

# THE 2021 TIDELIFT OPEN SOURCE MAINTAINER SURVEY

TIDELIFT

## INTRODUCTION

In early 2021, Tidelift fielded its first-ever comprehensive survey of open source maintainers. Nearly 400 maintainers responded with thoughts about how they fund their work, what they enjoy about being a maintainer, what they don't like so much, along with a host of other interesting insights.

Over the following pages, we'll share nine of the most interesting findings with you.

## FINDING #1

# About half of maintainers get paid nothing for their work

One of the hottest topics in open source today is the relationship between money and maintainers. The most pressing questions surround how open source maintainers should be compensated for their work and whether they are being paid for it today. So we made the issue of maintainer compensation a core part of our first maintainer survey.

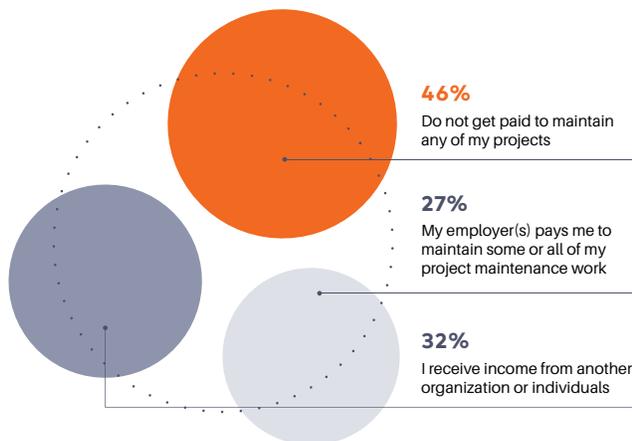
Historically, *some have made the case* that a good percentage of open source maintenance work is already being funded by companies employing maintainers. *Others have speculated* about whether maintainers would rather work independently and autonomously. And many believe that today *most maintainers are volunteers*, and are paid little—if at all—for the work they do.

So what's the truth?

Some clear answers emerged from our survey. We found that slightly less than half (46% percent) of maintainers report that *they aren't paid at all* for their open source work. Nothing. Not a dime.

## About half of maintainers get paid nothing for their work

Which of the following describe how you currently fund your open source project maintenance work? (Choose all that apply)



n=378 | More than one option could be selected



Thankfully, our data also shows that Tidelift is changing this trend. Once you remove the maintainers partnered with Tidelift (which made up 27% of our survey respondents) the percentage of maintainers not being paid at all for their work jumps to 57%, which means Tidelift is having an outsized impact in terms of increasing the percentage of maintainers getting paid.

Some people assume that many maintainers get paid to work on their projects by benevolent bosses who allow them to work on their projects as part of their day jobs. The data from our survey does not support this as the normal state of affairs. Only 27% of the maintainers in our sample get paid by their employer to maintain some or all of their projects.

In fact, more maintainers receive income from a third-party (like Tidelift, donation programs, or foundations) than from an employer (32% vs 27%).

## Tidelift-partnered maintainers are entrepreneurial and busy

Only 18% of Tidelift-partnered maintainers say their employer pays them to maintain their project, yet 71% have full-time jobs. That means a vast swath of maintainers are doing maintenance outside of working hours, which tracks with [conversations we've had with maintainers](#), like Claudiu Popa, who maintains Pylint.

Claudiu tries to make Pylint part of his day job, but he can only work on it as it pertains to his employer. "We have all sorts of checks specific to an organization, specific to my company, and we wrote our own checks finding particularities specific to our project," he said. "So I work on it at my job only as it pertains to my job."

Sixty percent of Tidelift-partnered maintainers handle six or more projects, while on average only 38% of the full survey sample maintain that many.

While our survey found that just under half of maintainers are unpaid volunteers, the good news is that means just over half are being paid. But how much? Is it a meaningful amount of money? And who is paying them today? That's what we explored next.



## FINDING #2

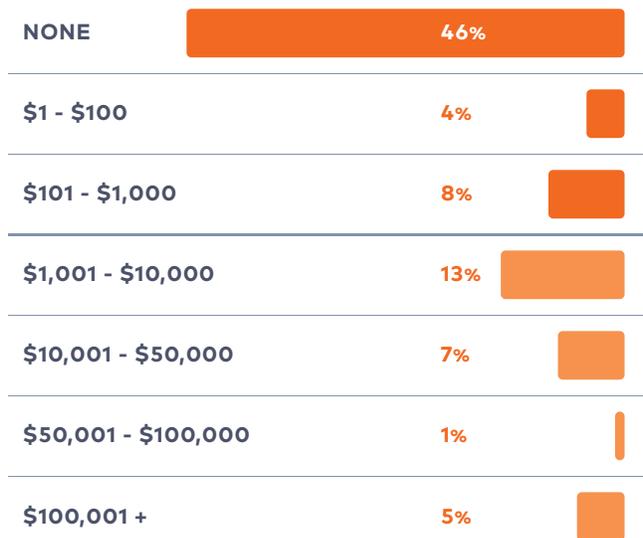
# Most maintainers aren't paid well today, but Tidelift is having an impact

We asked the 54% of maintainers who are getting paid for their open source maintenance work to break down the amount of money they receive each year from all sources. The most striking finding? Just over a quarter of maintainers (26%), earn more than \$1,000 a year for their work today.

What's more, half of maintainers receive less than \$100 US per year, while only 5% earn over \$100,000 US a year for their project maintenance work.

## Only 1/4 of maintainers earn more than \$1K per year for their maintenance work

How much total income do you receive per year for your open source maintenance work from all sources?



n=361 | "None" includes respondents that previously indicated they do not get paid. Results do not equal 100% because "Don't know" and non-responses are not shown.

Looking at these top earners a bit more, it is also important to note that most if not all of them are being paid for their work as part of their day job. The full-time employed maintainers, representing 64% of the study, were asked if open source maintenance work is an explicit part of their job responsibilities. Only a third said yes, but 20% of this group makes over \$100,000 a year from being a maintainer. In contrast, no one without this core responsibility claimed over \$100,000 a year in income from maintenance work.



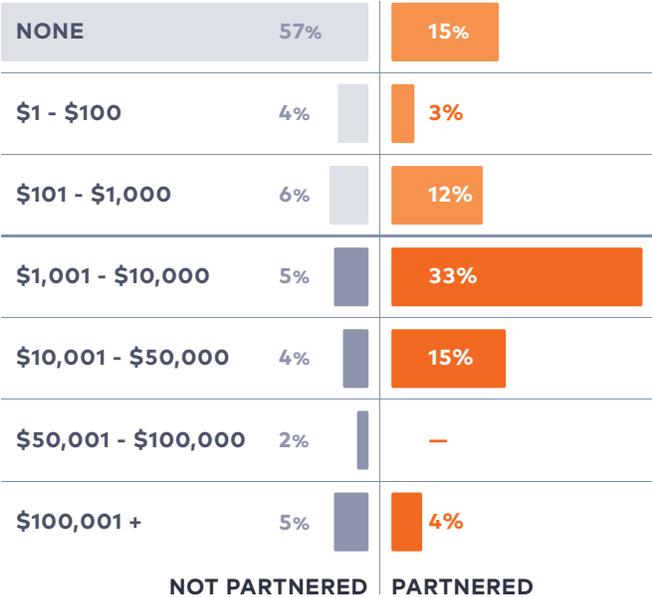
# Tidelift is having an impact

While not yet “quit your job” money for most maintainers, Tidelift is beginning to have a significant and noticeable impact on how much maintainers get paid. Over half (52%) of Tidelift-partnered maintainers who responded to the survey earn more than \$1,000 a year for their maintenance work as compared to only 17% of the maintainers not partnered with Tidelift.

Thirty-three percent of Tidelift-partnered maintainers earn between \$1,001 and \$10,000 per year for their maintenance work, as opposed to a paltry 5% of non Tidelift-partnered maintainers. And 15% of Tidelift-partnered maintainers earn between \$10,001 - \$50,000 for their maintenance work—which definitely enters the realm of “making the mortgage payment” money—while only 4% of non Tidelift-partnered maintainers earn that much.

## 52% of maintainers partnered with Tidelift make more than \$1K per year while only 17% of other maintainers do

How much total income do you receive per year for your open source maintenance work from all sources?



*Tidelift-partnered maintainers, n=101; All other paid maintainers, n=277 | "None" includes respondents that previously indicated they do not get paid. Results do not equal 100% because "Don't know" and non-responses are not shown. Percentages rounded up to nearest full percent.*



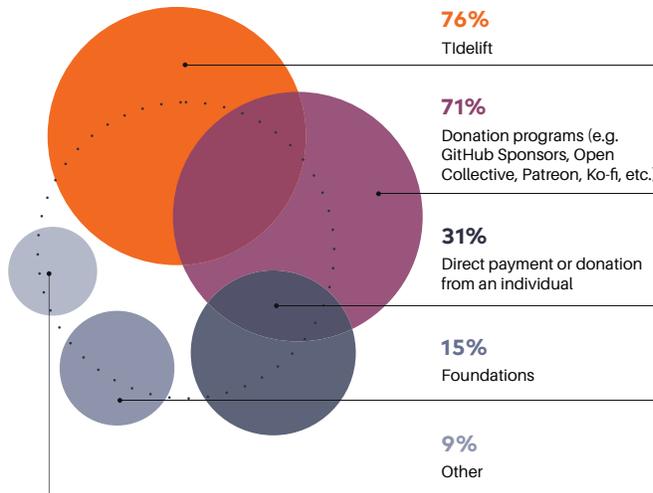
## Who's paying the maintainers today?

We dug deeper to learn more about other income sources beyond those earning income from their employers. According to our respondents—again skewed by the large percentage of the total sample (27%) receiving income from Tidelift—by far the most common sources of non-employer income were Tidelift (76%) and donation programs (71%).

In addition, 31% of maintainers have received money via direct payments or donations from an individual, while payments from foundations were the least likely source of income, with only 15% of respondents reporting income from these sources.

### Tidelift and donation programs are most common sources of non-employer income for maintainers

Break down how each of the following sources account for the non-employer-related income you receive for open source maintenance work?



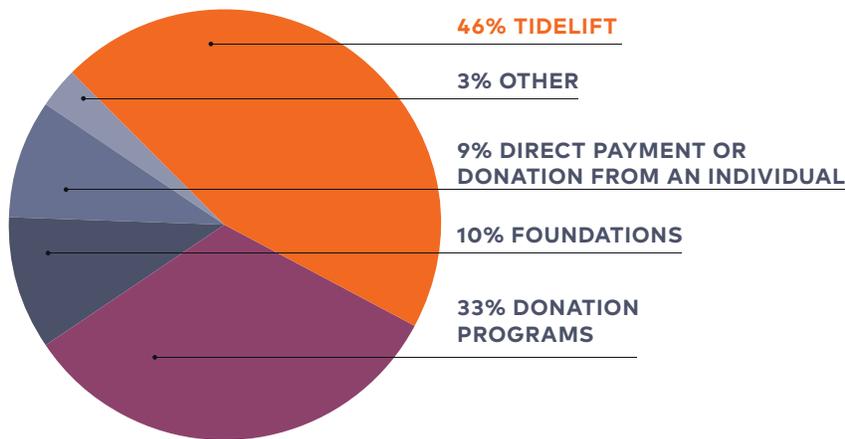
n=87



Which leads us to an important point: although donation programs are popular, when you look at the amount of money maintainers earn from them, it is quite a bit smaller. While Tidelift makes up the largest percentage of non-employer income (46%), donations account for only 33% of maintainers' non-employer maintenance income.

## Almost half of the average paid maintainer's non-employer income is coming from Tidelift

Break down how each of the following sources account for the non-employer-related income you receive for open source maintenance work?



*All respondents paid by third-party for their project maintenance and were able to answer detailed income questions, n=87*

One interesting note on foundations: of the 10% of individuals that did report income from foundations, it made up a large percentage (60%) of their maintenance earnings.

When it comes to paying maintainers for their important work, the data shows that there is progress... but still so much more work to do. A small minority of maintainers are getting paid a living wage by their employers to maintain their projects. And Tidelift is helping many maintainers make a dent in their bills, but not yet to the scale where the majority of maintainers can afford to work on their projects full time.

If maintainers aren't yet able to earn a living from project maintenance alone, why do they continue to do the work? Here's what we found out.

### FINDING #3

## Maintainers enjoy making a positive impact and those who make money enjoy it

We now know that *almost half* of open source maintainers get paid nothing for their work and *more than half* of maintainers are earning less than \$1K per year. So if they are not working for money, what motivates maintainers today? That's where our survey went next: we wanted to know what maintainers enjoy about their work and why they keep doing it.

### Maintainers enjoy making a positive impact and doing challenging, creative work

What do you enjoy about being an open source maintainer?  
(Choose all that resonate with you)



n=357

The vast majority of maintainers reported that “making a positive impact on the world” is one of the things they enjoy about being a maintainer. Seventy-one percent of maintainers chose this option, and it was far and away the most commonly cited thing respondents like about their work.

The second most popular choice, chosen by 63% of maintainers, was “allowing me to fulfill a need for creative, challenging, and/or enjoyable work.”

Ranking third on the list of what maintainers enjoy about their work, 59% chose the option “getting to work on projects that matter to me.”

One maintainer said: “Being an open source maintainer, is indeed something I feel proud of... It matters as I know I have made a change and helped those who are starting out in the same field.”

Another said, “Maintaining open-source software gives me a sense of purpose, and lets me devote time that would’ve otherwise been spent doing nothing into giving something back to the greater community, all the while giving me a chance to learn new best practices, programming languages and software libraries, making me a better developer.”

Perhaps if education were its own answer choice, it may have been the top vote getter, because 74% of respondents cited either “I enjoy learning” or “improving my coding skills and knowledge of software” as what they like about being a maintainer.

One maintainer explained: “I learn not just about software, but also intercultural communication, people, and how technology impacts people in different ways across the world. It makes me a more globally-aware person.”

Interesting note: some people shared that they actually aren’t sure they enjoy being a maintainer. Rather, they feel like they are doing their civic duty. Here are two quotes:

- “I think ‘enjoy’ is a stretch. I do it because it needs to be done, and I’m glad it’s having a positive impact, but I’d rather not have to do it.”
- “Not sure if it’s ‘enjoy’, specifically, but I feel a great sense of obligation and responsibility to the [community name withheld privacy purposes] user community....Someone’s gotta deal with that, and no one else is, soooo... :)”



## Enjoyment differs based on where maintainers live

### What's fun about maintenance depends on where you live

What do you enjoy about being an open source maintainer?  
(Choose all that resonate with you)

	OVERALL RANK	NORTH AMERICA	EUROPE	ASIA
Making a positive impact on the world	1	1	1	1
Allows me to fulfill a need for creative, challenging, and/or enjoyable work	2	2	2	4
Getting to work on projects that matter to me	3	3	4	6
Improving my coding skills and knowledge of software	4	7	3	3
I enjoy learning	5	6	5	2
Working with peers and my community	6	5	8	7
Building my reputation and resume	7	8	6	5
Knowing my work is being used in important organizations and projects	8	4	7	10
Receiving recognition for my work	9	9	9	8
Working with others to create software that I need for work	10	11	10	9
Getting paid for my work	11	10	11	11

Overall, n=357; North America, n=113; Europe, n=113; Asia, n=78

In an interesting development, where a maintainer lives impacts how they feel about some aspects of being a maintainer. North Americans are more likely to care whether or not their work is being used in an important organization or project—that ranks #4 for versus #8 for the study as a whole. North Americans are less likely to see maintaining as a positive way to improve coding skills and knowledge, ranking that seventh.

Respondents from Asia enjoy improving their skills but the general love of learning is the second most positive idea they associate with being a maintainer.

## More money = more enjoyment

We'd be remiss if we didn't point out the enjoyment option that ranked dead last: getting paid for maintenance work. Some might look at this and assume it means that money is not a motivator for maintainers, that they are doing the work only because they want to make a positive impact and challenge themselves.

This assumption is dead wrong.

Instead, money is not something maintainers enjoy about their work today because *not enough of them are earning enough for it to be a motivator.*

When you dive into the details, it turns out that money is a very important motivator.

- Only 18% of those getting paid less than \$1,000 say getting paid is a reason they enjoy being a maintainer.
- That rises to 30% for those making \$1,001 - \$10,000.
- And explodes to 61% for those earning more than \$10,000.



# The more a maintainer gets paid, the more they *enjoy* getting paid

Percentage of respondents who report “Getting paid for my work” as one of the things they enjoy about being a maintainer.



Less than \$1,000, n=40; \$1,001 - \$10,000, n=29; More than \$10,000, n=60.

What a shocker! Those who get paid more enjoy getting paid. Those who get paid less don't. Whouda thunk?

Here is our proof that money is a reason to enjoy being a maintainer—for the lucky minority getting paid a lot. Over the coming years, we certainly hope more maintainers get paid more for their work, so this continues to rise up the list of things all maintainers can enjoy.

All the more reason to support efforts to [pay the maintainers](#). Let's give more maintainers another reason to enjoy their work by ensuring they are fairly compensated for the value they create.



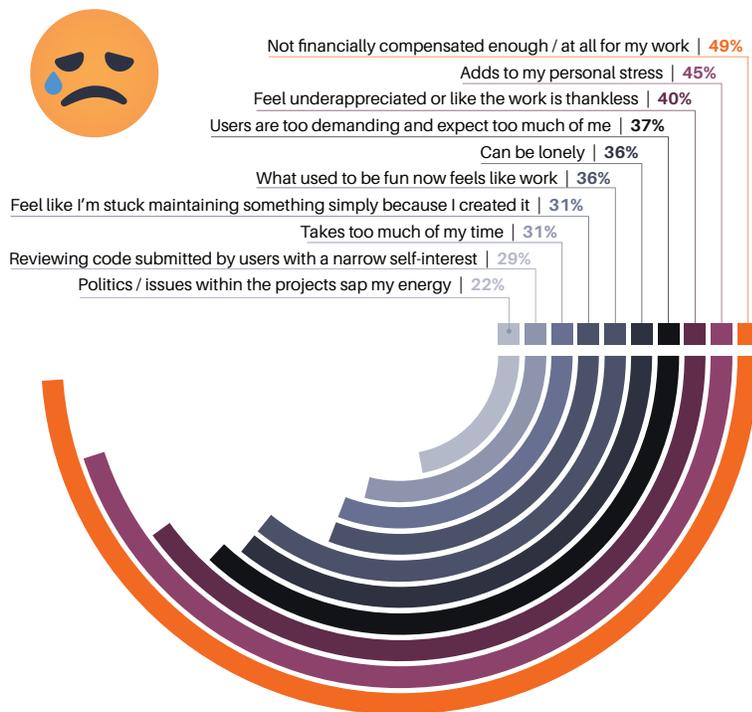
#### FINDING #4

## Open source maintenance work is often stressful, thankless, and financially unrewarding

Next, we wanted to explore what maintainers *don't* enjoy about being a maintainer. Not surprisingly, when asked about what they dislike, respondents' quantitative and qualitative responses overwhelmingly said, "Stop taking advantage of me!"

### Open source maintenance work is often stressful, thankless, and financially unrewarding

What do you dislike about being an open source maintainer?  
(Choose all that resonate with you)



n=335

“Not getting financially compensated enough or at all for my work,” with almost half of respondents citing it, is the top reason to dislike being a maintainer. This tracks with the fact that getting paid for their work ranks at the bottom of the list of things maintainers love.

Also not surprisingly, while 49% of respondents say not getting paid (enough) is a reason they dislike being a maintainer, only 34% say this if maintenance is an explicit responsibility of their full-time job. Furthermore, 36% of these full-time employed maintainers cite getting paid as a reason they enjoy being a maintainer if it is a core job responsibility, which is more than double the 15% that say this if it is not their core job responsibility.

Beyond financial compensation, the next set of things maintainers dislike about the work are that it “adds to my personal stress” (45%), “feel underappreciated or like the work is thankless” (40%), “users are too demanding and expect too much of me” (37%), “can be lonely” (36%), and “what used to be fun now feels like work” (36%).

Here’s more color, in the maintainers’ own words:

- “I have the privilege of being paid for my work, but others don’t, and it breaks my heart to see them struggle with the burden of unpaid labor.”
- “While some people appreciate the work I do, some other people just are too demanding and entitled. That’s not only harsh to deal with, but also sad.”
- “Being an open source maintainer is like living *Good Will Hunting* in reverse. You start out as a respected genius and end up as a janitor who gets into fights.”

Ouch.

# Dislikes differ based on where maintainers live

## What maintainers dislike depends on where they live

What do you dislike about being an open source maintainer?  
(Choose all that resonate with you)

	OVERALL RANK	NORTH AMERICA	EUROPE	ASIA
Not financially compensated enough / at all for my work	1	2	1	1
Adds to my personal stress	2	1	2	2
Feel underappreciated or like the work is thankless	3	3	4	3
Users are too demanding and expect too much of me	4	5	5	6
Can be lonely	5	8	3	4
What used to be fun now feels like work	6	4	7	5
Feel like I'm stuck maintaining something simply because I created it	7	7	8	8
Takes too much of my time	8	9	6	7
Reviewing code submitted by users with a narrow self-interest	9	6	9	9
Politics / issues within the projects sap my energy	10	10	10	10

Overall, n=335; North America, n=110; Europe, n=106; Asia, n=76



While almost everyone, everywhere dislikes not being compensated enough for their maintenance work, there were some noticeable differences in other areas depending on where you live.

North Americans rank “adds to my personal stress” as the top reason they dislike being a maintainer. Europeans, on the other hand, dislike maintenance because it “can be lonely,” which was the third most-cited response versus the eighth most-cited response for North Americans.

## Maintainers like more things than they dislike about their work

One silver lining in our findings? If you compare the things maintainers said they enjoy about their work versus the things they said they dislike, of the eleven possible choices we gave maintainers for things they like about their work, all but three resonated for more than half of maintainers, and the most commonly selected answer (making a positive impact on the world) was selected by 71% of respondents.

Comparatively, on the list of dislikes, none of the ten choices we gave were selected by more than half of maintainers, with the most common response (not financially compensated enough / at all for my work) only selected by 49% of respondents.

So the optimistic finding behind our look into maintainer likes and dislikes is that, even given some of the challenges maintainers face, maybe there is more to like about being a maintainer than there is to dislike—that’s good news!

Still, if so many maintainers find the work stressful, thankless, and financially unrewarding, what percentage of them have quit or considered quitting? Spoiler alert: it’s a pretty high number.

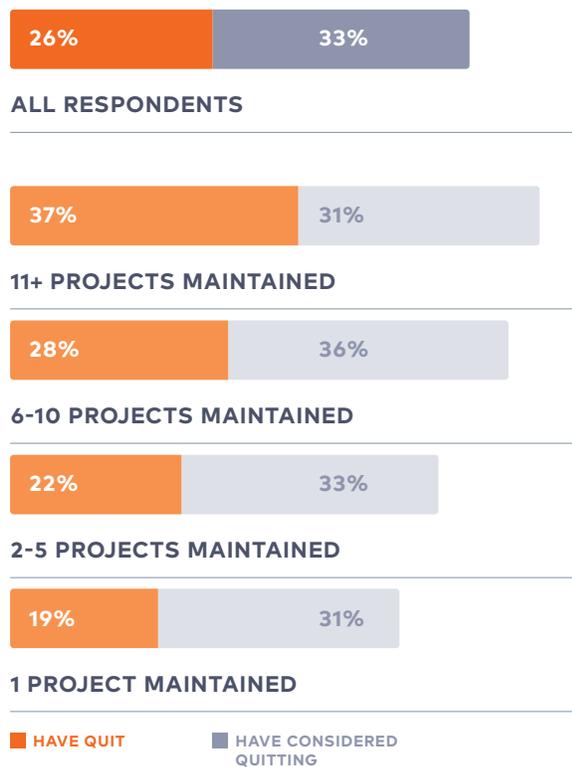
## FINDING #5

# More than half of maintainers have quit or considered quitting, and here's why.

Based on how many maintainers find their work stressful, thankless, and financially unrewarding, you might not find this next data point surprising: a whopping 59% of maintainers we surveyed have quit or considered quitting maintaining a project.

## 59% of maintainers have quit or considered quitting

Have you quit or considered quitting maintaining a project?



1, n=54; 2-5; n=159, 6-10, n=61; >10, n=75

Also, the more projects a maintainer is responsible for, the more likely it is that they have considered quitting, with over two thirds of maintainers responsible for over 10 projects having quit or considered quitting maintaining a project.

We asked maintainers who've quit or considered quitting to share why. The number one most likely reason to quit, with 60% citing it, was that "other things in my life and work took priority."

## Maintainers consider quitting because of other priorities and to avoid burnout

What are the key reasons you quit or considered quitting as maintainer of the project(s)? (Choose all that apply)



n=204

Burnout was the next most commonly mentioned reason, with half of maintainers citing it as a reason for quitting or considering quitting.

Burnout becomes even more of a factor for quitting, rising from being cited by 50% of respondents to 64% if the maintainer ranked “personal stress involved with project maintenance” as one of the top things they dislike about being an open source maintainer.

What’s causing maintainers to feel burned out? The answer is pretty obvious: the amount of time and stress involved in maintaining projects isn’t balanced by the rewards. Respondents that dislike the added personal stress of being a maintainer were 14% more likely to say that burnout and excessive time requirements were reasons they considered quitting. This helps add context to what it actually means to be burnt out.

Others quit because they lost interest (45%), it took up too much of their time (44%), they weren’t getting paid enough to make it worthwhile (32%), they didn’t enjoy the maintenance work (31%), or they were overwhelmed by demands from users (28%).

## Why—despite the issues—some maintainers persevere

While 59% of maintainers have quit or considered quitting, only a quarter of them actually followed through. So why did maintainers who considered quitting, but didn't, stick with their projects?

For many, there is a feeling of responsibility. One respondent said, they didn't quit because of "a sense of duty and commitment to existing users."

A sense of duty can easily turn into feelings of guilt or worse. For example:

"I have a real sense of despair about ever properly transitioning my projects to new maintainers; I assume that one day I'll stop maintaining them and my reputation will take a nosedive as they all slowly break."

One maintainer didn't quit because they "found good co-maintainers to help out." In other words, they didn't have to do everything by themselves anymore, perhaps helping relieve the sense of loneliness maintainers cited as another thing they dislike about the work. This also fits in with the sense of community that 52% of maintainers cite as something they enjoy about being a maintainer.

Some maintainers held off the urge to quit by taking a break from the project or resetting expectations for what they were willing to do. Here are several quotes exemplifying this approach:

- "I tend to reduce effort level and time I check in on projects, but continue maintenance at a slow pace. I tend to get invested in the social and community aspect, and the other long-term maintainers, so won't entirely quit, just take vacation for a while and come back... later."
- "I'm doing the lowest level maintenance until I either give up completely or find my mojo again."
- "I made the decision to continue maintaining the project after shifting parts of my life to better suit my maintainer duties and switching to handle a different area of the project that was more enjoyable."

Ah, work-life balance. How exactly does a maintainer—especially one not being paid well for their maintenance work—manage their day? That's where we went next.



## FINDING #6

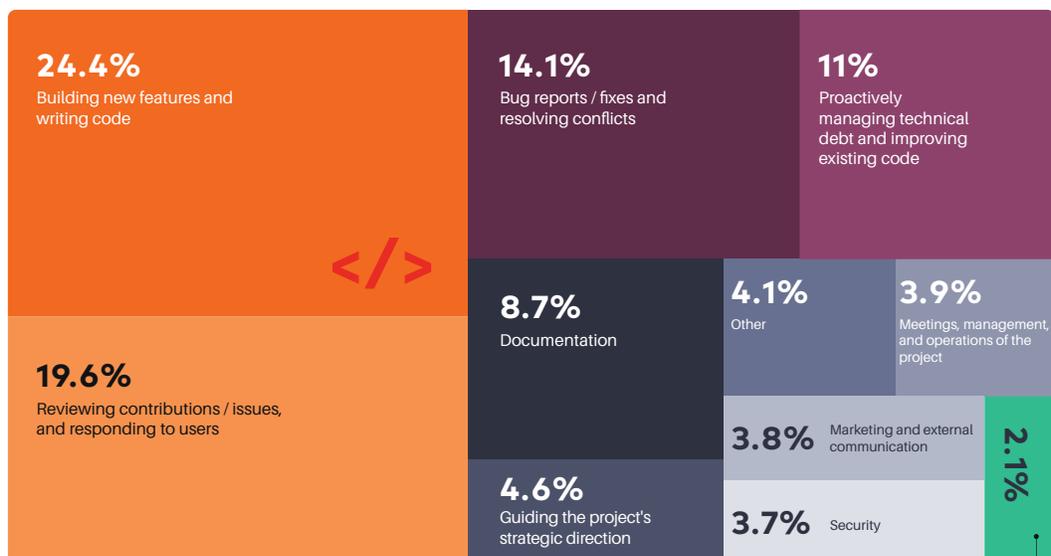
# Maintainers only spend 1/4 of their time writing code, and here's where the rest of their time goes

We asked maintainers to break down the percentage of their time they spend on a variety of tasks, and found some surprising results.

While maintainers spend more time building new features and writing new code than anywhere else, it still makes up less than a quarter (24%) of their time.

## Maintainers spend less than 1/4 of their time writing code

For the projects you maintain, what percentage of your time is spent on the following tasks?



n=327

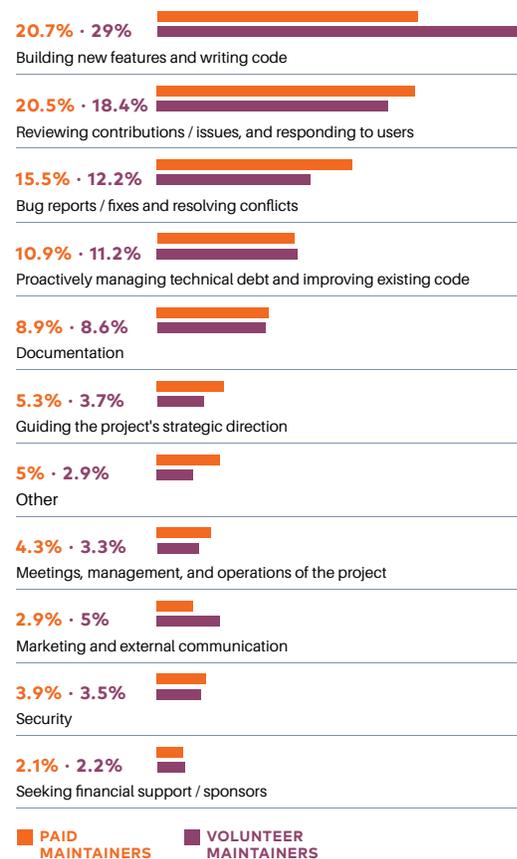


So how do they spend the rest of their time?

Reviewing contributions, issues, and generally responding to users takes about 20% of their time. Resolving conflicts and handling bugs accounts for another 14%, and managing technical debt and improving existing code consumes 11% of the relevant time.

### **Paid maintainers spend more time reviewing contributions, issues, bug reports, and resolving conflicts.**

For the projects you maintain, what percentage of your time is spent on the following tasks?



Volunteer maintainers, n=143; Paid maintainers, n=184

Non-technical tasks take up most of the remaining project-related time, with documentation (8.7%) usually consuming more hours than marketing (3.8%) and meetings (3.9%) combined.

In the category of “beware of what you wish for,” paid maintainers spend only 21% of the relevant time writing code. In contrast, 29% of volunteer maintainers’ project time goes to writing new code. How does that happen?

Paid maintainers are likely working on more complex projects where they have more end users, more contributors, and more demands on their time. In these instances, outward-facing responsibilities can mean less time left for writing code. Paid maintainers spend more of their time reviewing other people’s contributions and issues, bug fixes, resolving conflicts, and guiding the project’s strategic direction.

Meanwhile, volunteer maintainers might have more time to build features and write code, but they also need to spend significantly more of their time (5% vs. 2.9%) on marketing and external communication, as they try to ensure their projects gain traction.

So if these are the areas where maintainers are spending their time today, where is work not getting done and where are they crying out for more help?

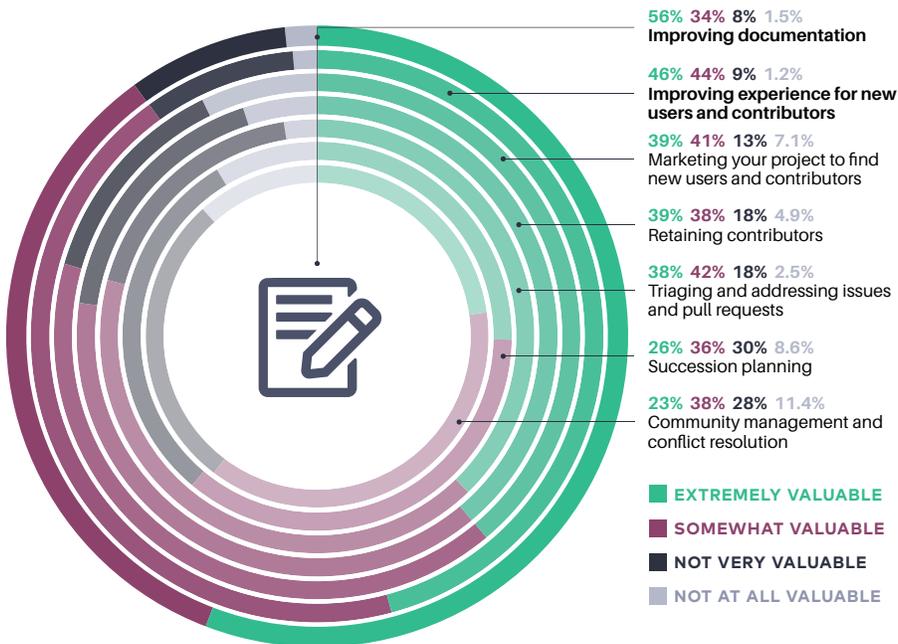
FINDING #7

# Maintainers need help improving documentation and the user and contributor experience

While getting paid for their work would be helpful to most maintainers, it doesn't solve all of their woes. So we asked maintainers what other help—beyond money—they could use.

## Maintainers need help improving documentation and the user and contributor experience

If you were offered non-financial support for your projects, how valuable would each of the following be in making your life as a maintainer easier?



n=325

Not surprisingly, improving documentation was the number one non-monetary place where maintainers need assistance. Docs are vital, but most maintainers aren't necessarily technical writers—nor do they want to be. This has come up in many conversations we've had with maintainers, so this data is unsurprising to us.



As we learned previously, documentation currently takes up 9% of a maintainer's project-related time. And it sounds like that isn't enough time, with 56% of maintainers saying it would be extremely valuable to get more help with docs and another 34% believing it would be at least somewhat valuable to get more help with documentation.

Next on the list of non-financial support options on the maintainer wishlist: help improving the experience for new users and contributors, with 90% of respondents reporting that this would be extremely or somewhat valuable.

Beyond this, maintainers would also appreciate help with marketing (80% extremely or somewhat valuable), triaging issues and pull requests (80% extremely or somewhat valuable), and retaining contributors (77% extremely or somewhat valuable).

## Maintainers simply want more help

We'd be remiss if we did not point out that of the seven non-financial support options we included, not one of them was seen as not very or not at all valuable by more than 39% of maintainers. In fact, you could make the case that maintainers want—and need—help in all of these areas.

Even the two options seen as least valuable—succession planning help and community management and conflict resolution—were seen as somewhat or extremely valuable by 62% and 61% of respondents respectively.

Every other option was seen as somewhat or extremely valuable by at least three fourths of the maintainers we surveyed.

Our conclusion? While paying maintainers for their contributions is the lightning rod issue that needs critical action, it is by no means the only way we can help maintainers be more successful. Over the coming years, we can help maintainers by ensuring they are both paid well and supported broadly in other areas as they complete their important work.

**FINDING #8**

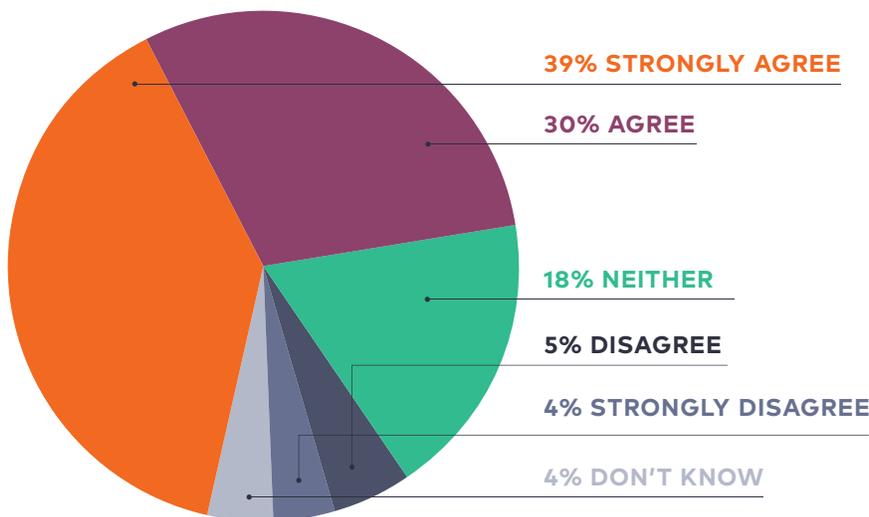
# Maintainers believe open source would benefit from increased contributor diversity

Another topic that we were interested in understanding better through this survey—and that is an important issue for the technology industry as a whole—is how to increase the diversity of contributors. We specifically wanted to understand whether maintainers view diversity as an important issue, and if so, get some ideas from them on how it could be improved.

Sixty-nine percent of maintainers agree that “open source suffers from a lack of diversity and would benefit if contributors represent a wider set of backgrounds and experiences.” Only 9% disagreed with that statement.

## Maintainers believe open source would benefit from more contributor diversity

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Open source suffers from a lack of diversity and would benefit if contributors represent a wider set of backgrounds and experiences.”



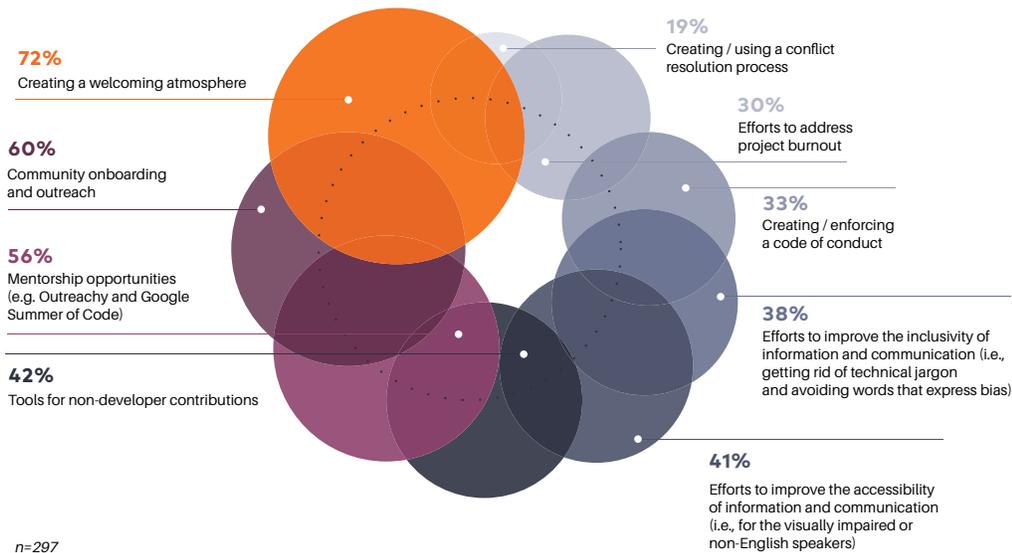
n=324



We were curious to hear ideas from maintainers about how diversity could be improved.

## Improving diversity begins with creating a welcoming atmosphere

Which of the following can best improve the contributor diversity of open source projects you are involved with? (Choose all that apply)



Creating a welcoming atmosphere was cited by 72% as a way to improve the contributor diversity of the projects they are involved with. Sixty percent believe that making efforts in the areas of community onboarding and outreach could have an impact, while 56% thought additional mentorship opportunities would help.

Next up, improving tools for non-developer contributions was selected by 42% of respondents. As we discussed previously, projects need help with marketing, documentation, and in many other areas, which might help attract more diverse contributors. Encouraging contributions beyond code can provide less intimidating entry points and create a bridge into the community for newcomers.

Here are a few specific comments and ideas from maintainers regarding maintainer diversity:

- “Paying maintainers. Volunteered contributions introduce bias towards those without other obligations, which trends towards white male contributors.”
- “Solving the systemic problems in the world that lead to the likelihood that people with the free time and money to contribute to FOSS largely come from the same background.”
- “Building core developers in emerging markets. Having non-coding contributors in emerging markets is fine, but if core developers are only in Europe/US only, the imbalance will continue.”

Maintainer diversity is clearly an issue that is important to address, and we look forward to working with the maintainer community to put some of these ideas into practice in the coming months and years.

## FINDING #9

# Maintainers feelings in their own words

In our first-ever Tidelift maintainer survey, we thought it would be nice to get some color between the data points. So we included several questions where maintainers could share their thoughts directly, in their own words.

And, as you might expect, maintainers didn't hold back. Instead they gave us direct feedback on a number of areas that impact their work every day. For this final finding, we wanted to share their words with no filter, so you could hear directly from the maintainers who are responsible for the projects you use every day.

In their words, being a maintainer is:

### A CALLING AND A DUTY

*"Being an open source maintainer is indeed something I feel proud of... It matters as I know I have made a change and helped those who are starting out in the same field."*

*"Maintaining open-source software gives me a sense of purpose, and lets me devote time that would've otherwise been spent doing nothing into giving something back to the greater community, all the while giving me a chance to learn new best practices, programming languages and software libraries, making me a better developer."*

*"I consider it 'charity work' to help the world. Instead of volunteering at a soup kitchen or advocacy organization, I volunteer to help a bunch of software projects get a tiny bit better..."*

### A THANKLESS PAIN IN THE !@#%\$

*"While some people appreciate the work I do, some other people just are too demanding and entitled. That's not only harsh to deal with, but also sad."*

*"Being an open source maintainer is like living Good Will Hunting in reverse. You start out as a respected genius and end up as a janitor who gets into fights."*

| *"The meanness of some users is rather depressing..."*

| *"Many open source users are self-centered assholes."*

| *"I handle the majority of issue triage and it's rather negative by nature. Every bug report, feature request, whatever has that undertone of 'the thing you've built \*isn't enough\* for me'. Even if I know that the authors are well-meaning and just want to see the project improve, it's hard getting away from the fact it was opened because something wasn't good enough."*

| *"I dislike how undervalued open source software is in the area of computational science. Apparently, people can make money doing all sorts of useless things on the internet and YouTube and so on, but not many people support scientific open source software."*

| *"I think 'enjoy' is a stretch. I do it because it needs to be done, and I'm glad it's having a positive impact, but I'd rather not have to do it."*

| *"Not sure if it's 'enjoy', specifically, but I feel a great sense of obligation and responsibility to the [community name withheld privacy purposes] user community....Someone's gotta deal with that, and no one else is, soooo... :)"*

| *"Some communities happen to be particularly annoying to interact with—I'm thinking of the cryptocurrency community, which seems to find my Tidelift-backed project useful."*

| *"I don't like how companies take open source for granted and while they're happy to take, never contribute back to help maintain the project. And no, I don't call giving a project a star or raising a ticket saying "I can't get it to work, fix ASAP" a contribution;-)."*

| *"My software is used by a number of companies who profit from it directly, and many of those companies contribute nothing back to me, while still pointing their users to my support channels when things go wrong. This blend of exploitation and draining of my already limited resources has proven to be so stressful that I'm not likely to ever make any later projects I work on that are user-facing (not developer-facing, i.e. libraries or tools) free and open-source."*

## A SOURCE OF GUILT, DESPAIR, AND LONELINESS

*"[I feel] guilt when others have problems that I do not have time to fix or respond to properly."*

*"I dropped a bunch of projects over the years because it was thankless and frustrating. I still feel guilty about dropping them, like I broke a promise and am not reliable."  
"It's hard to collaborate on some projects and I'm a lone wolf. I dislike this kind of work, because there's little human interaction."*

*"I have a real sense of despair about ever properly transitioning my projects to new maintainers; I assume that one day I'll stop maintaining them and my reputation will take a nosedive as they all slowly break."*

*"I'm doing the lowest level maintenance until I either give up completely or find my mojo again."*

## A JOB (OR VOLUNTEER LABOR)

*"In the past, I did paid consulting on open-source work, but that started feeling like a second job."*

*"It's really hard to run an open source business, and taking on client work reduces the amount of time I can spend improving the project."*

*"I feel lucky that my current open source project is the least stressful of all the ones I've worked on in the past, due in part at least to Tidelift's funding."*

*"I tend to reduce effort level / time I check in on projects, but continue maintenance at a slow pace. I tend to get invested in the social and community aspect, and the other long-term maintainers, so won't entirely quit, just take vacation for a while and come back... later."*

*"You just have to be careful with your work-life balance: as long as it's not financially rewarded, you've got to be careful that your passion for the project doesn't make it into a second, unpaid job."*

*"I have the privilege of being paid for my work, but others don't, and it breaks my heart to see them struggle with the burden of unpaid labor."*



## A LEARNING AND GROWTH OPPORTUNITY

*"I learn not just about software, but also intercultural communication, people, and how technology impacts people in different ways across the world. It makes me a more globally-aware person."*

*"Being part of a decades-long transition to see open source software become mainstream, including ensuring those who work so hard to provide value get paid for the value they provide."*

*"I'm fairly introverted, and working on open source has given me a means to have meaningful social interaction that is comfortable for me."*

*"I struggle with getting out of my own way sometimes. I have to remember sometimes the point is to teach or mentor, not just do the work because you already know how to do it."*

*"I don't have all the necessary skills to maintain by myself, but I haven't been able to recruit co-maintainers 🙄 I also don't have the time to do it by myself..... But maybe if I had more of the necessary skills, it wouldn't take as much time??"*

## BUT SOMETIMES FUN, SOCIAL, AND FULFILLING!

*"Work is acknowledged as such: there is no politics, no power plays, no people rejected because they don't have the right degree—if you work hard and well, you'll be recognized and included. It feels so nice! The community is also incredibly kind and benevolent."*

*"As a long-time community member, part of my enjoyment is from the friendships and camaraderie of my communities."*

So there you have it, what it is like to be a maintainer today, from the mouths of maintainers themselves.

And with that, we conclude our first ever Tidelift open source maintainer survey. We hope you found these insights valuable. If you'd like to get future survey results like these as we get them, please [sign up for updates from Tidelift](#) and we look forward to sharing more with you soon!



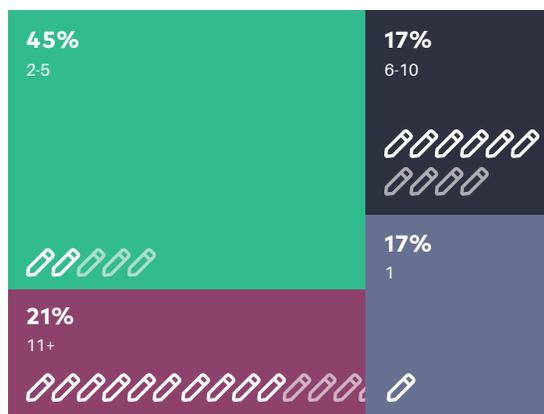
## ABOUT THIS SURVEY

This is the fourth year in a row Tidelift conducted a [survey](#) about open source but the first time it focused exclusively on the maintainers who create and maintain the open source projects we all depend on.

Over 500 people that maintain at least one open source project responded to the survey in February and March 2021. An incentive (free socks) were offered to most participants, with Chuck Taylor sneakers given to Tidelift-partnered maintainers—people under contract to provide a set of agreed upon security, maintenance, and licensing-related assurances for at least one project as part of the Tidelift Subscription. After screening for quality and other criteria, we focused our analysis on 378 respondents who completed a majority of the questions.

Here's more detail about the survey demographics:

How many open source projects do you currently maintain?



n=378

How old are you?



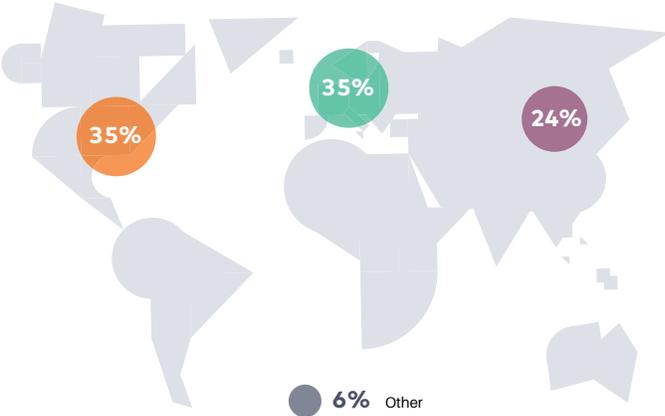
n=330

Which of the following best describe your current employment situation? (Choose all that apply)



n=378

Which geographic region are you located in?



n=330



## ABOUT TIDELIFT

Tidelift helps organizations effectively manage the open source behind modern applications.

Through the Tidelift Subscription, the company delivers a comprehensive management solution, including the tools to create customizable catalogs of known-good, proactively maintained components backed by Tidelift and its open source maintainer partners.

Tidelift enables organizations to accelerate development and reduce risk when building applications with open source, so they can create even more incredible software, even faster.

[Tidelift.com](https://tidelift.com)

