Overview

• Sources of Information
• Why Care?
• Five Factors of Engagement and Retention
• Creating a Strategy
• Selected Practices
Sources of Information
A Brief CV

• I am a PhD candidate
  • Which involves reading a lot of papers
  • I research open source communities
• I was a community manager for one year
• I was a software developer for many years
  • And I organised some conferences, wrote summaries, etc.

• This talk is based on existing scholarly work, my research, and my experiences

Me at work.

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https://www.flickr.com/photos/quintanaroo/64858186
Objective

• I want to summarise the research on this topic
  • ...Without getting bogged down in the details
  • So that you can apply it to your own situation

• But if academic work interests you,
  • My research is posted on https://barcomb.org
  • Or ORCiD: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2126-9511
  • Get notifications on ResearchGate:
    https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ann_Barcomb

• A short non-academic article with more detail:
  https://opensource.com/article/17/10/managing-casual-contributors
Why Care about Casual Contributors?
Benefits

- Increased innovation
- Increased software quality
- Diffuse knowledge of the project to social networks

The social network graph of an anthill.

Original image by Martin Grandjean
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via Wikimedia Commons
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Social_Network_Analysis_Visualization.png
Casual but Committed

• Casual contributors don’t always lack devotion
  • “Episodic” is a better term than “casual”
• They don’t have to be one-off
  • Retention means coming back, not giving more hours
  • Retention means less time and attention to get results
• Many contribute habitually in other communities
Casual Contributors are Already Here

• Casual contributors are already present in many communities
  • Doing many different kinds of work
• Many existing practices are also effective on casual contributors
  • But without a strategy and tracking, how can you know you’re managing effectively?
Five Factors of Engagement and Retention of Casual Contributors
Five Factors

Antecedents | Experiences | Consequences
---|---|---
Motives | +/- | +
Social Norms | + | +
Psychological Sense of Community | + | +

Intention to Remain

Satisfaction
Organizational Commitment

Motives

- Seeking personal benefit (-)
- Enjoyment (+)
- Socialising (+)

People with enjoyment and socialising motives are more discouraged by technical barriers to entry
Social Norms

• How the contributor perceives social response to involvement (peer pressure)
• Less of a factor in OSS communities than other volunteering

• Volunteers - especially non-code contributors - are responsive to personal invitations to participate
Psychological Sense of Community

• Do I feel welcome? Supported? Inspired to action?

• Inclusivity was commonly mentioned as an important community quality

A more welcoming mat wouldn’t require me to read binary upside-down.

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Satisfaction

• Experiences matched expectations?
  • Feeling appreciated
  • Having fulfilling relationships
  • Enjoying the work
  • Knowing the work is used

• When people talk about their reasons for remaining, they usually talk about satisfaction
Organisational Commitment

• Identification with the community and its goals
  • Being a part of something bigger
  • Seeing oneself as “a volunteer”

• People who talk about their involvement also tend to be more likely to want to remain
Creating a Strategy for Managing Casual Contributors
Creating a Strategy

• Decide what your objectives are
• Identify appropriate tasks
• Find practices to support goals
• Measure outcomes

I’m not actually going to discuss measuring. That would require doing a second PhD.

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Decide What You Want to Accomplish

• Understand your casual contributors?
• Inspire more people to join?
• Retain more casual contributors?
• Get them to return more often?

Tip: homing pigeons are quite likely to return.

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http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/3749720
Identify Appropriate Tasks

• For generalist contributors, tasks should be:
  • Small, quick
  • Narrowly focused
  • Need little up-front investment
  • Be broken into smaller pieces
  • Not require skilled labor
  • Chosen because they interfere with habitual contributors’ other responsibilities

• For specialist contributors:
  • Separate domain knowledge from specific details
Find Practices to Support Goals

• Use the Five Factors and knowledge of your community to identify reasoned proposals
• Many practices may already be in place
• My list is not exhaustive
  • (It isn’t even everything in my research!)
  • Not everything may work for you
  • Consider it an example of how to think of practices
Selected Practices for Managing Casual Contributors
Selected Practices (1)

• Offer guided introductory events (e.g., MozBoot)
  • Reduce technical challenges for newcomers with social and entertainment motives
  • Address social motives
Selected Practices (2)

• Encourage existing volunteers to talk with people they know about their participation in your community
  • Personal invitation is an effective method of recruitment (social norms)
  • People who talk about their involvement usually want to remain (organisational commitment)
Selected Practices (3)

• Make sure non-coding activities are recognised
  • When potential contributors look at your community, they want to feel a “match” (psychological sense of community)
• People find satisfaction through seeing their work appreciated
Selected Practices (4)

• Develop awareness of your contributors’ areas of expertise and ask for help (sparingly)
  • People feel appreciated if they believe their skills are recognised (satisfaction)
  • People are more likely to return if they are asked personally
    • …but don’t ask too often, or make trivial requests
Selected Practices (5)

- Consider time-based releases
  - Casual but committed contributors (organisational commitment) can better plan their contributions if the project follows a schedule
- May cause too much overhead in small communities
Discussion
What Do You Think?

• Do you have any suggestions for managing casual contributors?
• Any ideas on how to apply this method to your community?
• Do you think I’m completely wrong?

• Contact me if you’d like to participate in follow-up research!
Thank You
Connect

• https://barcomb.org
• ann@barcomb.org

This might be a metaphor for communities with casual contributors. It also describes how doing research often feels: jumbled.

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