

LTS survey detailed response summary

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Introduction

On July 18th, Stretch LTS started, offering two more years of security support to the Debian Stretch release. Stretch LTS is the fourth iteration of LTS, following Squeeze LTS which started in 2014, Wheezy LTS in 2016, and Jessie LTS in 2018.

However, for the first time, we prepared a small survey about our users and contributors, who they are and why they are using LTS. Utkarsh Gupta has compiled a document with the results of that very survey.

This document aim to summarize the more detailed textual answers on the following questions from that survey. Below you can find the questions.

Question 12: Why do you use LTS?

Question 13: Do you see problems with/about Debian LTS and if so, which?

Question 14: What suggestions/wishes do you have for Debian LTS?

Reading guide

Some quotes has a tag after it indicating what role the person making the comment has. This is not always relevant so it is not always mentioned.

- [DD] – Debian Developer
- [DSA] – Debian System Admin
- [S] – Sponsor
- [LU] – LTS user
- [LC] – LTS contributor
- [DR] – Debian Release team member

Question 12: Why do you use LTS?

The most common reason for using LTS is, to no surprise, its long support time. Many commented that it is stable, predictable and allows the older version to be kept instead of upgrading. There are many motivations for this such as laziness, bureaucracy, downtime, budget, or simply the general idea to not to fix something that is working just fine. Some mentions that it can be hard to coordinate an upgrade when there are hundreds of users on a specific system.

Some mentions that one big advantage is that you can install the system once and then the system can be decommissioned before Debian LTS support ends. This seems to apply both to laptops and server systems.

A few mentions that later Debian releases have dropped some software component making it impossible to upgrade.

Hardware compatibility is also mentioned frequently.

One of the most commonly mentioned problems is custom or 3rd party software components that have a specific dependency on something provided in a specific software release. In some cases it is libraries but most commonly php5 compatibility is specifically mentioned. Also other software components such as openvz. Another common thing mentioned is systemd.

Some mentions that it allows upgrading every second release.

Some mentions that they generally wait for a few stable point releases, to ensure it works good enough, before starting to upgrade to the next stable release and LTS allow them to do this since it takes time to upgrade all the systems.

Question 13: Do you see problems with/about Debian LTS and if so, which?

A very common comment is that people have a problem with that the software is not the latest. Complaints that flatpaks or backports must be used. That should not really be a surprise to anyone.

One specific comment was really upset by the fact that packages were not up to date. I have decided intentionally to not quote it because it was quite rude.

Quite a few complain that the system (I guess apt) do not inform the user that the support is about to end (with some kind of margin).

“Unclear state of which packages are really supported and for how long (like sometimes a package ends up as not-supported-anymore during the lifetime of the LTS support)”

[LU, DD]

Quite a few mentions that a problem is that the life-time is too short.

Confidence

A few fear that the model is not sustainable with comments like this:

“Funding and the overall effort seem precarious and there's not a lot of confidence in long-term viability.”

[LU, DD]

One of the sponsors share a similar concern:

“It's unclear if the funding model is sustainable, but it seems to have worked for quite a while. Overall I have been impressed with the LTS efforts”

[LU, S]

A few mention that LTS updates are better than the ones from regular security team and see this as a problem.

*“The main problem I see with Debian LTS is actually more with the security team at this point. I feel that the secteam has less staff, and possibly less time to do updates on the more important stable, and officially supported, Debian distribution. I worry that there is a growing discrepancy that could make LTS *more* secure than our stable release because paid staff take care of it.” [DD, LC]*

“I wish LTS people took over regular stable updates too - they issue updates faster and more frequently for our use case (LAMP)” [LU]

Advertisement and documentation

A common comment is that the name is confusing. Others mention that it is confusing because it does not work exactly as Ubuntu LTS or RHEL.

“I think LTS could use some more userfriendly website that explains to average users what LTS is and how to use it. I know this is documented on the Debian wiki, but it seems quite hard to find one's way around if one does not know what LTS even is, why one would use it etc.”

“As a Debian user, I find the distinction between Debian proper and Debian LTS to be confusing and unhelpful. Internally within Debian it makes sense, but as a user it would be best if nothing changed at all with the handoff from the stable release and security teams to the LTS teams. That is, for example, security updates for LTS should continue to be delivered via debian-security-announce and labelled as Debian Security Advisories. The fact that a different group of people is responsible for producing these updates really isn't relevant to most users.”

Friction within the community

A comment from a LTS contributor and Debian Developer:

“Paying some people and not others introduces room for friction.” [LU, DD, LC]

“Lack of coordination by LTS contributors with the package maintainer in Debian.” [LU, DD]

A comment from a Debian Developer

“There is a friction between (E)LTS and some Debian core teams, and this friction is structural/systemic: The approaches/motives/POVs of the teams necessarily differ and are logically in potential conflict. I.e. the LTS team is responsible to the paying companies, and the contributors benefit personally from fulfilling their assigned hours. This at least can, probably subconsciously, lead to the impulse to get many and fast updates out. These interests can be in contradiction to the volunteer teams and their open or implicit motives (maintaining as little machines and architectures as possible, differentiate between DSA and point-release issues, ..., in short: keep the current stable and future (and oldstable for a year) releases going). -- This friction is nothing personal or related to any ill-will on any side but a consequence of the setup with the intersection of the commercial LTS team and the volunteer core teams.” [DD]

A comment from a Debian developer, build admin and www team member:

*“It's not clear enough to many users which parts of Debian will (or won't) be covered by LTS. This leads to user pressure on regular (i.e. non-LTS) developers to support things longer than they ever signed up for. Until and unless LTS team members cover **all** areas in Debian, this will continue to cause friction.” [DD, DSA]*

But then something is probably misunderstood. Here is a comment from a Debian developer and LTS user (who would not be sad if LTS goes away):

“Distracting devs from updating current release, burning dev time” [LU, DD]

We know some debian developers do not want to be contacted by LTS team. But some do as shown by this comment.

*“Personally I would like to see **more** communication from the LTS contributors to me as the maintainer of at least on package that regularly gets a security update. I'd like to help and avoid duplicate effort.” [LC, DD, DR]*

Question 14: What suggestions/wishes do you have for Debian LTS?

Through the responses it is possible to collect quite a few improvement suggestions.

The far most common answer was in the style of “keep going”, or “keep up the good work” or as this nice comment.

“Thank you very much for LTS.”

A very common comment is that Debian LTS should be supported for 10 years, or at least longer than today. Others are more sensible and realize that it also comes with a cost.

“I would love it if LTS was one year longer, so that I can directly switch to the release+3 instead of release+2.” [LU]

“I would be very appreciated if you can extend support over 6 to 7 years for LTS, then ELTS should extend to 8 to 9 years.” [S]

One “testing user” commented that 5 years support is maybe too much (!). That person is not using LTS and not sure why that person responded because that person answered “no” to all questions on role.

One of the most common suggestions, is how to improve the visibility of the support situation shown in the system itself.

“Somewhat better notifications in the update process. I had actually forgotten about when the LTS ended for Jessie and was only made aware of it thanks to a Reddit post. Had there been some sort of notice (preferably in a different color) when running apt update/upgrade in advance I wouldn't have had to upgrade quite as quickly.” [LU]

There are quite a few contradictory suggestions. Some wants LTS and ELTS to be part of regular Debian.

“Would be nice to make eLTS an official Debian project in Debian Infrastructure.” [LU, DD]

“I would like that LTS project become a debian project and not an external project not maintained by volunteers but maintained from the original package Developer” [DSA]

While others do not and even want LTS to use Freexian infrastructure. Others think that Debian infrastructure is much more reliable and think Freexian infrastructure is down too much.

“Debian's LTS is very much focused around Freexian. ELTS infrastructure is down quite regularly and not being part of Debian's official infrastructure.” [DD, LU]

Another contradiction is how updates should be provided. Some think they should be done quicker, for less severe problems while others complain that the fixes are not tested enough, not peer reviewed and that we should only do updates for high severity issues, not minor ones.

Many want to have LTS support for backports.

“Id' love to see more updated user facing software in backports. Ex Firefox, Telegram Desktop etc.” [LU]

“Need regularly up to date latest package of apps like LOffice, Gimp, Firefox, Inkscape, Scribus etc.” [LU]

“Ancient and stable are not always the same thing.” [LU]

Related to this there is quite a constructive idea on how to perform this.

“Maybe some sort of automated backports mechanism (opt-in, not enabled by default), which could be added to apt sources & pinned instead of testing/unstable directly? Packages in it would be newer, but linked against LTS libraries. Anything that fails to build could be omitted; this would just be there to solve the simple cases.” [LU]

Funding

“Perhaps offer easier means of monetary contributions. And transparency about such contributions. Cryptocurrencies, Patreon or similar platforms, donations via cash or check, and how such donations will directly benefit Debian. Also, clearer communication regarding commercial support services. If Slackware can pull in thousands of extra dollars a month in donations, why not Debian?” [LU]

Competition

Since quite a few suggestions were to make Debian LTS work as RHEL LTS or Ubuntu LTS I have compiled a short description of them so the comments are easier to understand.

RHEL LTS provide a 10+ year support cycle. RHEL contain substantially less packages and the focus on RHEL updates is to fix severe, critical and high severity issues. In the first ~5 years also medium severity issues may be fixed.

Ubuntu LTS is provided every 4th release (years cycle) and the time support lasts is similar to Debian. The difference compared to Debian LTS is that only base packages have support, not universe or multiverse.

Other comments

Even though we had three free-form comments some did not answer those questions but gave a more general view. Such answers has been described below. There are also some key stake-holders like sponsors that was checked specifically.

Sponsors

Did some specific checks for sponsor answers since they are, after all, the ones funding the project financially.

Sponsors are generally happy with Debian LTS. On the question about quality they answer 9 or 10 and on the question about whether they would recommend it all but one answered 10 and the one with a different opinion answered 9.

Cloud team

One person commented is part of the cloud team and mentions that stretch is quite popular.

“By some metrics available to us, stretch remains more popular than buster at this time, and even if that is not the case, it is still demonstrably quite popular.”

That person also commented that the cloud team was worried before but that is no longer the case.

“In the past, some folks have been concerned at the level of work that supporting LTS might require on the cloud team. But during the recent round, all maintainers agreed to continue producing images through the LTS period. So I think the initial concerns were either fixed, or were unfounded. I'm quite happy about that situation!”