Fora, Q&A, Mailing Lists, Chat...Oh My!

Open Source Summit North America 2017

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Overview of available platforms
Overview of available platforms

Questions / Considerations
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Key Takeaways
Fora

- Traditional options such as vBulletin, phpBB, XenForo, and UBB.threads

- Newer options such as Discourse

By nature they are conversational… and encourage discussion
Pro: Fantastic solution for building community, debating technical topics, and finding solutions as a group; create a searchable archive of all previous discussion, facilitate mentorship

Con: A great solution might be buried in post #324 of a long thread; create a searchable archive of all previous discussion
Lesson Learned
Q&A

- Askbot, OSQA
- StackExchange, Questions for Confluence

By nature they are not conversational… and discourage discussion
Q&A

Pro: Excel at surfacing quality answers quickly and easily, narrow focus minimizes distractions and off-topic behavior, allows participants to build reputation

Con: The lack of conversation makes it less suited for building a community with deep roots, as such communities typically require that people get to know each other through discussion
Lesson Learned
Mailing Lists

- Mailman, LISTSERV, phpList
- HyperKitty
- Google Groups

By nature email is conversational…
But whether discussion is encouraged or discouraged is really down to culture for most mailing lists.
Mailing Lists

Pro: Email is part of existing workflow for most people, can use existing tools, well understood, almost everyone already has an email address so it’s not ‘yet another account’

Con: Relies on manual filtering, search typically isn’t great, varied netiquette rules may intimidate non-technical users, top posters
By nature IRC is conversational…
and discussion is unavoidable
IRC

Pro: enables real-time communication, existing part of many communities and expected by some technical communities, simple but powerful

Con: Sets an expectation of instant responses, more likely to cause context switches, search is usually poor (with logging often disabled), easy to miss messages, lack of threading, may intimidate non-technical users
Chat

- Slack
- MatterMost, Rocket.chat, HipChat
- Telegram, WhatsApp

By nature chat is conversational…
and discussion is unavoidable
Chat

Pro: enables real-time communication, gaining an increasing mindshare, allows participants to get to know each other

Con: Sets an expectation of instant responses, more likely to cause context switches, search is usually poor, business model may impact usage
Lesson Learned
Jira, GitHub issues, wiki talk pages, Reddit, twitter…
If you don’t get this right, your community will either route around you or wither and decay.
I know, I’ll just:

Implement all the things!!!
No
No really, you probably shouldn’t.
Ask yourself some questions

● What are your goals?

● What tasks do you want each communication channel to be used for?

● Who will be using each channel, and do they have an existing preference or opinion? Where is your community now?

● How large is the community that will be participating and how many resources do you have to dedicate?
Ask yourself some more questions

- Do you want a conversational platform?
- Is a permanent record desirable? Should it be public?
- How important is search?
- How important is real-time communication?
- Are you targeting a project/community or a product/customers.
Other considerations

- How technical are the participants?
- How much structure do you want?
- How much do you value openness?
- How important to you is mindshare/inertia?
- How much control do you want/need?
- How will your community react to gamification?

Remember: True community is not just about getting stuff done, it’s also about building relationship, supporting each other, and helping people grow and improve. Do your want the platform to foster this; or something else?
Other considerations

- What other questions/considerations do you have?

Remember: Community is not just about getting stuff done, it’s also about building relationship, supporting each other, and helping people grow and flourish. Do you want the platform to foster this; or something else?
Key Takeaways
Understand your priorities and goals, and ensure you use the combination of options that will best enable you to reach those goals.
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● Your community will route around you or whither if you don't provide the proper platforms to communicate.

● Don't be afraid to say no. You don't want to fragment your community in a way that creates empty unused sites.
The questions you should ask, and the answers to those questions will vary significantly for each community. **As with most community decisions, understanding your community is the key.**
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