Open source software is software that can be freely used, changed, and shared—in modified or unmodified form—by anyone. Open source software is created and managed by a variety of communities of practice: collaborating user groups, consortia, non-profit foundations, institutions of higher education, governments as well as businesses and corporations.

Open source software development practices harness the power of distributed peer review and co-creation through transparency of process. The promise of open source is higher quality, greater reliability, more flexibility, lower cost, and an end to predatory vendor lock-in.

The “open source” label was coined by Christine Peterson at a strategy session held on February 3rd, 1998 in Palo Alto, California, shortly after the release of the Netscape source code. Later that month, The Open Source Initiative (OSI) was founded by Eric Raymond and Bruce Perens, as a California non-profit corporation, to educate about and advocate for the benefits of open source, and to build bridges among different constituencies across the open source community.

One of the first tasks undertaken by the OSI was to draft the Open Source Definition (OSD), and use it to begin creating a list of OSI-approved licenses. Today the OSI is the internationally respected steward of the OSD and the community-recognized body for reviewing and approving licenses as OSD-conformant.

Only software distributed with an Open Source Initiative Approved License may be considered “open source.” Each of these OSI Approved Licenses complies with the Open Source Definition.

Open source doesn’t just mean access to the source code. The Open Source Definition also requires: free redistribution; the ability to modify and create derivatives; not to discriminate against persons, groups or fields of endeavor; the software to be product independent and technology-neutral. The complete Open Source Definition can be found at http://opensource.org/definition.

Some significant examples of open source software includes: the Android mobile operating system, the GNU/Linux operating system, the Apache Web Server, the WordPress blogging platform, the Mozilla Firefox web browser, the Open Office & Libre Office productivity suites, and many... many... more.

Many organizations and companies—not just in the technology sector—use and contribute to open source software, just a very few examples include: Adobe, Amazon, Apple, Bank of America, BMW, Boeing, Chevron, GE, Google, H&R Block, Men's Wearhouse, HP, IBM, MasterCard, Microsoft, NYSE, Office Depot, Sears, Toyota, Twitter, Verizon, Walmart, Wells Fargo & Co., Wikimedia.

Open Source communities are recognized for managing software development and spurring innovation through common practices such as transparency, self-organization, collaboration, emergence, iteration and meritocracy.

Today, the values and benefits originally derived from the Open Source Software movement can be found in other sectors, including: education, with Open Educational Resources; hardware and devices, with Open Hardware; and other initiatives such as Open Access, Open Data, Open Government, Open Textbooks, etc.