



The Fair Software Business Development Kit

www.mobifree.org

Table of Contents

»»» About Mobifree	→	Page 03
»»» Why Fair Software Matters	→	Page 04
»»» Core Principles of Fair Tech	→	Page 05
»»» Building Ethical Software Products	→	Page 08
»»» Open Source Strategy and Best Practices	→	Page 12
»»» Ethical Business Models	→	Page 15
»»» Measuring What Matters: Impact over Vanity	→	Page 19
»»» Engaging Users as a Community, Not a Product	→	Page 20
»»» Working with (and Against) Regulation	→	Page 21
»»» Scaling Ethically (and Staying Independent)	→	Page 22
»»» Looking Ahead: What's Next for Fair Tech?	→	Page 23
»»» Common Challenges & Hard Lessons	→	Page 23
»»» Advice to New Fair Tech Founders	→	Page 24
»»» Final Takeaways	→	Page 25

About Mobifree

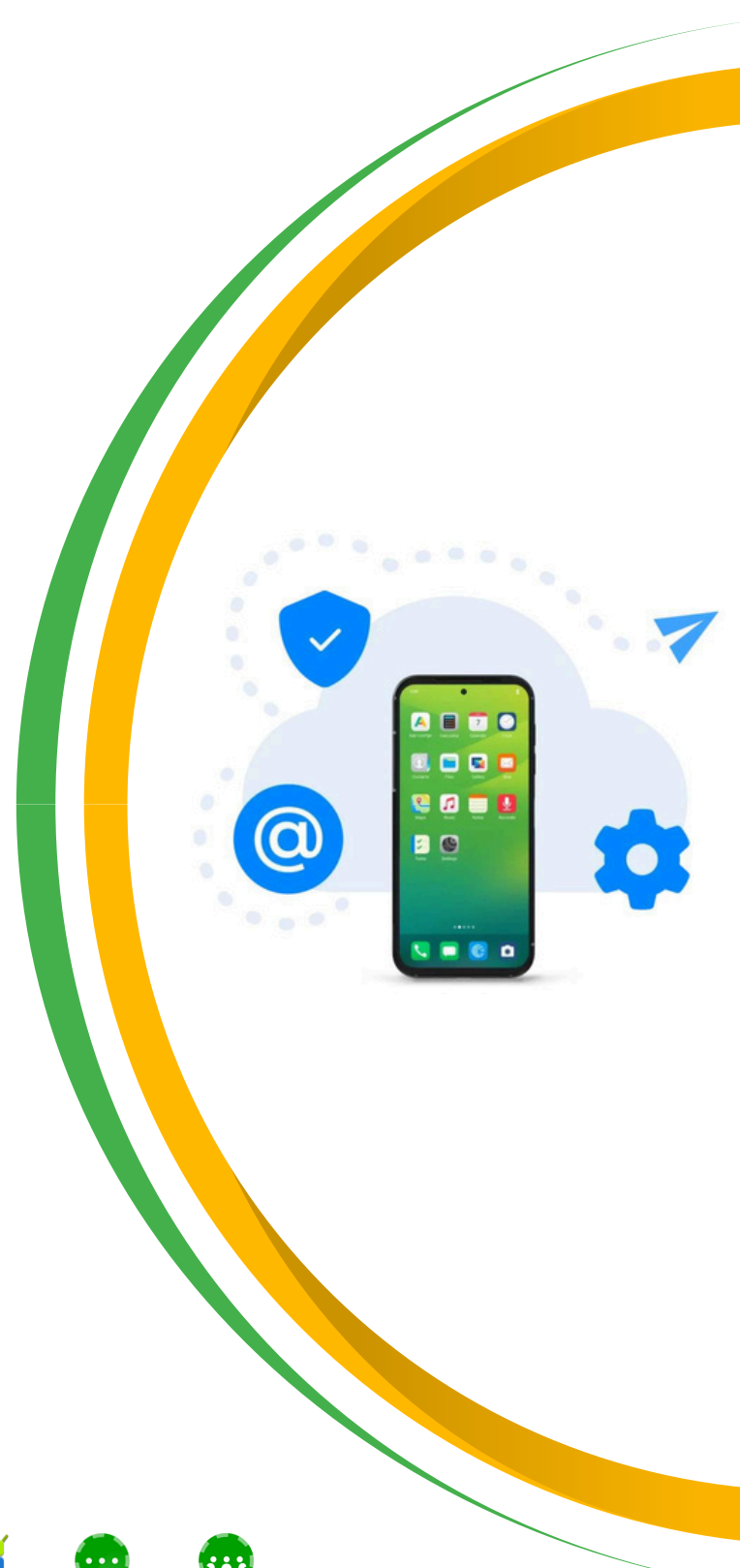
The Freedom in Human-centred and Ethical Mobile Software (MOBIFREE) project works to give European citizens and organizations more choice in, and access to, human-centred and ethical mobile software.

Big Tech: bad for people and the environment

Mobile software development has been dominated in the past 20 years by Big Tech companies, who have created an IT-ecosystem that is characterized by closed-source software, proprietary standards, private data sources, harvesting of user data, privacy violations, poor labour standards and production practices that are bad for the environment. We think this needs to change.

Or values are different

As part of the Mobifree project, twelve organizations are collaborating to develop better mobile software in a better way. Our shared values for this project are: Respect for digital rights, Great quality, Fair competition, Empowerment of workers, Inclusiveness, Open code/data/standards, A strong industry, and Positive for the environment.



Partners



Why Fair Software Matters

Across Europe and beyond, a wave of digital startups is challenging the way big tech operates. These companies don't just build software — they make statements. They stand for privacy, sustainability, open access, and fairness. And they're not just talking about it — they're building it.

In today's digital world, software is everywhere — from the phone in your pocket to the server farms that power our lives. But the default business model has become toxic: **data exploitation, black-box systems, planned obsolescence, monopolistic control.**

Users are no longer passive. They are waking up.

According to a 2024 survey by Mozilla Foundation, **72% of users** express concern about how companies handle their data. **58% say they are willing to pay more** for services that protect their privacy and respect their rights.

This shift is a great opportunity.

Companies like **Murena, Ecosia, Vivaldi, Tuta, RapidSpace,** and **NextCloud** are leading the way — proving that fair, ethical software can thrive, win loyal users, and make real impact. Together, they're showing that yes, it's possible to create digital products that are **ethical by design, commercially viable, and technically excellent.** Here's how.

💡 If you build a company that respects users, the planet, and open standards, you don't just sell a product. You build a movement.

Core Principles of Ethical Digital Products

Across all six above mentioned companies, and other we spoke with we saw common values — not just in theory, but embedded deeply in their product decisions and company culture:

- **Privacy by design:** User data is not a commodity. Tuta, Murena, Vivaldi, and Nextcloud all emphasize privacy as a non-negotiable.
- **Transparency:** Open source is a foundation — it's how these teams build trust. "We publish everything — client code, server code, even our transparency reports," said one team member at Tuta.
- **Sustainability:** Whether it's Ecosia planting trees or Murena optimizing energy usage in their OS, sustainability is a strategic priority.
- **Freedom of choice:** These companies resist vendor lock-in. "Everything we do is open, so people can run it, study it, adapt it," said Rapid.Space.
- **Community-centered:** All six work closely with their users — whether via GitLab issues, Telegram groups, or yearly surveys.

★ Ethics isn't a marketing add-on — it's baked into the product.

Core Principles of Fair Tech

At the heart of fair tech lies a simple, yet powerful idea: technology should serve people — not exploit them. While many startups use buzzwords like “privacy,” “sustainability,” or “community,” fair tech companies go several layers deeper. These principles aren’t just branding — they are built into the code, business models, hiring practices, and relationships with users.

Below are five foundational principles that define the fair tech movement. Together, they create an ecosystem where ethics and innovation work side by side.

1. Privacy by Design

What it means:

Fair tech companies treat privacy not as a feature — but as a foundation. Privacy by design means collecting the minimum possible data, using strong encryption, avoiding third-party trackers, and giving users full control over their information.

This isn’t just a GDPR checkbox — it’s a commitment to respecting users’ autonomy at every level: technical architecture, user interface, and even business model.

Real-world example – Tuta:

Tuta (formerly Tutanota) is a privacy-first email and calendar provider. Everything is end-to-end encrypted by default. The service doesn’t track user behavior or serve ads. Even basic metadata, like subject lines or contacts, is encrypted — going far beyond most “secure” alternatives. The company is fully transparent about how it handles data (or rather, how it avoids handling it).

Why it matters:

In a world where personal data is currency, fair tech takes the radical stance that your data is yours. This builds real trust — not through policy pages, but through design choices.



2. Open Source

What it means:

Open source is about more than public code — it's about accountability and community empowerment. When source code is public, anyone can inspect it, audit it, contribute to it, or fork it. This creates products that are more secure, transparent, and responsive to real-world needs.

Real-world example – Nextcloud:

Nextcloud offers a full alternative to proprietary cloud platforms like Google Drive and Microsoft OneDrive — with file sharing, calendars, email, and more. Every part of their infrastructure is open source. Users can self-host or choose ethical hosting partners. Updates and features are shaped directly by community feedback.

Why it matters:

Trusting a black-box system is an act of faith. Open source gives users verifiable privacy and technological independence — no backdoors, no surveillance, no hidden rules.

Open code also aligns naturally with fair monetization and collaborative development. Fair tech doesn't ask users to trust blindly — it invites them to look under the hood.

3. Sustainability

What it means:

Sustainability in fair tech is about both environmental impact and system longevity. Products are built to be energy-efficient, compatible across devices, and designed for long-term support — not planned obsolescence.

It also means building infrastructures that respect planetary boundaries — in hardware choices, cloud energy use, and server architecture.

Real-world example – Ecosia:

Ecosia is a search engine that uses its profits to plant trees. It's transparent about its finances, environmental footprint, and tree-planting partnerships. Every month, it publishes a report detailing how much CO₂ was offset, how much was earned, and where money went. Ecosia's servers run on 100% renewable energy, and its browser extension prevents unnecessary data transmission.

Why it matters:

Tech has a massive — and growing — carbon footprint. The fair tech movement refuses to ignore this. Instead of chasing performance at any cost, it optimizes for efficiency, repairability, and ecological responsibility.

Many companies (like Murena and Fairphone) also promote device reuse and refurbished hardware to minimize e-waste and maximize lifespan.

💰 4. Ethical Monetization

What it means:

Fair tech companies reject surveillance capitalism. That means they don't monetize through advertising, tracking, or user profiling. Instead, they earn through ethical business models: direct payments, subscriptions, donations, open-source services, or fair partnerships.

Real-world example – Vivaldi:

The Vivaldi browser doesn't track users or sell ads based on personal behavior. It makes money through search engine partnerships (like DuckDuckGo or StartPage), and from automotive manufacturers, who want an in-car browser. Crucially, these partnerships don't compromise user privacy — and users can opt out or customize their setup completely.

Why it matters:

People are waking up to the true cost of “free” tech. Fair tech offers a different deal: you pay with money, not data — or you support a community-run model. This creates more honest relationships and healthier products. It also fosters financial independence, reducing reliance on investor pressure or dark-pattern upsells.

👥 5. Community-First

What it means:

Fair tech products are co-developed with their users. Feedback isn't just tolerated — it's invited and implemented. Open governance, public roadmaps, community forums, and accessible communication channels are the norm.

These companies view their users not as passive consumers, but as active stakeholders.

Real-world example – Rapid.Space:

Rapid.Space is building fully open 5G and edge cloud infrastructure — and anyone can contribute. Hardware is open source. Documentation is public. Universities and developers around the world use its systems to learn, test, and deploy real-world solutions. The company even teaches 5G architecture in partnership with top engineering schools.

Why it matters:

Big Tech platforms keep control centralized — fair tech decentralizes it. By inviting users and developers into the process, these startups create more resilient, adaptable, and inclusive technologies.

The result? Products that reflect community needs, not just corporate KPIs.

📌 Summary

These five principles are what distinguish fair tech from greenwashed or privacy-washed alternatives. They aren't always easy to implement — in fact, they often make things harder in the short term.

But in the long run, they create something stronger: trustworthy, future-proof tech that serves people and the planet.

Building Ethical Software Products

(How to bake privacy, transparency, and user choice into your UX, not just your marketing)
Fair tech isn't just about a mission statement — it's about how products are actually built, feature by feature, setting by setting, default by default. While Big Tech often uses ethics as a slogan, fair tech companies bake ethical decisions into the core architecture, user experience, and business model. This section dives into three standout examples — and closes with a step-by-step guide for building more trustworthy, user-centered software.



🧱 Case Study 1: Murena — Advanced Privacy, Built In

The challenge: Android, by default, is a data-leaking machine. Even when you're not using your phone, it's sharing data with Google and other third parties.

Murena's solution: Fork Android, remove all the Google services, and rebuild the OS (now called /e/OS) from the ground up — with privacy defaults.

One of the flagship features is **Advanced Privacy** — a simple, toggle-based tool that gives users control over:

- **Tracker blocking:** Murena automatically detects and blocks trackers in apps and websites.
- **Location faking:** Users can choose to provide a fake location or none at all to apps.
- **IP address masking:** A built-in relay hides users' real IP address, preventing profiling.

💡 **Impact:** The average /e/OS user blocks over **200,000 trackers per month** — without installing anything extra. It just works, because privacy is the default.

🔧 **UX insight:** Murena avoids confusing jargon. The settings are clear: "Fake my location," "Hide my IP address," "Block trackers." It's privacy for everyone — not just power users.

📦 Case Study 2: Nextcloud — Modular, Transparent Cloud

The challenge: Most cloud platforms (Google, Microsoft, Dropbox) are tightly integrated black boxes — users get no control over features, hosting, or data.

Nextcloud's solution: Design a modular, self-hostable cloud platform — where users can pick only what they need, and everything runs on their terms.

- **Apps, not monoliths:** Want file sync but not email? Or group chat but not calendar? Install only what you want from the app store — no bloat.
- **Open API and plug-ins:** Developers can build on top of Nextcloud, or contribute directly.
- **User-owned infrastructure:** Host it yourself or pick a trusted ethical host — no lock-in.

💡 **Impact:** Millions of users and organizations — including governments — use Nextcloud because it offers **freedom, visibility, and control**. It replaces not just one Big Tech product, but several — with full transparency.

🔧 **UX insight:** Despite its power, Nextcloud's interface is approachable. New users can use default setups; advanced users can tweak everything. It meets people where they are.

📦 Case Study 3: Vivaldi — Privacy Without the Lecture

The challenge: Most browsers claim to be private, but sneak in trackers, partner with shady search engines, or use telemetry that's hard to turn off.

Vivaldi's solution: Build a browser that's **deeply customizable**, fast, and fun — while collecting zero user data by default.

As the Vivaldi team puts it:

“We don't sell your data because we don't have your data.”

- No telemetry
- No trackers — even on the welcome screen
- Ad and tracker blocking built-in
- No user profiling for monetization

💡 **Impact:** Millions of users have made Vivaldi their daily browser — not just because of its privacy, but because it's a **feature-rich, power-friendly alternative** that respects them.

🔧 **UX insight:** Vivaldi doesn't just hide behind a “Privacy” tab in settings. It makes ethical defaults **visible and explainable**. When users launch the browser, they immediately see: “We don't track you. We don't know who you are.”

✓ Actionable Guide: How to Build Ethical Software

You don't have to rebuild Android or the cloud to start being more ethical. Here are five key steps you can take today to make your software more trustworthy and fair — for all users.

🔍 1. Audit Your Data Collection

Why? You can't be ethical if you don't know what you're collecting — or why.

Start with this checklist:

- What personal data do we collect? (Emails, IPs, behavior, location...)
- Do we need it to make the product work?
- How long do we store it?
- Is it shared with third parties?
- Could we do this anonymously or locally instead?

Red flag: “We collect it just in case” — this usually leads to problems later.

🖋️ 2. Explain Privacy Simply to Users

The problem: Most privacy policies are unreadable.

Do this instead:

- Use plain language: “We don't track you.” “We store data only on your device.”
- Offer privacy dashboards that show what data is being shared — and how to turn it off.
- Include short summaries next to longer legal documents (“TL;DR: We don't share your info.”)

Bonus: Add friendly language to onboarding. Ethical UX starts the moment someone opens your app.

📦 3. Build Modular Features

Why? Power users want control. Others want simplicity.

- Make advanced features optional, not mandatory.
- Allow users to disable telemetry, ads, personalization.
- Build for interoperability, not lock-in (e.g. export/import tools, open formats).

🔧 Borrow from Nextcloud: let users install what they need, and skip what they don't.

🔒 4. Default to Private

Don't make users dig through settings to protect themselves.

Good defaults:

- Encryption on by default (at rest and in transit)
- Minimal permissions (e.g. don't request contacts unless needed)
- No trackers — even for analytics — unless explicitly consented

Privacy should be the easy path, not the expert-only one.

5. Communicate Like a Human

Your users are people, not data points.

- Use clear language. No dark patterns.
- Show transparency — even when things go wrong (e.g. data breach notifications)
- Make it easy to reach support. Fast replies build trust.

Fair tech wins not just on security — but on honesty, approachability, and human tone.

Closing Thought

Building ethical software doesn't mean sacrificing usability, fun, or performance. The best fair tech companies prove that privacy can be delightful, and open source can be beautiful.

You don't need to be perfect — but you do need to be intentional.

Start small. Block one tracker. Remove one unnecessary permission. Add one line of plain-English privacy explanation. Your users will notice — and stay.

Open Source Strategy and Best Practices

Why openness isn't just an ethical choice — it's a competitive advantage

Open source used to be considered a “nice-to-have” or a risk for companies afraid of giving away their intellectual property. Today, it's becoming a core strategy for ethical and independent tech startups. The reasons go far beyond idealism.

- It builds **trust**.
- It invites **contributions**.
- It drives **faster innovation**.
- And yes — it even makes your company more resilient in the face of Big Tech.
-

In this section, we break down why open source matters, how to navigate licensing, and how startups like RapidSpace are using open source to compete with the biggest cloud players in the world.

Why Open Source Builds Trust (Even if It Invites Competition)


For privacy-focused, ethical, or sustainability-first startups, transparency is currency. Users won't just take your word that you “don't collect data” — they want proof.

Open source gives them that proof.

By opening your code:

- Anyone can **audit** what your software does (and doesn't do)
- Users gain **control** and can run your software independently
- Developers and partners are more likely to **adopt and trust** your tech
- The risk of **vendor lock-in** is eliminated
-

This is what Murena calls “**auditable privacy**”: users don't have to trust marketing — they can verify the claims themselves, or let others do it.

 Yes, competitors can reuse your code. But that's a tradeoff:

- If you're first to market and build community trust, you'll still win.
- You can monetize services, integrations, or hardware instead of the code alone.
- And if your mission is ethical impact, wide adoption is a **good thing**.



Licensing Strategies: GPL vs AGPL vs Apache

Choosing the right open-source license isn't just a legal decision — it's a strategic one. Your license defines how others can use your code, contribute to it, or profit from it.

Here's a breakdown of the most common licenses for ethical software projects:

License	Key Feature	Best For	Watch Out
GPL (v3)	Requires anyone who distributes modified versions to also open-source their changes	Software you want to keep open through the ecosystem	May scare off commercial partners who want to modify in private
AGPL	Same as GPL, but applies also to software delivered as a service (SaaS)	Web platforms, cloud tools — like Nextcloud or Murena Cloud	Hosting companies must also share code — more restrictive
Apache 2.0	Permissive — allows commercial use, modification, closed forks	Encouraging wide commercial adoption (e.g. hardware companies, universities)	Competitors can copy and close your code unless you build other moats (e.g. brand, services)

Key takeaway:

- Use **AGPL** if your core value is privacy, transparency, and cloud independence.
- Use **GPL** if you want to allow local use/modification, but not proprietary forks.
- Use **Apache/MIT** if your goal is mass adoption — even by commercial or enterprise players.

💡 Many ethical companies dual-license — one open for community use, another commercial for partners (e.g. paying for branding rights, integrations, or support).

Case Study: RapidSpace — Using Openness to Compete with AWS

The challenge: How can a European startup take on cloud giants like Amazon Web Services — who dominate on scale, budget, and brand?

RapidSpace's strategy: Build a completely open, transparent, and sovereign cloud — powered by open hardware and open software.

- All infrastructure is based on open-source ERP (ERP5), open hardware (OCP), and open deployment scripts.
- Customers can see everything: how services are deployed, updated, and billed.
- RapidSpace uses open protocols and standards (e.g. Re6st for IPv6 mesh networking) that anyone can reuse.

By going 100% open, RapidSpace attracts:

- Governments that require digital sovereignty
- Enterprises who want to audit and customize infrastructure
- Developers and SMEs who want low-cost, vendor-neutral hosting

What's the lesson?

RapidSpace can't outspend AWS — but it out-transparencies them. Their openness becomes a selling point, not a vulnerability.

Quick Guide: Open Source Best Practices for Startups

If you're building a privacy-first or ethical tech startup, these are practical steps to adopt open source wisely:

1. Choose a license intentionally

Pick the license that matches your values and business model. Don't just default to what's easy.

2. Make your repo truly open

- Public GitHub or GitLab repo
- README that explains how to run and contribute
- Clear CONTRIBUTING.md and LICENSE files

3. Keep privacy promises checkable

If you claim “no tracking,” let the code show it. Consider having third-party audits, and document privacy behavior.

4. Build community, not just code

Invite contributors. Be friendly in issues. Respond to pull requests. Open source isn't just about code — it's about culture.

5. Think beyond GitHub stars

Use open source as part of a broader strategy — for credibility, hiring, partner onboarding, and compliance.

Ethical Business Models



How mission-driven startups are making privacy profitable

Let's get one thing straight: building ethical tech is not charity work. While these startups care deeply about privacy, user autonomy, and transparency, they still need to keep the lights on — and grow.

What's different is how they make money. Instead of monetizing users' attention, behavior, or data, they focus on value-driven business models that align with their ethics.

This section explores how each company turned its mission into a viable business.

Murena

Model: Hardware sales + cloud subscriptions

Tagline: "Yes, our products are more expensive — but they don't sell your soul."

Murena combines hardware (smartphones) with privacy-first software (/e/OS) and cloud services (Murena Cloud). Their pricing reflects their values: no ads, no tracking, no subsidies from data monetization.

- **Revenue Streams:**
 - Murena smartphones (pre-installed with /e/OS)
 - Paid Murena Cloud storage tiers
 - B2B licensing of /e/OS for device makers
- **Challenges:** Competing on price with subsidized Android phones and Google's free cloud.
- **Ethical Advantage:** Every euro a customer spends supports an ecosystem built entirely on respecting privacy.
- **Why it works:** The bundled offering — hardware + OS + cloud — simplifies user onboarding. It also mimics Big Tech's ecosystem lock-in, but with freedom and transparency as the core features.

Tuta (formerly Tutanota)

Model: Freemium + Premium Upgrades

Tagline: "No ads. Ever."

Tuta uses a classic SaaS freemium approach — but with a radically different philosophy. Its free tier offers privacy-by-default email and calendar. The paid tiers unlock custom domains, aliases, more storage, and business tools.

- **Revenue Streams:**
 - Premium plans (for individuals, families, teams, and businesses)
 - Donations from privacy advocates
 - Custom deployments for NGOs and education
- **Challenges:** Explaining to users *why* secure email matters — and why it's worth paying for.
- **Ethical Advantage:** Fully encrypted infrastructure, based in Germany, with no venture capital backing.
- **Why it works:** As privacy awareness grows, many users are ready to pay for digital security. Tuta positions itself as the humane alternative to Gmail and Outlook — simple, secure, and sustainable.

Vivaldi

Model: Ethical search partnerships + product bundling

Tagline: "We say no to a lot of money, on purpose."

Vivaldi doesn't monetize through ads or tracking. Instead, it earns a portion of search engine revenue — but only from privacy-friendly partners like DuckDuckGo, Startpage, and Ecosia.

- **Revenue Streams:**
 - Search engine referrals (customizable by user)
 - Fees from automobile manufacturers for in-car browsers
- **Challenges:** Leaving potential revenue on the table — deliberately.
- **Ethical Advantage:** No data collection, no profiling, no dark patterns. Users customize everything — from appearance to privacy settings.
- **Why it works:** Vivaldi targets power users and digital minimalists. Its fans are fiercely loyal — and spread the word organically. When users trust you, they'll support your growth, even without ads.

Nextcloud

Model: Open-source B2B support + deployment services

Tagline: "We work with governments, schools, and companies who want to self-host."

Nextcloud gives individuals free access to its open-source collaboration suite — a secure, self-hosted alternative to Google Workspace or Microsoft 365. Revenue comes from enterprise support and custom integrations.

- **Revenue Streams:**
 - Support and consulting contracts
 - Enterprise subscriptions (with SLAs and feature guarantees)
 - Partnerships with cloud and hosting providers
- **Challenges:** Competing with “free” tools that offer convenience but compromise privacy.
- **Ethical Advantage:** Code transparency, data sovereignty, and European data law compliance.
- **Why it works:** Governments, schools, and NGOs need digital infrastructure that respects user data and local regulations. Nextcloud helps them take control — with support when they need it.

Ecosia

Model: Search ads reinvested in reforestation and renewables

Tagline: "It's capitalism with boundaries."

Ecosia operates as a not-for-profit B-Corp, redirecting 80%+ of its profits toward climate action — particularly tree planting. It uses Bing search results, layered with its own privacy filters and ad platform.

- **Revenue Streams:**
 - Search engine ads
 - Browser partnerships
 - Ecosia-branded products (browser extensions, mobile apps)
- **Challenges:** Balancing mission with scale — and making the environmental impact traceable and auditable.
- **Ethical Advantage:** Every search funds trees. No third-party tracking. Public financial and planting reports.
- **Why it works:** Ecosia taps into the emotional economy: users know they're doing good with every click. It combines ethical commerce with radical transparency.

Rapid.Space

Model: B2B Infrastructure + White-label Open Source

Tagline: "The openness is what gives us a competitive edge."

Rapid.Space sells cloud infrastructure and automation tools to organizations that value auditability, control, and freedom from vendor lock-in. It thrives by being 100% open: software, hardware, deployment tools.

- **Revenue Streams:**
 - Hosting and infrastructure sales
 - Open Compute hardware solutions
 - B2B consulting and training for open cloud deployments
- **Challenges:** Competing with hyperscalers (AWS, Azure) on performance and scale
- **Ethical Advantage:** Everything is open — customers can fork it, inspect it, run it locally.
- **Why it works:** Governments, universities, and industries facing digital sovereignty concerns want cloud solutions they can own — not rent under fine print.

Cross-Model Insights: What Works for Ethical Startups

Model Type	Description	Pros	Trade-Offs
Freemium SaaS	Free basic service with paid upgrades	Low-friction adoption, scalable revenue	Need a large user base to convert to paid
Hardware + OS	Bundled privacy-focused devices	Full ecosystem control, visible value	Capital-intensive, slower scaling
Ethical Search Ads	Earn from user intent, reinvest profits	Easy user onboarding, broad reach	Limited by partner integrity, thin margins
Enterprise Support	Sell open-source + services to large orgs	High value contracts, trust-based selling	Long sales cycles, customer concentration risk
Cloud Infrastructure	B2B open cloud platforms	High transparency, global demand for control	Complex to deploy, tough competition

Final Thought

Ethical business is not just about what you won't do (track users, sell data) — it's about what you will do to create value. Whether it's planting trees, offering radical transparency, or helping users host their own cloud, these startups are proving a powerful truth:

 **Ethics can be your business model — if you align it with real-world value.**

Measuring What Matters: Impact over Vanity

While most tech companies obsess over metrics like “monthly active users” or “click-through rates,” these fair tech companies take a broader, deeper view.

Murena

“We look at OS downloads, cloud subscriptions, and churn. We also monitor how many trackers our Advanced Privacy tool blocks per device — often 200,000 a month. That shows real-world impact.” Their “no data collection” policy also means they can’t rely on surveillance-based metrics. So they engage their community directly for feedback — via GitLab, help desk, Telegram, and surveys like MobiFree.

Tuta

They track encryption usage, customer support satisfaction, and premium conversions. “We care more about how many people are protected than how many clicked a button.”

Ecosia

They report trees planted and solar energy generated in real time. “For us, transparency builds loyalty. We show our monthly financial reports publicly — down to the last euro.”

Nextcloud

They focus on self-hosted deployments, GitHub contributions, and enterprise customers. “We monitor contributions because open source is our lifeblood.”

Rapid.Space

“Success is replication. If someone forks our hardware or software and makes it better — we win.”

Vivaldi

“Our forum and community are active, respectful, and full of power users who shape the browser with us. And if someone else copies one of our features to offer users more privacy, that’s a win for the internet.”

Engaging Users as a Community, Not a Product

Each of these startups sees their users as collaborators — not data points. Engagement is authentic, messy, and often driven from the ground up.

Murena

“We’re in constant dialogue. Users suggest features on GitLab, report bugs, and help test beta versions. Our help desk team is close to our developers — feedback travels fast.”

They also run special projects like MobiFree, a large-scale user feedback initiative designed to better understand what people expect from ethical smartphones.

Tuta

They rely on user feedback via encrypted forms and open forums. “Our users are often more informed about privacy law than most lawyers. They keep us sharp.”

Nextcloud

Contributors span developers, sysadmins, and translators. “Many of our best features started as community plugins. That’s the power of open source.”

Rapid.Space

Their hardware and software are open for re-use and contribution. “We don’t just tolerate forks — we encourage them.”

Vivaldi

Their forum and blogs create space for long-form conversations. “People don’t just file bugs — they debate UX philosophy with us.”

Ecosia

They involve users through tree planting updates, environmental impact reports, and direct Q&As. “Our user base is a movement, not a market.”



Working with (and Against) Regulation

This is where things get tricky.

Every company interviewed described the current EU regulatory landscape as a double-edged sword — full of promise but often stifled by complexity or misalignment.

Murena

“NGA funding was shut down. Now the EU says it will help telecom operators instead — even though they’ve failed to deliver ethical alternatives. Regulation is well-intended, but often benefits the big guys.”

Tuta

“We’re based in Germany, so GDPR helped us stand out — it set a global standard for privacy. But enforcement is inconsistent.”

Rapid.Space

They operate across multiple regions, including Asia. “Europe over-regulates, which makes it hard to compete. In Asia, there’s less regulation — but also fewer ethical standards. It’s a hard tradeoff.”

Nextcloud

They actively lobby against Big Tech. “Apple and Google abuse their app stores — and we’ve filed complaints about it. But we still wait years for real enforcement.”

Ecosia

They’re vocal about digital and environmental policy. “We need regulation — but smart regulation. One that enables innovation, not just box-checking.”

Vivaldi

“App store gatekeeping is the biggest obstacle. We support the DMA, but platforms are finding ways to delay or dilute compliance.”

👉 **Summary:** These startups want regulation — but they want it to be fair, transparent, and enforceable. Right now, it often serves incumbents more than challengers.



Scaling Ethically and Staying Independent

Going from startup to scaleup is never easy. Doing it without selling out? Even harder.

Murena

They're exploring how to scale across desktop and new markets while maintaining ethics. "Crossing the chasm is real. We're thinking about partnerships and private investment — but only with aligned values."

Tuta

They grow organically and cautiously. "We don't want to be acquired or pushed into dark patterns. If that means slower growth, we're okay with it."

Nextcloud

Their revenue from enterprise support allows them to stay independent. "Our model scales — because public institutions want sovereignty, not surveillance."

Rapid.Space

They focus on repeatability, not speed. "Our tech is modular and replicable. That's how we scale — by enabling others."

Ecosia

They became a steward-owned company, which legally blocks profit extraction. "We've locked in our mission. Growth is welcome — but not if it compromises the core."

Vivaldi

Still co-owned by its founders and employees. "We've been offered money. A lot of it. But we say no. Integrity is not for sale."

Looking Ahead: What's Next for Fair Tech?

These startups are optimistic — but realistic. They're growing, building, and pushing boundaries — but they also face giants and systemic inertia.

Common priorities for the future include:

- Desktop expansion (Murena, Tuta)
- E2E encrypted collaboration (Nextcloud, Tuta)
- Increased localization and international reach
- Better legal tools for interoperability
- Climate-positive infrastructure at scale (Ecosia, Rapid.Space)
- Stronger coalitions of fair-tech startups

Common Challenges & Hard Lessons

These startups aren't shy about the tough parts — they're living the reality of building ethical alternatives in a world designed for surveillance capitalism.

Here's what came up most often:

★ 1. Dominant Platforms Are a Wall

- "It's hard to enter markets where Apple and Google set the rules — technical, legal, and financial."
- App stores are tightly controlled, default apps are pre-installed, and anti-competitive behavior is rampant.
- Some are actively filing complaints (Nextcloud, Vivaldi), but enforcement is slow.



🌱 2. Competing on Features Without Compromising Ethics

- “We want our products to be as easy and polished as Big Tech — but without using their shortcuts (tracking, addictive UX, data profiling). That’s hard.”
- Making good UX, privacy-by-default, and seamless performance takes more work, not less.

👛 3. Funding the Fair Way

- Most have resisted VC money unless values-aligned — which limits growth.
- “We’re always asking: how do we grow fast and stay true?”
- Steward ownership, ethical investors, and enterprise support help — but the path is narrower.

🔧 4. Going from “Startup” to “Scale-up”

- “Crossing the chasm” — moving from early adopters to the mass market — is a shared challenge.
 - Scaling infra, hiring talent, and expanding go-to-market is resource-heavy.
- “We have the product — now we need the fuel.”

Looking Ahead: What’s Next for Fair Tech?

We asked: If someone is starting a new fair tech company today, what should they know?

Here’s what they said:

💡 **Start with values — but validate with the market.**

“Murena started from personal values. But it wouldn’t exist without clear market need.”

📦 **Accept the hard parts.**

“The system is not built for you. Don’t expect it to be fair — but do expect your users to care.”

🌱 **Small wins are real wins.**

“You won’t dominate overnight. But if your browser has 1M users or your OS blocks 200,000 trackers — that’s impact.”

🤝 **Find allies early.**

“Work with others. We talk to Nextcloud, Vivaldi, Murena. We’re all rowing in the same direction.”

🗣️ **Be transparent. Always.**

“Users trust us because we publish everything. Code, financials, problems. That’s our unfair advantage.”

Final Takeaways

This isn't just a group of cool startups doing things differently.

It's a movement.

A growing coalition of companies proving that tech can be ethical, open, privacy-first — and actually work.

They're not naive. They know Big Tech dominates — but they also know public sentiment is shifting.

Users are more aware. Regulators are waking up. And ecosystems like F-Droid, Mastodon, and Fairphone are growing. If you're a founder, investor, policymaker, or user who wants a more humane digital future — these companies are showing you how.

Let's recap the key takeaways:

- ✓ Privacy-first tech can be usable and beautiful.
- ✓ Open-source doesn't mean low quality — it means trustable.
- ✓ Sustainable tech isn't just about climate — it's also about longevity, efficiency, and freedom.
- ✓ Fair competition needs real regulation — not just promises.
- ✓ Users want choice — and some will pay for it.
- ✓ Independence is hard — but worth it.



www.mobifree.org