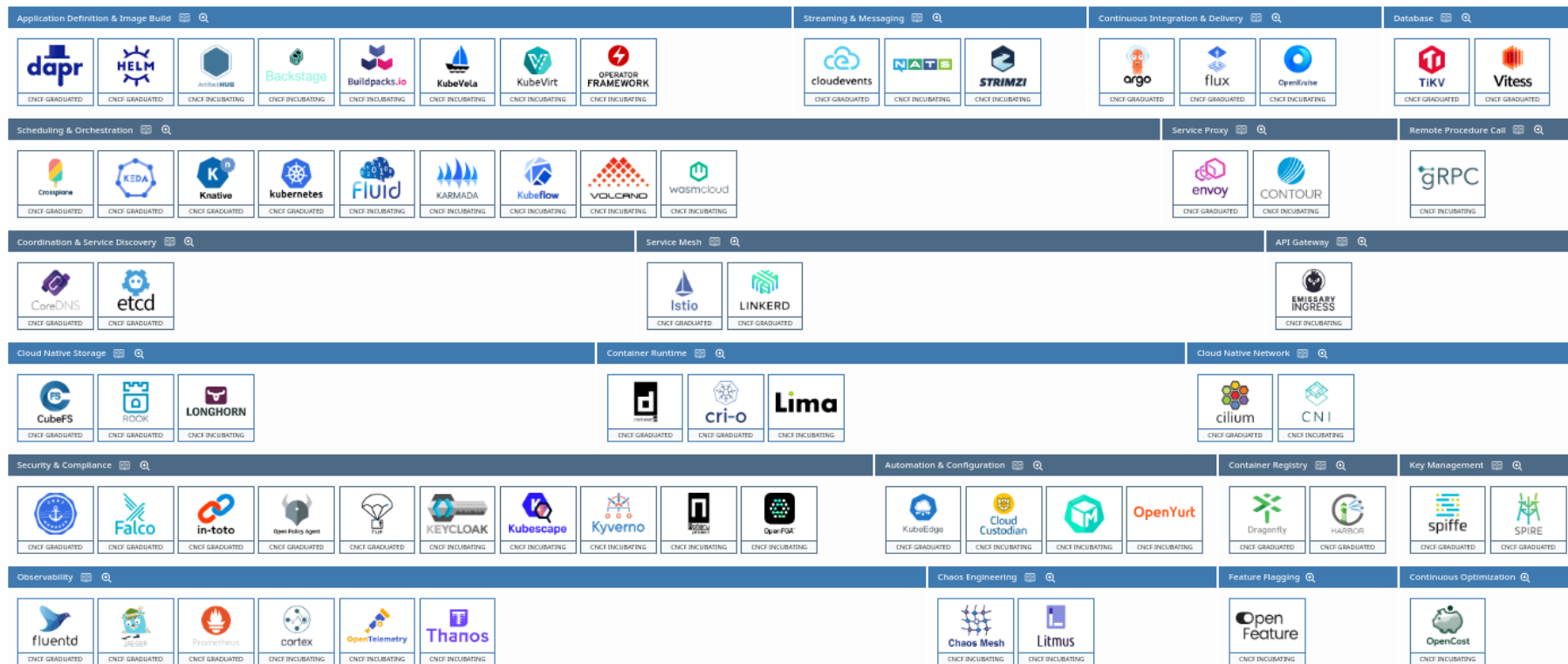


Open Core

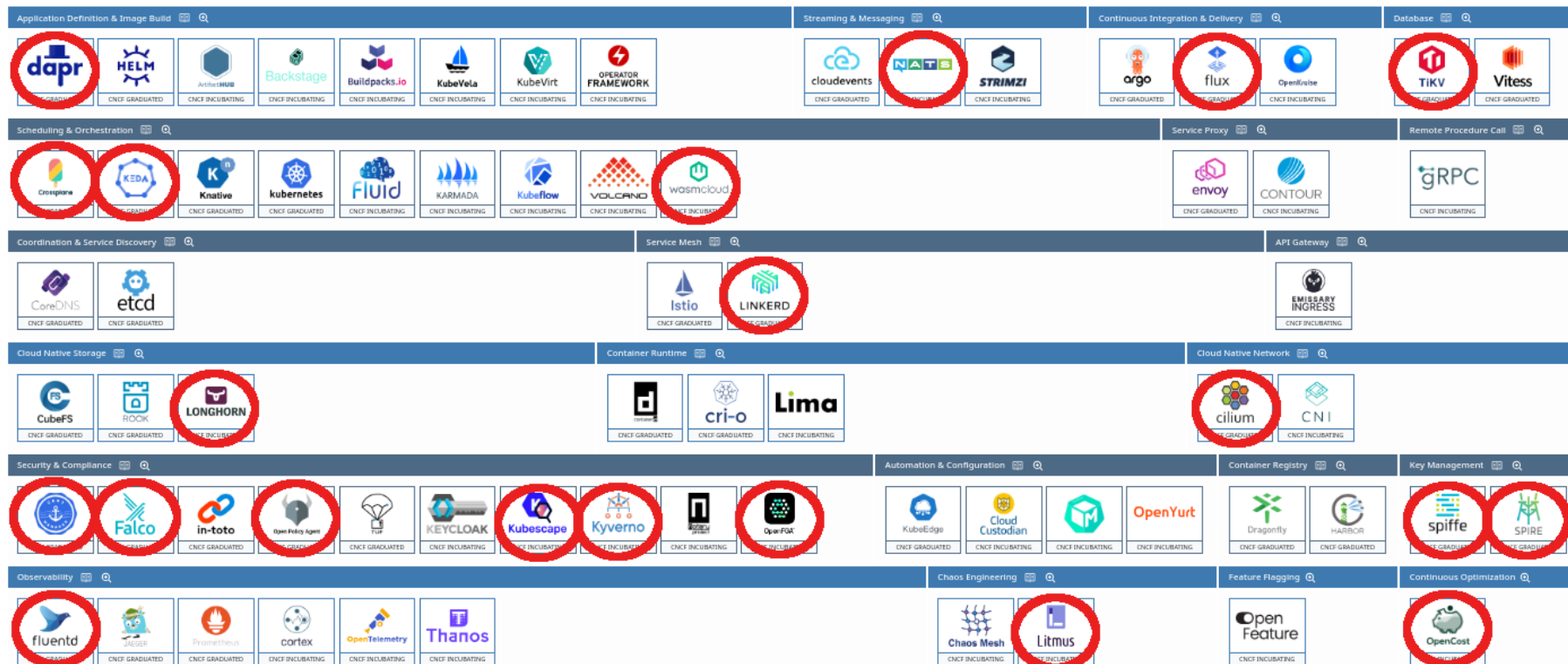
Open Core is publishing some piece of software as Open Source, while keeping some other piece as closed source and charging licensing costs for that other piece.



CNCF Landscape



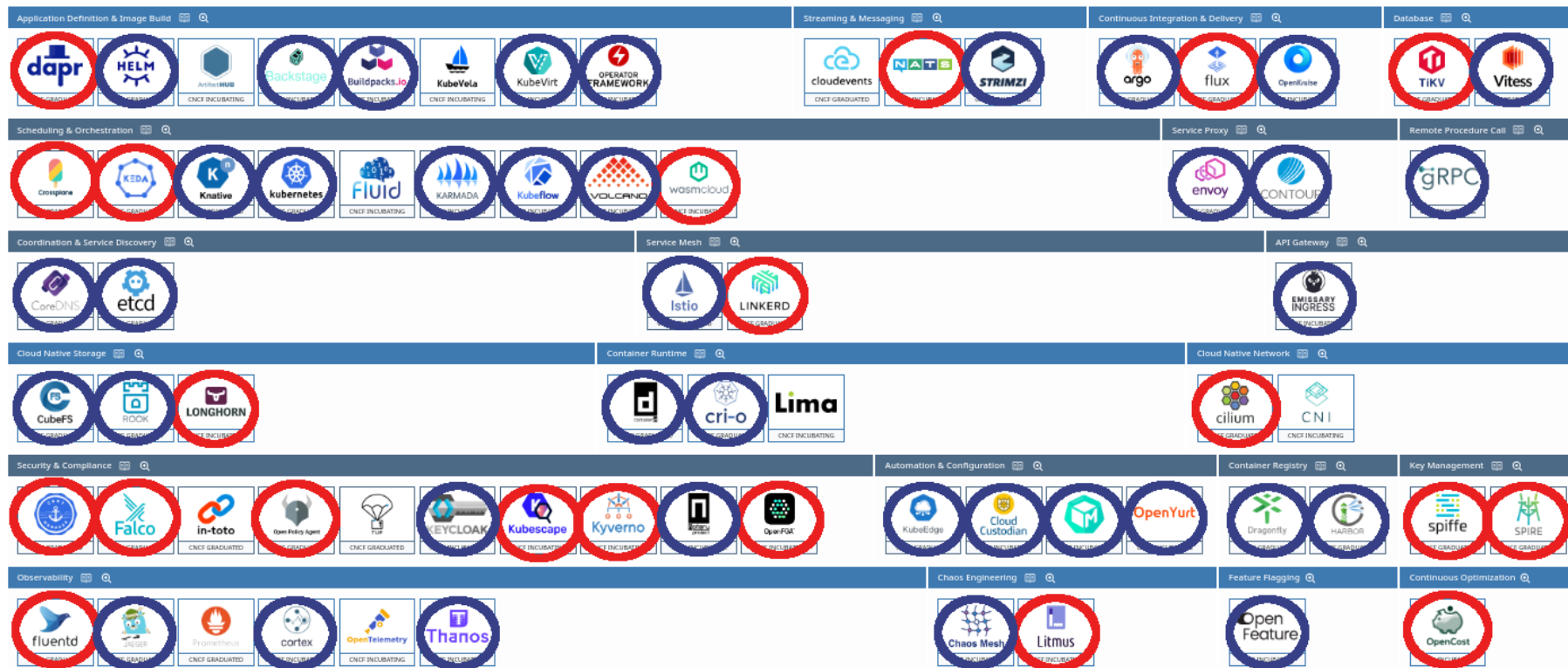
CNCF Landscape



Source: <https://landscape.cncf.io>



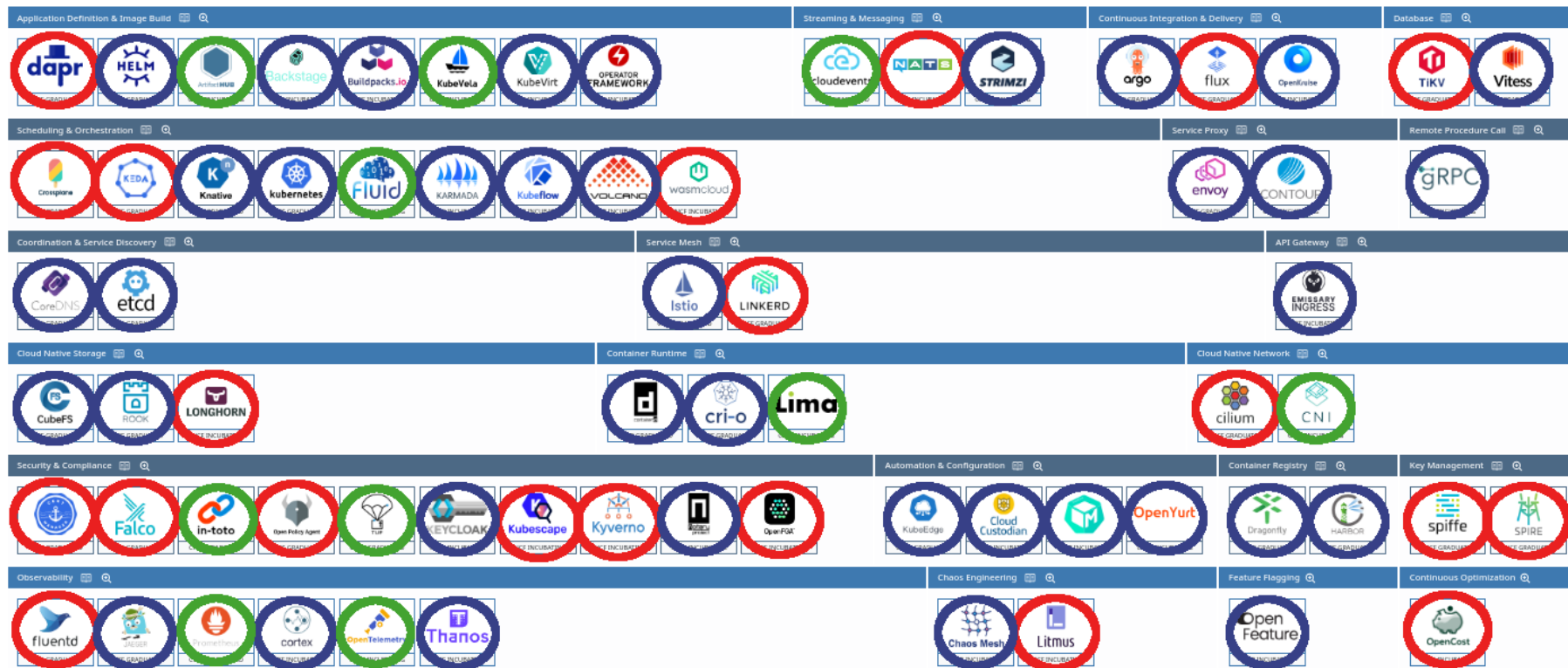
CNCF Landscape



Source: <https://landscape.cncf.io>



CNCF Landscape



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The Hashicorp / Terraform SNAFU

- On August 2023, Hashicorp announced they would move all their projects to BUSL.
- Companies that had built products on top of Terraform got together and organized a fork (OpenTF → OpenTofu)
- Several companies committed to donating a number of FTEs for a number of years.



Alternatives



Crowdfunding and donations

- GitHub sponsors
 - 40 million dollars donated through the program
- Open Collective
 - 2692 collectives in the Open Source Collective
 - 426 collectives in the Open Collective Europe





- NLNet distributes funds from the EU's "Next Generation Internet" program.
- 1567 projects have received grants.
 - Many are small, not so well known.
- Grants also tend to be small, funding specific features or functionalities.



Sovereign Tech Fund

- Part of the Sovereign Tech Agency, a German body with funds coming out of the German government.
- Aims to pay the costs of maintaining the digital infrastructure (used by everybody, not just Germany).
- Grants are generally larger, aimed towards larger projects.





- Initiative started in 2023. Companies commit to donate at least 2000 USD per developer per year.
- Goal:
establish a new social norm in the tech industry of companies paying open source maintainers, so that burnout and related security issues can become a thing of the past.
- Sort of like an Open Source Tax, but it's voluntary and each company decides where the funds go.



Companies employing FOSS devs

- Various companies employ FOSS maintainers and let them work on their projects 20%, 50% or even 100%.
- Having maintainers on the payroll benefits the company as the project gets maintained and the company gets the expertise.



Is this enough?



It's not enough

- It's complex to navigate the options, requires significant work to get the funding needed.
- Grants require ongoing work to ask for them, there's uncertainty whether you'll get them or not.
- Constantly asking for donations feels like begging.



No juniors → Little diversity

- This model only pays for senior maintainers.
- Less experienced developers need to work nights and weekends until they have enough experience.
- This is a ***privilege*** that impacts diversity.





A better world is possible



Open Source is making the world better, today.

People working in Open Source are constantly adding a lot of value that benefits everybody.



People working in Open Source should be able to do it as their full time job, if they want to.



Companies giving back

- Sign the Open Source Pledge.
- Alternatively, donate whichever amount fits the company's budget.
- Normalize donating to support Open Source.



Foundations employing devs

- Explore the option of employing developers to do the work covered by the Foundation.
- This is a complex subject, so it might require discussions to reach agreement.
- Start by surveying members to find out their opinion.



Companies employing FOSS devs

- Normalize employing maintainers and giving them time to work on their projects.
- “Open Source Employment Pledge”
 - e.g. 50% FOSS time every 20 devs.



Teams > Loneliness

- Let's move to a world of teams working together.
- If you are a solo maintainer, find other maintainers in the same space to form a team.



DANKE!
THANK YOU!
MERCI!
GRAZIE!
GRACIAS!
DANK JE WEL!



Questions?



