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The emergence of a new support role: Service Stewards in Research Software Engineering

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The German National Research Data Infrastructure (NFDI) and its Base4NFDI initiative have introduced the role of Service Stewards to drive the development and integration of NFDI-wide basic services. They support the service developer teams, acting as a crucial interface connecting the teams and NFDI consortia and ensuring basic services are known and meet the communities' needs. Especially when generic research software is developed and multiple stakeholders are involved, the process benefits from their interdisciplinary role.

Since March 2023, NFDI comprises 26 discipline-specific consortia. In general, these scientific communities operate their own service portfolios, i.e. software tools, technical services or workflows, and offer advice to enable and facilitate researchers to create and work with FAIR data. However, cross-disciplinary services are necessary to address overarching needs such as federated identity management (IAM4NFDI), persistent identifiers (PID4NFDI), and knowledge graphs (KGI4NFDI). This is where Base4NFDI comes into play: as a joint initiative of all NFDI consortia, the project promotes these basic services for a NFDI-wide service portfolio, providing financial funds for personnel and building the framework for accompanying the service development process.

Basic services usually combine existing solutions to aim for a sustainable, long-term technical and organisational service provision. They may offer new software, processes and workflows, computing and storage resources and personnel for development and user support. As cross-disciplinary solutions, basic services can be quite generic. All basic services are required to add value to the entire NFDI and ensure interoperability on an (inter)national level. They also need to be backed up by a sustainable operating model, obligating partner institutions and developing a financial plan.

In the development process of these services, research software engineers (RSEs) as well as Service Stewards play a key role. Tasks of RSEs include adapting a service and associated software to the needs of the consortia, combining their technology with other basic services, and incorporating FAIR principles and the open science approach.

Service Stewards support the work of the basic service teams by acting as a communication interface between all involved stakeholders. They support the bottom-up approach by requirement engineering and the continuous analyses of community needs in order to ensure a high level of acceptance and usability among the various target groups of the services. Regarding coordination and implementation, they are a valuable resource especially in multi-stakeholder processes, being able to represent different interest groups and maintaining the flow of information as well as outreach activities. RSEs can therefore benefit from their support and networking with funding organisations and scientific communities. The emergence of NFDI basic services, combined with a requirement-driven development process that fosters communication among stakeholders as part of a broader cultural shift in science, has the potential to promote and strengthen Research Software Engineering as a scientific discipline, further enhancing its role in research.

Join us to discuss the partnership between Service Stewards and RSEs and the potential to foster not only NFDI's basic service development but also for other multi-stakeholder development processes.

I want to participate in the youngRSE prize

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