The Lifecycle of an Open Source Program Office: From Inception to Strategic Pivoting

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With a foreword by the TODO Group Steering Committee

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Foreword

At the TODO Group, we help organizations build and evolve Open Source Program Offices (OSPOs) that align with their organization's goals and community values. This report, *"The Lifecycle of an OSPO",* written by Dr. Ibrahim Haddad, offers a practical framework to guide OSPOs from inception through growth, maturity, and strategic reinvention.

As OSPOs grow, there will be times for reassessment within your program's direction. The lifecycle model outlined within this report helps open source leaders benchmark progress, anticipate challenges, and plan for sustainable impact. This report shares real-world patterns seen across the TODO community and reinforces a key truth: OSPOs are not static. These offices need to evolve with organizational priorities and innovation trends.

We believe this resource will support OSPO managers, team members, and leadership to navigate complexity within the open source ecosystem. Leaning into fostering internal alignment and deepening external engagement will turn open source participation into a long-term strategic advantage.

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Abstract

This paper outlines the lifecycle of an Open Source Program Office (OSPO), tracing its evolution from inception to maturity and beyond. It provides a practical framework for understanding how OSPOs emerge from grassroots needs, gain executive sponsorship, and expand to encompass strategy, compliance, and community engagement. The paper highlights key phases: inception, growth, maturity, winding down, and introduces the concept of a "Second Wave" phase, where OSPOs realign to address new organizational priorities. The paper is geared toward executive sponsors, open source leaders, and engineering strategists and aims to offer insights to guide sustainable investment and organizational alignment in open source program development.

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Introduction

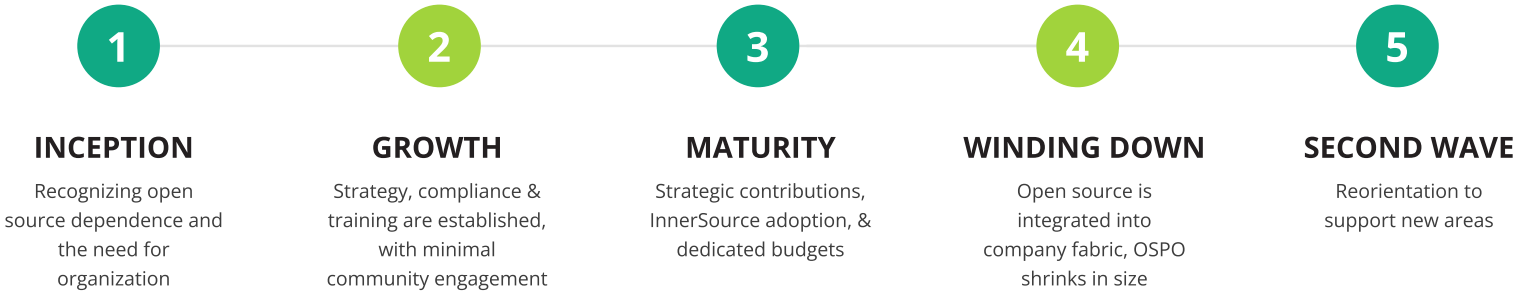
Open source software (OSS) plays an increasingly central role in developing modern digital products and services. As organizations deepen their reliance on open source, many establish Open Source Program Offices (OSPOs) to create structure around usage, contribution, and compliance. However, the role, scope, and structure of an OSPO evolve, and understanding this lifecycle is essential for companies seeking to establish, grow, or reposition their OSPO to align with strategic priorities. This paper outlines the lifecycle of an OSPO from inception to growth, maturity, winding down, and potential reorientation based on real-world patterns observed across industries. It is intended to help executive sponsors, open source leaders, and engineering strategists position their OSPOs effectively within their organization.

FIGURE 1

A high-level overview of the OSPO life cycle phases

FIGURE 2

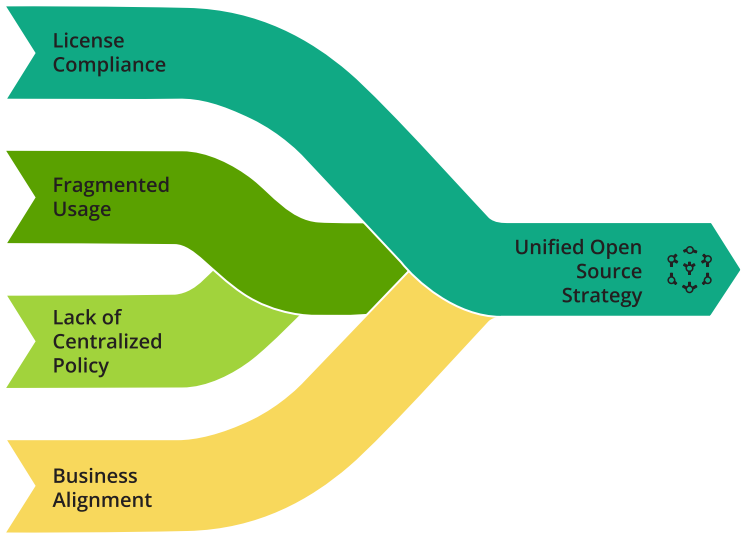
The focus within each phase of the OSPO lifecycle



Inception Phase: Acknowledging the Need for Open Source Governance

FIGURE 3

Drivers for the inception phase



The inception of an OSPO is often triggered by a realization that open source is deeply embedded in the organization's technology stack, whether in products, platforms, or services. This realization is typically accompanied by a growing awareness of the risks and inefficiencies of managing open source in an ad hoc, uncoordinated manner. In many cases, grassroots efforts, such as engineers raising concerns about compliance or proposing contribution policies, spark the initial momentum. However, an OSPO only materializes when executive leadership acknowledges the strategic importance of open source and commits to investing in a formalized structure. This acknowledgment often takes the form of an executive sponsor who secures the initial mandate and allocates budget and resources. At this early stage, the OSPO may consist of only a handful of people, and its focus is typically narrow and risk-driven.

Key drivers at this phase include:

- The need for license compliance and mitigation of legal risk.
- Fragmented or informal open source usage across teams.
- Lack of centralized policy or visibility into open source dependencies.
- The desire to align open source usage with broader business or product strategies.

Characteristics of Inception

In the inception phase of an OSPO, the primary focus is on laying the foundation through initial policy and process development. Organizations typically begin by drafting clear usage policies, processes, and guidelines, most of which center around ensuring license compliance. Alongside this, they start identifying and implementing essential tooling, such as scanning tools and compliance management platforms, to help track open source components and ensure that licenses are properly respected. To support these efforts, education becomes a priority, with training programs introduced to raise awareness among developers and cross-functional teams about open source usage, compliance requirements, and best practices.

Key Focus Areas

There are three main focus areas during the inception phase: executive buy-in, license compliance, and setting up the initial investment and budgeting. Executive support plays a pivotal role in the inception phase, as the recognition of the need for an OSPO often prompts buy-in at the leadership level. This backing helps formalize the office and secure the initial funding required to get it off the ground. At this stage, license compliance remains a central concern, with efforts directed toward ensuring that all open source licenses are properly tracked and adhered to, minimizing legal and operational risks. Early investments are typically modest and focused on risk mitigation, covering compliance tooling, governance infrastructure, and a small but dedicated team to manage these responsibilities.

During inception, establishing trust is foundational. Internally, trust must be built with engineering and legal teams to align on open source goals, ensure early buy-in, and counter resistance.

Externally, it's essential to begin fostering credibility with the open source community by signaling intent to engage responsibly, even if contributions are not yet substantial.

Milestones

During the inception phase, several foundational milestones are typically achieved that lay the groundwork for a functioning OSPO. Key policies and procedures around open source usage and compliance are formalized, providing a consistent framework for the organization to follow. A small, focused team is assembled to manage licensing and compliance efforts, serving as the initial backbone of the OSPO. At the same time, the organization begins to roll out early awareness and training initiatives to educate developers and relevant stakeholders on open source responsibilities and best practices.

Growth Phase: Strategy, Compliance, and Process Establishment

As the OSPO gains formal recognition, it enters a growth phase where the primary objective is to lay the groundwork for strategic, compliant, and scalable open source engagement. The functions that tend to expand first are strategy development and compliance enablement, with a strong emphasis on governance.

Organizations at this stage typically engage in the following activities:

- Expand and roll out open source usage and contribution policies.
- Expand license compliance processes and integrate them into the development lifecycle.
- Deploy tooling to support software composition analysis (SCA), SBOM generation, and contribution workflows.
- Launch internal training programs to raise awareness among developers, product managers, and legal teams.

At this phase, community engagement is minimal and mostly reactive, as the OSPO focuses inward to ensure teams are using

open source responsibly. The budget and headcount are often justified through a risk mitigation lens, ensuring that products can ship with minimal legal exposure.

Characteristics of Growth

As the OSPO enters the growth phase, its scope begins to expand beyond the foundational elements to include the expansion of policies, increased license compliance focus, community engagement, and growth of budget and headcount.

The organization starts to broaden its policies to include a more strategic approach to open source, establishing guidelines for contributing to upstream projects, integrating open source into product development workflows, and aligning these efforts with broader business objectives. License compliance remains a central focus, but the methods become more mature. Tooling, processes, and workflows are refined to support compliance throughout the entire development lifecycle.

While community engagement remains limited at this stage, the seeds are planted. The OSPO may begin participating in open source events, sponsoring initiatives, and forming early relationships with key projects and communities. To support these growing activities, budgets and headcount increase, largely justified by the need for robust governance and risk mitigation. This marks a shift from reactive management to more proactive, structured open source enablement.

Key Focus Areas

Maintaining open source license compliance is a critical focus throughout the life of an OSPO. As the organization's use of open source software grows, having robust processes in place for managing licenses and generating reports becomes essential to mitigate legal risks. Equally important is the continuous investment in tooling that helps track and manage open source dependencies across projects. Tools such as dependency scanners, CI/CD integrations, and software composition analysis (SCA) platforms and tools are key to ensuring compliance is monitored effectively and issues are flagged in real-time. Additionally, to support these efforts, organizations must prioritize training and education, ensuring that all teams are well-equipped to handle open source software responsibly. Scalable training programs, clear guidelines, and accessible resources like workshops and certifications can help foster a culture of open source awareness, empowering both developers and non-developers to follow best practices and contribute effectively to the organization's open source initiatives.

As the OSPO evolves, trust becomes a strategic asset. Internally, the office must maintain transparency and consistency in applying policies to reinforce confidence across business units. Externally, this phase often includes the OSPO's first real contributions to upstream projects, making it crucial to act as a respectful and reliable community partner to earn and sustain goodwill.

Strategic Impact

During this phase, the OSPO begins to evolve into a governance and risk mitigation function, helping ensure the company can scale its open source usage safely. In many cases, some early community engagement may happen, but it remains limited compared to later phases.

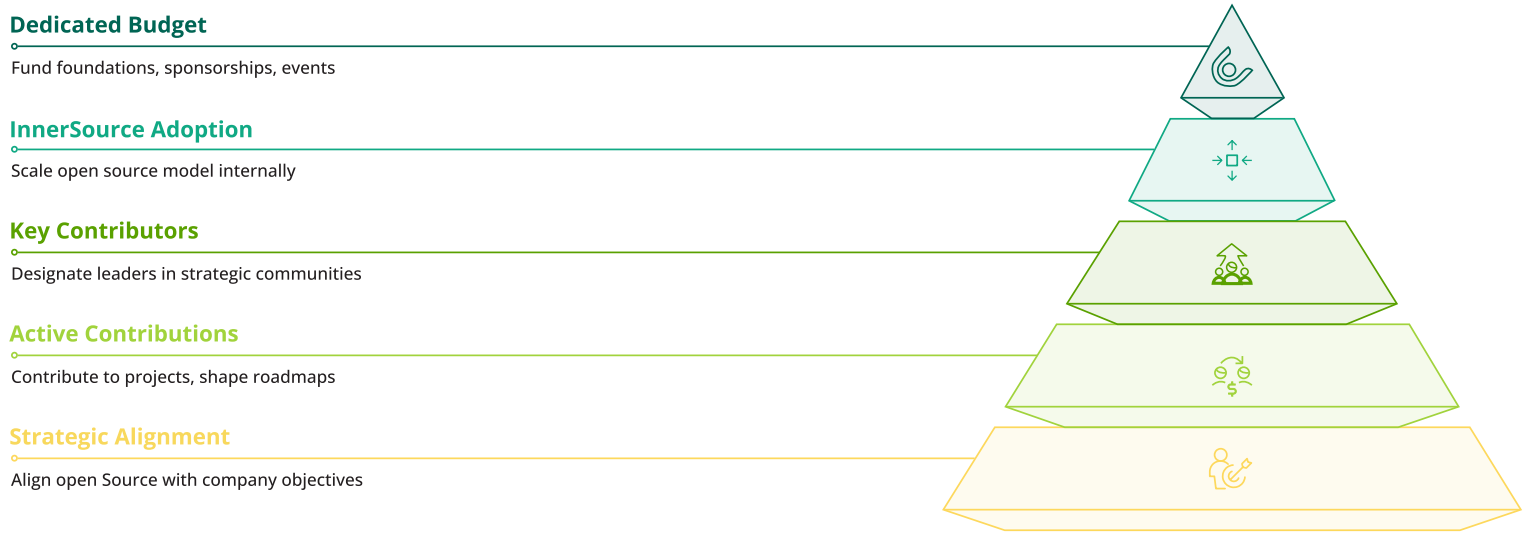
Milestones

During the growth phase, the organization enhances its compliance processes and tooling, kicks off the initial stages of community engagement, and has a more advanced and refined open source strategy and execution plan.

Maturity Phase: Strategic Integration and Ecosystem Leadership

FIGURE 4

Hallmarks of a mature OSPO



Once the foundational policies, processes, and tools are in place, the OSPO can evolve into a more mature, strategically integrated entity. At this stage, the organization typically embraces a more outward-looking posture, investing in open source not just as a compliance requirement but as a source of innovation, influence, and developer satisfaction.

Hallmarks of a mature OSPO include:

- A well-defined strategy that aligns open source engagement with company objectives.
- Active contributions to key open source projects to reduce technical debt, shape roadmaps, and maintain alignment with internal priorities.
- Designation of key internal contributors as maintainers or project leads in strategic communities.
- Adoption of InnerSource practices to scale the open source development model internally across teams.
- Dedicated budget for open source foundations, project sponsorships, event participation, and community building.

Mature OSPOs may be structured as standalone units with their budget embedded within broader CTO or engineering organizations. Their mandate extends beyond compliance into ecosystem leadership, innovation enablement, and cross-functional collaboration.

By the maturity phase, the OSPO is fully integrated into the company's overall strategic planning and product development processes. Open source is no longer an afterthought but a key enabler of the company's success.

- Embed open source leadership across functions (legal, product, data, AI, and platform teams)
- Act as ecosystem architects, not just internal enablers
- Lead cross-company collaboration initiatives, including open standards and co-development efforts
- Operate as nodes in global networks rather than internal silos
- Push for ethical and sustainable open source aligned with corporate ESG goals

This is where the OSPO becomes truly horizontal, evolving from a central office to a federated model that supports autonomy and innovation at scale, while still anchoring open source culture and governance.

Characteristics of Maturity

As an OSPO matures, it evolves to focus on strategic contributions that directly align with the organization's business goals. This includes not only creating or managing open source projects but also actively contributing upstream and influencing key projects that are integral to the company's technology stack. In parallel, the organization embraces InnerSource practices, which adapt open source collaboration models internally to foster greater collaboration and code reuse across different departments. The OSPO also increases its engagement with broader open source ecosystems, participating in foundation memberships, taking on technical leadership roles, sponsoring important events, and even contributing to governance within key projects. To support these expanded efforts, the OSPO may be allocated its own budget, ensuring sustainable funding for activities such as foundation memberships, event sponsorships, and contributions to open source projects critical to the company's success.

Key Focus Areas

As the OSPO matures, the company takes an active role in driving change within key open source projects that align closely with its product and platform strategies. OSPO members are not only contributors but also leaders in these open source communities, helping to shape technical direction and project governance. At the same time, the organization begins to embrace InnerSource principles, creating an internal ecosystem that mirrors open source workflows. This approach fosters greater collaboration across teams and increases the reuse of code, driving efficiency and innovation within the organization.

Strategic Impact

During this phase, the OSPO is seen as a key enabler of both internal innovation and external leadership in open source. Open source becomes a critical part of the company's competitive strategy, with the OSPO fostering both internal collaboration and external influence.

Milestones

Key milestones for a mature OSPO include a high level of upstream contributions, where the organization actively shapes and influences critical open source projects. The successful adoption of InnerSource principles internally marks a significant achievement, fostering improved collaboration and code reuse across departments. A strong presence in open source communities reflects the company's leadership and influence, while dedicated budget allocations for strategic initiatives, such as event sponsorships and direct project support, ensure continued investment in open source engagement and growth.

Winding Down Phase: Open Source as "Business-as-Usual"

As open source principles, processes, and mindsets become embedded across the company, the OSPO may naturally enter a winding-down phase. This is not a sign of failure but a reflection of success, as the initial transformation has been achieved.

During this phase:

- The organization no longer requires a large, centralized team to drive open source practices.
- Responsibilities are decentralized, with engineering, product, legal, and security teams internalizing open source responsibilities.
- The OSPO team shrinks, with many original members transitioning to other roles within the organization.
- The remaining OSPO function focuses on maintaining policies, managing key external relationships (e.g., with foundations), and ensuring strategic alignment across business units.

In some cases, the OSPO transitions into more of a stewardship role, quietly maintaining consistency and oversight while empowering the rest of the company to operate with open source fluency. As the company's open source practices become normalized and integrated into day-to-day operations, the OSPO begins to downsize, reflecting the maturity of the program and the company's ability to manage open source autonomously.

Characteristics of Winding Down

As the OSPO enters the winding-down phase, open source becomes fully embedded in the company's day-to-day operations. Teams are now empowered to work with open source independently, confidently, following the established policies and procedures. The OSPO's role shifts to a more strategic oversight and policy stewardship function, with a smaller core team responsible for maintaining the long-term vision, ensuring legal compliance, and nurturing key relationships with open source communities. As open source practices are seamlessly integrated across the organization, former OSPO team members transition into other areas, such as platform engineering, developer relations, or architecture, where their expertise remains invaluable.

Key Focus Areas

During the winding down phase, the OSPO's key focus areas shift to ongoing stewardship and internal education. A small, dedicated team ensures that open source policies and processes are regularly updated and followed, with less emphasis on large-scale engagement. The team also plays a crucial role in training new employees, ensuring they are well-versed in the company's open source policies and guidelines, and fostering continued understanding of best practices within the organization.

Strategic Impact

Open source is now fully embedded in the organization's fabric and is managed as a routine part of the software development lifecycle.

Milestones

During this winding-down phase of the OSPO's life cycle, the OSPO team shrinks as more responsibilities are spread across engineering and other departments. Open source contributions are now managed organically within teams rather than being driven centrally by the OSPO, while a smaller core OSPO team focuses on policy maintenance and community relationship management.

Second Wave Phase: Pivoting to New Frontiers

FIGURE 5
Characteristics of the OSPO second wave

In some organizations, the OSPO experiences a reorientation, or "second wave", driven by a change in strategic priorities or external technology trends. For example, the rapid rise of open source in artificial intelligence has prompted many companies to re-strategize their OSPOs to focus on AI ecosystem engagement.

This phase is characterized by:

- A renewed focus on external developer relations and community building in emerging domains such as open source AI.
- New initiatives to support transparency, reproducibility, and compliance in complex AI supply chains.
- Partnerships with new foundations or standards bodies relevant to evolving ecosystems.
- A shift in metrics from policy enforcement to influence, reach, and innovation acceleration.

Unlike the growth phase, this is not about building from scratch but repurposing existing capabilities for new strategic opportunities. It is more of a pivot than a reinvention.

A second wave of transformation may occur when the company faces a new strategic direction. This phase is typically triggered by external shifts such as the rapid rise of new technologies or changes in market demands.

Characteristics of Second (or X) Wave

During the Second (or X) Wave, the OSPO pivots its focus to emerging open source technologies, such as AI and machine learning, as we have been witnessing in the past 3+ years, in alignment with the company's evolving business and technical strategy. As open source AI becomes increasingly integral to innovation, the OSPO redirects its efforts to engage with the AI open source ecosystem. This includes funding key projects, forging strategic partnerships, and sponsoring events that drive AI development. Additionally, the OSPO redefines its approach to developer relations, crafting new programs, sponsorships, and initiatives specifically tailored to engage and support the growing community of AI developers. In this section, we use AI as an example of a new emerging technology.

Strategic Impact

In this phase, the OSPO's efforts are redefined based on the company's shift toward new technologies, helping the company stay competitive and influential in a rapidly changing tech landscape.

Milestones

Key milestones during the Second (or X) Wave include a clear reorientation towards newly established ecosystems, such as AI-driven open source ecosystems, as the OSPO shifts its focus to emerging technologies. New developer relations and community engagement strategies are articulated to support and foster collaboration within these rapidly evolving fields. Additionally, there is a reinforced strategic alignment with the company's long-term technological goals, ensuring that open source initiatives directly contribute to advancing the company's position in emerging tech landscapes.

Evolving the OSPO into a Strategic Risk Radar

As open source becomes deeply embedded in critical digital infrastructure, OSPOs must evolve beyond their foundational roles of license compliance and community coordination to function as strategic risk radars. This shift is especially urgent in light of intensifying geopolitical tensions that affect technology collaboration, data sovereignty, and access to global open source ecosystems. Export controls, national cybersecurity regulations, and trust-related restrictions on foreign software components are no longer abstract concerns, they shape the daily realities of engineering and legal teams alike. Mature OSPOs are uniquely positioned to monitor these dynamics, anticipate regulatory impacts, and advise corporate leadership on emerging risks to the supply chain, developer engagement, and foundation participation. By building strong relationships with legal, compliance, and public policy teams, OSPOs can provide forward-looking insights that protect the organization while maintaining healthy participation in global open source communities.

OSPOs in Action: China's Approach

For OSPOs in China, this evolution is especially critical. With growing scrutiny of cross-border technology flows and the need to align with domestic priorities such as the Xinchuang (信创) movement, Chinese OSPOs must navigate both international open source dynamics and national directives. Acting as a risk radar means maintaining visibility into U.S.-based foundations and projects while also preparing for ecosystem shifts that prioritize local alternatives or introduce new restrictions on participation.

At the same time, China's evolving data protection landscape, including the Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) and the Data Security Law (DSL), places additional responsibilities on OSPOs. When developers contribute to or use foreign-hosted open source tools, OSPOs must ensure that internal practices comply with these laws, especially regarding data residency and cross-border code contributions that might include sensitive telemetry or usage data.

These dynamics highlight the need for Chinese OSPOs to build internal capabilities in legal interpretation, risk monitoring, and strategic alignment, not just with engineering objectives, but with broader national and geopolitical realities.

OSPOs in Action: European Approach

In Europe, the role of OSPOs is evolving beyond compliance, policy implementation, and tooling oversight. Today's leading OSPOs serve as interpreters of regulation, custodians of software supply chain integrity, and facilitators of cross-sector collaboration in an increasingly complex and interconnected digital ecosystem.

For OSPO Leaders:

OSPOs in the EU are uniquely positioned to help organizations navigate regulatory and geopolitical complexity. This includes:

- Translating regulatory frameworks such as the AI Act (AIA), Cyber Resilience Act (CRA), and Digital Markets Act (DMA) into actionable, developer-oriented guidance.

- Proactively identifying legal and geopolitical risks in open source stacks by understanding the organization's dependencies and assessing their origin and associated risks.
- Engaging executive leadership in strategic conversations about the business-critical nature of open source dependencies.
- Evolving contribution strategies, particularly in AI and data-intensive domains, to align with emerging compliance and sustainability requirements.
- Strengthening cross-border collaboration by participating in neutral foundations that protect and sustain global cooperation and collaboration.
- Embedding open source in resilience and autonomy strategies, ensuring long-term viability and reducing vendor lock-in.

These activities also support a "Shift Left" approach, enabling teams to identify vulnerabilities, licensing risks, and policy misalignments earlier in the development cycle and reducing downstream remediation and firefighting.

For EU-Based Contributors:

Developers and maintainers across the EU play a pivotal role in ensuring the sustainability and compliance of open source projects. Key practices include:

- Understanding regulatory implications, especially in areas like AI, cybersecurity, and infrastructure.
- Improving documentation practices related to licensing, data provenance, and model training workflows.
- Engaging in governance efforts that promote project longevity and community health.
- Collaborating across borders through initiatives that safeguard continuity and mitigate geopolitical disruption.
- Working closely with OSPOs, recognizing them as partners in enabling contribution.

For EU Policymakers:

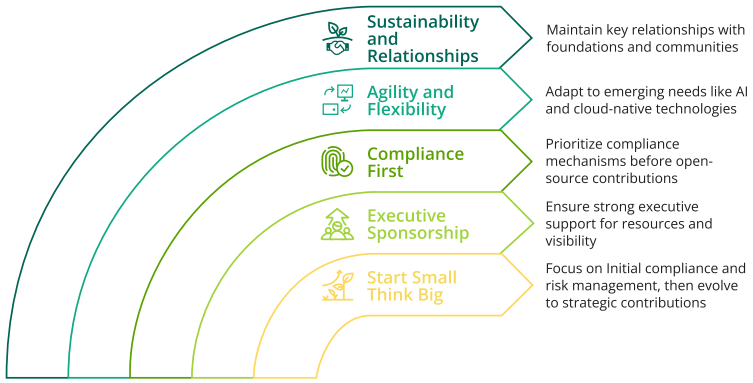
Effective policy in the open source domain requires proximity to practice. Policymakers can foster a thriving ecosystem by:

- Collaborating directly with OSPOs and maintainers, ensuring that regulatory initiatives are informed by real-world development dynamics.
- Investing in open source as a strategic pillar for AI innovation, cybersecurity readiness, and digital infrastructure sovereignty.
- Supporting neutral, resilient governance models that transcend national boundaries and political shifts.
- Crafting frameworks that balance innovation with accountability, enabling flexibility and trust in open source adoption.

Overall Learnings: OSPO Positioning

FIGURE 6

OSPO key learnings



Positioning your OSPO for long-term success involves carefully navigating through its phases of growth and aligning its efforts with the company's evolving goals. Key learnings include:

- "Start small, think big": Initially, the OSPO will focus on compliance and risk management, but as it matures, it should evolve toward strategic contributions, ecosystem engagement, and aligning with broader company goals.
- Executive sponsorship is key: The success of the OSPO is closely tied to strong executive support, ensuring it receives the resources, visibility, and mandate needed to drive open-source initiatives across the organization.
- Focus on compliance, then contribution: Prioritize establishing compliance mechanisms and risk mitigation strategies before diving into open source contributions. A solid foundation in compliance is essential for long-term success.
- Agility and flexibility: Open source is a rapidly changing landscape, and your OSPO should be agile enough to pivot toward emerging needs, such as AI or cloud-native. Preparing for a second, a third, or a fourth wave helps keep the OSPO relevant and engaged with the right communities.
- Sustainability and relationships: As the OSPO becomes embedded, the focus should shift to sustainability through maintaining key relationships with foundations, communities, and developers. Budgeting for ongoing contributions, event sponsorships, and other open-source activities is essential for continued success.

By following these guiding principles, your OSPO can evolve into a strategic asset that drives innovation and aligns with the company's long-term vision.

FIGURE 7

OSPO success framework

Conclusion

The lifecycle of an OSPO reflects the growing maturity and integration of open source within an organization. From its risk-driven inception to strategic maturity, eventual embedding into the company fabric, and potential reorientation toward emerging technologies, each phase brings new challenges, stakeholders, and value propositions.

For companies evaluating their OSPOs, this life cycle provides a valuable lens:

- New OSPOs can use it as a blueprint to understand what's ahead and where to start.
- Maturing OSPOs can assess whether they are investing in the right areas at the right time.
- Established OSPOs can evaluate whether winding down or pivoting makes sense based on organizational maturity and strategic direction.

The open source landscape is dynamic. A well-positioned OSPO, responsive to both internal needs and external shifts, can become a long-term differentiator for innovation, compliance, and open source community leadership.

About TODO Group

The TODO Group's mission is to identify key policy and process choices related to open source management and engagement within organizations, and to create tools and educational materials that promote best practices through the establishment and evolution of Open Source Program Offices (OSPOs).

As a global community of practitioners, the TODO Group is composed of professionals from a diverse range of industries and regions who share a commitment to improving how organizations contribute to and consume open source. Our members collaborate to document lessons learned, share practical resources, and support each other in navigating the complex landscape of open source strategy, compliance, and governance. This collective knowledge and peer support are the backbone of our work, ensuring that our resources reflect real-world challenges and solutions.

Popular Resources from the TODO Group

Documentation and Frameworks

OSPO Book
source of knowledge for organizations developing strategies to use, contribute to, and create open source projects with the help of professionals working in OSPOs

TODO Guides
Practical how-tos for managing open source in organizations

Awesome Open Source Management
Curated list of tools and resources for OSPOs

Training and Certifications

OSPO 101
Introductory modules on Open Source Program Offices

CODE Certification

OSPO Tools / Software

Repo Linter
A tool to ensure repositories meet best practices

About the author

Dr. Ibrahim Haddad leads the Infotainment Engineering Group at Volvo Cars. He previously served as Vice President of Strategic Programs (AI) at the Linux Foundation, where he was also the Executive Director of LF AI & Data and the Founding Executive Director of the PyTorch Foundation. Prior to that, Dr. Haddad was Vice President of R&D and a Distinguished Engineer at Samsung Research. His career spans technical and portfolio leadership roles at Ericsson Research, the Open Source Development Labs, Motorola, Palm, and Hewlett-Packard.

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