

JARED: Hey, everyone. Thanks for listening to the podcast. If you are enjoying our show, I'd ask that you go record a version of your favorite death metal song, but with the lyrics replaced with Dead Code.

Hello, and welcome to the Dead Code Podcast. I'm Jared Norman. And, actually, rather than recording death metal covers, if anyone wanted to go leave a review on Apple Podcasts, I'm told that really helps podcasts find more listeners. I still have no idea how many people are listening to this one, but that'd be cool. I wouldn't hate that.

Coming up, I'm going to be at Rails World in Toronto. So, if anyone is going to Rails World, please come find me, say hello. I'll have Dead Code stickers. I'm actually going to bring maybe, like, three of the Anarchy Agile hats that we had done up. So, if you're one of the first few people to find me and you want one of those hats, just let me know, and you can have one. But that should be lots of fun for everyone that's going. I'm really excited for that.

Today, I'm joined by Stefanni Brasil. She is a Senior Software Developer at thoughtbot. She runs hexdevs and is just an all-around cool person. So, we're going to explore topics around open source and the sort of financial incentives around it, as well as sharing our work in working in public and how we can help teach others and our future selves. Let's get to it.

Hey, Stefanni. Welcome to the podcast.

STEFANNI: Hey, Jared, nice to meet you. Thanks for having me.

JARED: So, can you tell our listeners a little bit about who you are?

STEFANNI: My name is Stefanni. I am originally from Brazil, but I've been living in Canada for the past six years and a half. I went for school for literature, and I was going to be a teacher. But I ended up changing my career and haven't looked back since then. I am a very curious person. I like to learn different things and things that are not necessarily related to each other. I love cats, and I love spending time in nature, in the mountains. And I do a few things with technology, I guess.

[laughter]

JARED: Cool. Very cool. It's always great to hear from people who have sort of different paths into software development. I know a lot of people, especially people who have trained in some capacity in communication, whether that's teaching or journalism or anything, can apply those skills in really interesting ways in the software industry. So, when it comes to education, that's probably a good first thing for us to talk about. What is hexdevs, and what problem does it solve?

STEFANNI: Yeah. So, my partner and I we always kind of wanted to have something outside of our jobs. And both of us have always liked mentoring folks and helping them grow in their

careers. And, like I mentioned, I have all of these different interests, and sometimes I feel the need of having an outlet for the ideas that come from this interest. So, any creative stuff that I have, so guides for [inaudible 03:31] challenges, or anything that I'm curious about, I like to use hexdevs for that.

And how we use it for that is we like to write...so, we have free newsletter, free blog post. We have some guides on how to contribute to Ruby on Rails and how to use Pry debugging, how to debug with Pry. And I think two years ago, we launched our first paid educational material, which is called Get to Senior. And the idea came from seeing lots of people that we know from polls and just, you know, like, in the online communities in general that had more than 7, 8, 10, 15 years of experience and felt that they were stuck in their careers. They haven't been promoted to senior.

And whenever people asked about like, "Oh, I'm not a senior yet. What do I need?" People would reply with this huge list of technical books. That's it. And, sure, there is the technical side of it. We know that it's not just that. It depends on the company you are working for, the team you are currently part of. Maybe you won't ever be promoted out of your job.

So, the first step is for you [inaudible 05:00] can I be promoted here, and how can I have that conversation with my manager? How can I find the opportunities here in my job? If that's possible to grow here and be promoted here so I can grow my career. So, it's a different program in the sense of, you know, it's not, like, technical, you start here, and you have an end. Like, it's kind of open-ended because it's just to help you get unstuck.

And one of my friends she works at Shopify. One of my friends, Carol, she got promoted at Shopify after doing the training. I like to say that I really want to retire early, but I want my friends to do that as well. So, I want to share [laughs] about this and grow with everyone. So, I try to help folks keep growing in their career. It's just something that I like to do, and my partner on hexdevs as well.

JARED: Very cool. So, it sounds like with Get to Senior you're focusing more on sort of the career skills and teaching people to help navigate their growth from that perspective. Is that somewhere that you feel that the industry could stand to improve?

STEFANNI: I think so, for sure. Yeah, I don't know; it's hard to say for sure. But I think that it depends also on the place. Maybe some companies have no interest in promoting folks, and that is also something that we mentioned in the course. Like, have people been promoted at all in your company? How often are people promoted where you work at? Because that might not be possible. Your only chance might be to find a new job where you will have that opportunity. So, there is that aspect.

And I think that it's also because if you are a developer, almost always, the goal is like, okay, I just want to improve my technical skills only, and that's the focus, and that's how, I mean, it's also, of course, we're paid to deliver results, but I think it's also part of that problem. We focus

too much only on that. And then, yeah, not a lot on communication, or helping your team members, or leading your project, or finding problems and not waiting for someone to tell you what to do. All of those things are not that common for us as developers, and I don't see that being an expectation as well.

So, yeah, I think it's part of a little bit of the culture that does that and recognizes that, yeah. And, again, like I mentioned in the beginning, if you ask anyone tips on how to get promoted to senior, people will only mention those things, right?

JARED: Yeah, there's existing resources out there. Yeah.

STEFANNI: Yeah, like scaling performance and, true, that might be it, right? But how is it helpful to ask a random person who has no context on your background where you have trouble with going to help you? It's like you're asking generic advice out there. And it's important to have that feedback from someone who has more context about where you are at. And then, it might make sense okay, maybe, yeah, you do need to get better at database performance or something like that. But at least if you get that information from someone from your team, at least that's a little bit more helpful than generic advice, I guess.

JARED: Yeah, it's super contextual, especially with the technical stuff. Like, you can grow a ton when it comes to your technical skills, but if there's no opportunities at the company that you're at, or if you're, you know, applying for jobs that don't need those particular technical skills that you're building, it doesn't really matter. You're not helping yourself.

STEFANNI: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

JARED: So, we both do a bit of open-source work. So, I know you have some thoughts on the role that that plays in our industry. So, let's ask it broadly. What's an area that the software industry could stand to improve?

STEFANNI: I think it's just to be...it's like, what's the point of being that productive if we're still working the same hours? Like, where is this going to? And I don't know. Also, all of the ethical and environmental aspects of it I just...I don't know, where are we going? Like, why are we doing this? I'm still doing the same amount of work only now more because we can do more.

So, I found an interesting quote from the Happiness Lab podcast that was talking how Keynes, I think that's how we say his name, was predicting that by 2030 or something, we would all just be working 15 hours per week, and that is fascinating. But yeah, so I think that that is [laughs]...also, congrats to all the marketing team who worked really hard at pushing AI because now everyone is paying a lot of money to all of those tools. That's a hot take on that. But about open source [laughter]...yeah, I might be wrong about all of that. We will know in a few years.

JARED: We'll see. I mean, it's one of those things where, one, people talk about, you know, the March of Progress. And I think that we have to evaluate what are we progressing towards?

What is this actually doing? And there are communities in the world that do a lot better of a job at that, but I think the tech industry is sort of the opposite of that. It's just sort of anything that we can push as the next big thing becomes a very annoying hype cycle. And I don't see adopting these technologies making my life personally meaningfully better. We'll see. We'll see.

I mean, you know, there's certainly uses for machine learning and stuff, but the LLM stuff, in particular, it's iffy. We did a test with GitHub Copilot at work to see who would find, like, let's all use it for a couple of weeks, and then we'll all sit down and discuss. Do we like this? Is this worth paying for? Is this helping us?

And the team was about 50-50 split, but half the team felt that it provided just enough value to be worth having on, even if it was wrong a lot of the time and produced some weird results, and you needed to fix everything. And about half the team felt that, nah, it was more work to just go back and fix the things it was adding than it was to just write the code yourself in the first place. So, we'll see.

STEFANNI: Yeah. Something else that I think a lot is...and I think that I read an essay about this. I can try finding the link. It was a brief research or something. But they tested on people's happiness when using those tools in their work. And it turns out that people were actually unhappier because how would you feel if I tell you, "Hey, your job is not that important at all. We are going to automate it. Now, here go and talk with this bot"?

And, yeah, so, I don't know, I'm really curious to learn more about that other side of things. And, like you said, like, where are we going? Is this really where we want to go? But also, I don't want to buy into any fights, like, I don't have anything against anyone who uses it. It's just my own thing with it.

But can I talk about open source?

JARED: Sure, sure [laughs].

STEFANNI: I have more positive stuff, I guess [laughs].

JARED: Sure. So, how could we, like, what's wrong with how we're approaching how we use open source in our technology organizations?

STEFANNI: Yeah, so I help maintain Faker. It was the first time that I signed up for such a challenge, and I've been learning a lot. And I have also been using open source kind of strategically to help me in my career, right, because that was something that I saw. When I was getting started changing my career, and I joined the Ruby community, I saw that folks who were speaking at conferences or were working at good jobs they had this in common: they were contributors to open source.

So, in terms of what I think it's a bit wrong is, of course, it's just, like, almost all of our tools we use it for free. And now GitHub has the sponsor thing, which helps a little bit. But I think it's just companies are making millions and billions and whatnot per year in profit. And, I don't know, I feel like part of that should be contributed back, either in monetary terms or in, let's say, oh, every Friday afternoon, everyone here is going to contribute to the tools that we use, like fixing bugs or helping with any other stuff. Yeah, because I think, I don't know, I don't think it's fair [laughs].

JARED: True.

STEFANNI: I don't think it's fair. There are lots of cases of people who completely burned out. There was the case from a JavaScript library. I don't remember the details of the name of the person, but they really just got to this point where they were like, no, I'm tired of this. I don't want to keep maintaining this library for free, and nobody pays anything.

The medium, the way that they demonstrated that was a bit controversial. Like, they pushed a community that broke things for everyone. But also, it comes back to the point, like, you are using this in your project [laughs], right? And yeah, so I think we do have some initiatives. So, for example, Hacktoberfest. On RubyConf, we have Hack Day. And I know that RubyGems also sponsors some maintainers. But even [inaudible 15:52] itself, like, I don't know how much [inaudible 15:55] make. And it's hard. I don't have the answer for that.

But I wish I saw more companies either sponsoring the libraries directly or having their developers contributing to the gems that they use or, for example, sponsoring RubyCentral who, supports all the maintainers. I don't know what's the answer here. But I think that there is a lot of money on the table coming from free work.

And I'm lucky that, at thoughtbot, we have investment time. So, I'm really grateful that our clients, like, okay, we usually build for four days a week. And then, on Friday, I at least use it mostly for open source. But I wish that was something that was more common and people wouldn't find it, "Oh, really? You have one day to work on open source." We're, like, "Yeah." I wish that was common. I think.

JARED: Yeah. And, I mean, there's a lot to unpack there. It's hard to imagine a world where we've, you know, restructured things to really address this meaningfully. In the community I work in, the Solidus community, we have an open collective that people can donate to which goes to supporting the platform. And I think we're in a slightly different situation than most open-source projects in that it's pretty easy for us to make the case for people using the platform to donate to the platform because it's a relatively small community.

But if we stopped maintaining the project, that would be a huge burden for all of the online stores using the platform, and there's quite a lot of them. They would be forced to either do that maintenance work themselves, or they would have to re-platform, which could potentially cost

tens, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars to their business, or maybe more. And, you know, those are significant risks.

So, it's pretty easy for us to go to, us being the core team who all work or almost all work at consultancies who work with these stores, to go to the stores and be like, "Hey, it'd be really appreciated if you could contribute to the open collective because then we can pay developers to do the maintenance work that you then benefit from. And when you upgrade to the next version, you'll see the new features," or whatever it is. But when it comes to other technologies, it's really hard to make that case. And there's not necessarily someone out there, like myself, to make the case for those projects. Is it developers that have to sort of step up and raise these issues?

STEFANNI: I mean, primarily, yeah, the folks who are doing most of the work. But yeah, I agree. This is a clear problem that has a clear solution. But this is more like a thinking-in-systems type of problem. I think lots of things are involved, and, also, almost everyone [laughs] that I know who maintain open-source projects most of the time is actually really maintaining it. And that's a lot of work to keep up with. Only to make sure that the dependencies are up to date can be a lot, depending on the library. So, I understand that not a lot of people have that energy and that time to also say, "Hey, by the way [laughs], what do you think of, you know, paying something here?" So, that's completely understandable.

JARED: Yeah, developers don't like to be salespeople generally.

STEFANNI: Also that.

JARED: [laughs]

STEFANNI: Yeah, exactly. There is also that, which I think, yeah, that's a great point, which, honestly, I don't know, I find that a bit hard to understand. But I understand that's how most people think. But there is that part.

But there is also, for example, Evil Martians, I think that they have been productizing some open-source projects. I find that pretty cool. I really hope to see more of that because then you give the free option, similarly to how Sidekiq does, and then you'll have the other options. But that needs to be considered as you are creating the library because then you'll have to make decisions around that, right? So, it can be hard to go from this is all free to now, hey, you'll have to pay for some of these things.

JARED: Yeah, that's a very interesting trade-off, too, because, you know, you could make the case that commercial backing of a project, whether that's with a freemium model or some other, you know, what Sidekiq does, something like this it could make the project more sort of resilient. There's more resources going into the project. There's money going into the project, so you can trust that it's going to be around for a while. But, at the same time, you've got business interests

at play. The business may make decisions that are to use their leverage with their users to charge more or something like that.

And, at the same time, you've got project...there's recently been a project, and I don't remember the name of it, but sort of an open-source federated GitHub alternative. And there's a couple of them out there, but one came about because the other had been purchased by a for-profit business, and they didn't like that. They wanted to run this as a community-driven project. And now, okay, you're not behooven to any kind of business interests. But you now are dealing with, you know, people putting, you know, either charity, donating money to these projects, or putting free labor behind them. How do we evaluate that sort of trade-off when we're picking dependencies for our projects? Can we even or should we even be thinking about that?

STEFANNI: Oh, I would love that to be part of the consideration because then it also takes that solely focus on the technical side of things and pull us back a little bit to thinking, okay, what are the implications of using this library? Either we can do it ourselves, or we can go with this other approach. I would love to see more of those conversations happening.

JARED: It's something that I think we've seen a bunch of people, especially in the Ruby on Rails community, pushing for people to be more skeptical about the dependencies they pull in. And, usually, that's thinking about, you know, how much code they're pulling in, whether they need all of that, whether, you know, those libraries are going to change, whether they're well maintained. But this puts a whole different sort of perspective on it, a different sort of...it puts these things in the picture of, you know, how your organization's software fits into the world in a very sort of different way.

STEFANNI: Yeah, I like that summary. I think you said it really, really well. Yeah, I usually try to, like, have a really, really good reason for adding a dependency because not only because of that, but also, like, upgrading can be a pain as well, so yeah. But, I don't know, I mean, we're having this conversation, and I think this is good. It might be a start. I have also seen another service. I don't know if this is the name, Tidelift. It's something Tidelift. Have you heard about it?

JARED: No, no, no. What is it?

STEFANNI: So, I saw it because Mike from Loofah had it on Loofah's GitHub page. But, apparently, you register with your library under there, and some companies sponsor this. I don't know what they are, a collective? I don't know this company.

JARED: Sure.

STEFANNI: And they share some profits with the maintainers, something like that. I think that they also help the maintainers keep it up to date with the security vulnerabilities. And I found that really, really cool. But I haven't taken a good look at that. Maybe I should talk with Mike about that, but yeah.

But also, now that we're talking about this, there are also other ways of kind of benefiting from open source that are not directly being deposited in your account, which is, you know, you can use it as a way to, I don't know, kind of create more recognition around your work and maybe create some opportunities that you wouldn't have if you didn't put yourself out there, at least that's how I do it, how I navigate around that. And yeah, sure, I got salary. I'm a senior developer. But it's also, I don't know, it always makes me think those companies are making millions and billions, and there should be some for the community.

JARED: Yeah. Yeah. The incentives at play are really interesting because I think you're absolutely right. One of the motivations people have for contributing to open source is often...it's something actually Rachel, like, ChaelCodes on social media, has talked about.

STEFANNI: Oh yeah, I love her.

JARED: Yeah, yeah, she's really great. And she's talked about how the work that we do at companies when we leave those companies, we lose access to it. We can't show that off. We can, you know, tell a potential employer, you know, "I did X, Y, Z," but we don't have the code to show for it. But when we, you know, whether we're working in public or we're doing open-source work, whatever that is, that creates this avenue for us to create actual artifacts that demonstrate our skills that aren't realistically just going to go away one day, hopefully.

STEFANNI: Yeah, it's great that you mentioned that because I always...I mention that talk a lot. I think that it was a lightning talk. And the title was, Why You Should Live Stream, or something. I would say you don't have to only live stream. I prefer blogging and contributing to open source. But live stream is also fun when you do it with other folks. At least for me, that's a bit more fun than just being myself.

But yeah, I live by that, and I try to share that as much as possible because, especially as consultants, I'm often rotating projects, and I lose everything, right? And that's also something that I think about. The code that I wrote is still making money to the companies, even though they're not paying me anymore. But that's another discussion [laughter]. So, that's why I always tell people, it doesn't matter if there are already a thousand blog posts, whatever, conference talks about this. It doesn't matter. You got to solve this problem in a different context, in a different time. And it's you; it's your perspective.

So, something that I do a lot is, for example, when I'm opening PRs, I really like to open them and write a really good description. I add comments and things like that. Those comments I then extract them to a blog post later because they are almost half-written. Of course, I remove all the proprietary things like that. That's why I always use cats [laughter] as examples. But that's how I do it because I live by the motto of don't repeat yourself, but not only in code but also in life. So, people ask me stuff. The second time they ask me, I'm like, okay, it's time to write something.

And lightning talks are also a great way to get started talking and meetups. Meetups are always looking for folks to talk. So, if there is one thing that I wish people leave from this conversation is that, like, when you hear that voice, "This is not interesting. There are a lot of things about that." You're like, "Yeah, so what?" Do it anyway. If not for that, be selfish and do it for your future self. Because let's say that you are doing something similar in another job, and you don't have that code anymore, at least you wrote it in a way that gives you something years later or months later.

JARED: Yeah, and there's benefits. There's a ton of benefits that I think, in general, it's probably worth it for us as developers to approach a lot of the work we do as an opportunity for sort of teaching, and sometimes that means teaching ourselves. Sometimes that means teaching other developers. We inevitably learn things through the work that we're doing. And the more that we can make those things that we learned accessible, whether that's, you know, taking the info that you put in your PR, entering that into a blog post, or whether it's just within your organization, you're writing that really good pull request description to help, you know, teach whoever comes next, something about that, or sharing it within the company so that more people see it.

Or even, you know, all the way down to just leaving helpful comments that help whoever works on the code next understand the things that you understood in that moment and teaches them. You know, we can view a lot of the work we do as a teaching exercise and do ourselves a favor so that when we come back to it, we remember things, but also make our organization stronger by helping to share all that knowledge.

STEFANNI: Oh, yeah, yeah. That's all besides, like, sharing things internally [laughs].

JARED: Oh yeah, yeah.

STEFANNI: I think people underestimate how much doing things in public is good, not only for you but, you know, for your team, for your manager, for the company. I think it's because, I don't know, sometimes I post things, and I don't get any reaction, or something like that. So, it's easy to get carried away by that, but it doesn't mean that people aren't seeing because you don't know what people are seeing.

And as you share more stuff, people will start looking up to you as the person who knows that or as the person to reach out for that. And it's funny when that happens, and it can also be a way to meet someone, right? Like, "Oh, I know you from this, and I learned a lot." And it can be a starting point for a thoughtful conversation as well. I like that. I hope people get more encouraged to do it [laughs].

JARED: Yeah. And these things are...you don't always get sort of the responses you're expecting when you share these things because they're useful to you right now, but they're not necessarily useful to everyone else at the company right now. Where you see the benefit, of course, is, if you do this continually, you see the things that you're describing. You see people

becoming aware of the things that you know about and building those connections. And when people are searching for answers about things, they'll find the things that you've shared.

But you're building up this sort of organizational knowledge in a way that sometimes, even, depending on what you've left behind, these things actually persist beyond even your time at the company. And if they're blog posts, they might persist, you know, forever, who knows. But you're sort of building up the sort of knowledge available in the industry in a way that's important because we could all just sit and write code in our offices and never share anything. And what's the fun of that?

STEFANNI: Yeah. I don't know how it is to be like that because I have never been like it. So, I don't know, there must be [laughs] some benefits. I don't know. I think it's also maybe, like, what we are sharing here, writing blog posts or contributing to open source, giving lightning talks. Those are all hard things if you have never done any of those.

You know, I started doing improv, and it's great. It's like, we're there to fail and to be embarrassed in public and to play again as adults. And, I don't know, I think, also, everyone has their own problems [laughs]. People don't have a feed that every day they go like, oh, I wonder what Jared is doing today because that's going to impact my life.

JARED: [laughs].

STEFANNI: It's not like that. People have their problems. It's not all about you [laughs]. So, that can help a little bit with, oh, well, what will people think? Whatever, you know. People think a lot of things about everything. And, I don't know, you can learn something that you didn't know that you thought it was right, and it was wrong. Like, I did two releases that were wrong in Faker. Like, they didn't contain any changes.

JARED: [laughs]

STEFANNI: And I didn't know until anyone opened an issue. It was like, what just happened here? And then, I realized, okay, I was actually using my forked repository instead of the upstream. And I was like, okay, so I updated my script. Don't know how that happened.

JARED: [laughs]

STEFANNI: I think it's because I changed computers. I don't know. But I learned something. The world didn't end. Of course, Faker is not, like, a supercritical gem. But I guess even if it were, maybe I would have known faster and would have fixed it faster. I don't know, I think, you know, it's okay to make mistakes, and like, hey, I was wrong. I learned now. And I think that sharing in public is also a way of doing that. I say this today, but, in the past, that used to block me, but then I worked on that. I worked on changing, you know, my mindset and seeing things as, oh, I'm learning. It's better than not doing anything and not learning anything.

JARED: Absolutely.

STEFANNI: So, it's easier for me today now because I have put a lot of effort and therapy and coaching on that, but it's possible. It's possible to change and have fun also. As I mentioned with hexdevs, it's mine. I can do my own jokes. I can use my cats as examples. And we don't have to take things that seriously either [laughs].

JARED: Yeah, absolutely. Well, thanks, Stefanni, so much for coming on the podcast. It was really interesting talking to you about open source, AI, working in public. We covered quite a few different topics in there. Where can people go to find you online and follow you?

STEFANNI: Yeah. Thank you, Jared. Thank you for following along with [laughter] my different takes on different topics, but I appreciate it. I don't know, I think it was...I had fun. So, thank you. Yeah.

So, people can find me on my blog: stefannibrasil.me, and on hexdevs, so hexdevs.com. My contact information is all there. Yeah, I'm also regularly on Faker. Oh, there is something that we are doing right now, which is, because most of the code are, you know, I don't have access to. They are all private repositories. I can't know a lot on how people use Faker, what generators, because we are thinking of doing some changes there.

And one idea that I'm really into is kind of breaking down the generators and having a set of core generators and then having the plugins that people can add as they need. So, we have a community survey. I can send you the link if you could share in the notes.

JARED: Yeah, absolutely.

STEFANNI: So, anyone using Faker and would like to help the library the survey is up.

JARED: Cool. Cool. We'll put the link to the survey in the show notes. All right. Thanks, Stefanni.

STEFANNI: Yeah, thank you.

JARED: All right. A reminder: in case you somehow skipped through the intro of the episode, I will be at Rails World next week, so come say hi. Come get a sticker. Come get a hat. If you are not there, bummer. It's going to be in Toronto, which is really nice because I normally have to travel to a different country to go to conferences, and being able to not go through customs on a trip, for once, is a real treat.

Now go delete some...