

MDN Engagement Activities Recap

This document describes various activities that have been tried in the past for increasing participation and volunteer retention on MDN.

In most cases, we do not have hard data on the effectiveness of these activities. What follows are general descriptions and impressions.

[Group activities](#)

[Doc sprints](#)

[“Hack on MDN” weekends](#)

[“Wednesday docs” meetups](#)

[One-off events](#)

[Community meetings](#)

[Gear giveaways](#)

[Online recognition](#)

[Badges](#)

[Displayed list of page contributors](#)

[Blog posts](#)

[Meta-documentation](#)

[“Getting started” page](#)

[Documentation about MDN](#)

[Doc status pages](#)

[Direct engagement](#)

[Conclusions](#)

Group activities

Doc sprints

A doc sprint is a short period (usually a few days) when a group of people come together, virtually or in person, to collaborate on writing documentation on a given topic or related topics. From 2010 to 2013, a total of 13 doc sprints were held for MDN, 7 virtual and 6 in-person. The two types tended to serve different purposes, with virtual sprints drawing in new or occasional contributors, and in-person sprints serving to reward and build cohesion among existing active contributors.

Doc sprints required significant investment of resources. In-person sprints, of course, required budget to pay for volunteers and staff to travel and stay at the location of the sprint. Even virtual sprints required investment of staff time to promote, manage, and follow-up. They were usually scheduled over a weekend to maximize the time available from volunteers.

Date	Location	Volunteers	Notes
October 2010	Paris	4 onsite	2 volunteers were eventually hired; 1 contributed 2-3 years; 1 was never heard from again
January 2011	Virtual	31 online	Offered a t-shirt for contributing during the sprint. Paul Irish helped promote it on Twitter. Participation from several existing Mozilla volunteers, well-known web devs, and new volunteers who became long-term contributors. Relationships started with Google and Inclusive Design Research Centre (Toronto).
April 2011	Virtual	6 online + 1 partner	4 repeat volunteers from previous sprints; continued participation by Google.
June 2011	Cincinnati OH	9 onsite, 3 partners, 1 online	Part of Open Help Conference & Sprints; participants from Google and IDRC attended.
August 2011	Virtual	15 online + 4 partners	Google held an internal sprint to work on MDN during our sprint. Meetups happened in Taiwan and Austin, Texas.
October 2011	Berlin	6 onsite; 4 online + 1 partner	Ran during JSConf.eu, in the Hacker Lounge; only 1 person from conference contributed to MDN who was not invited for the sprint.
January 2012	Virtual	18 online	Offering a free t-shirt led to renewed high participation. One person said he participated because he was searching Twitter for "free t-shirt" and saw a tweet about the sprint; he continued contributing for at least a year after.
April 2012	MV/SF California	4 onsite, 5 online; 3 partners; 2 non-MDN staff	Google and IDRC continued to participate.
September 2012	London	9 onsite; 1 remote	

December 2012	Virtual	13 + 1 non-MDN staff	Note that Web Platform Docs launched in October 2012, and also ran doc sprints, possibly leading to doc sprint fatigue in the target audience.
March 2013	Virtual	17 online	9 repeat participants; 8 new-to-sprint This was intended as the first of monthly sprints coordinated with Dev Derby topics; monthly sprints were not sustainable.
May 2013	Virtual	11 online + 1 non-MDN staff	
June 2013	Paris	9 onsite; 1 remote	Coincident with the Mozilla Francophone Community meetup weekend; therefore, focused on localization

“Hack on MDN” weekends

In 2014 and 2015, there were in-person gatherings called “Hack on MDN” weekends. (An earlier “MDN Hack Day” was MDN-branded, but was a general web hack day, not specific to MDN.) Attendance at these events was by invitation, based on proposals that participants made for projects to work on during the 3-day weekend. Criteria for the projects were that they be doable within the timeframe of the event, and that they involve collaboration among participants. Scope of the projects could include content, platform, and community aspects of MDN. Like in-person doc sprints, these events served to reward and build cohesion among existing contributors. The proposal-based invitation process enabled a mix of long-term and newer contributors, with the broader scope allowing for a diversity of skillsets.

The [2014 event](#) was held in the Paris office, and involved all of the content and dev team members, one UX staff member, one non-MDN staff, and 11 volunteers. Projects included improvements to the search feature on MDN, a tutorial on web-based game development, and improvements to meta-documentation, including a new “Getting Started” page.

The [2015 event](#) was held in the Berlin office, with 13 volunteers and about an equal number of staff. Highlights from this event included a prototype for opening code samples in JSFiddle, code samples and articles about game development, and a plan for an experiment in badge-based recognition.

“Wednesday docs” meetups

These meetups were started in 2012 by Jeremie, as “Mercredi docs” in the Paris office, with a focus on localization into French by the Mozilla community in Paris. Initially, they were on a

weekly schedule, which was tiring to organize. Currently, they are on a monthly schedule, with meetups in both Paris and London (hosted by Jean-Yves), linked via Vidyo. The focus of the London meetup is creating and maintaining English docs. There are also a volunteer-driven meetup in Korea and periodic localization meetups in the Tokyo office, organized by Chiko.

Promotion for the meetups is through meetup.com and other social media.

Attendance averages about 10 in Paris and 5-10 in London. Because the meetups are on a regular schedule, people know when to come back. Some attendees contribute to MDN *only* during the meetup, never on their own. French attendees have remarked that MDN is one of the easiest avenues to contributing to Mozilla localization, because it does not require learning special tools (e.g., Pootle) or getting a review before publishing (like SUMO).

This type of event can lead to long-term engagement of volunteers, *if* there is regular schedule and a dedicated host, as there is in Paris and London.

One-off events

Volunteers have from time to time organized MDN-related events. For example, see [this list on the Reps Portal](#). We have produced [Guidelines for MDN Events](#) as well as a [Doc Sprint how-to](#) to help volunteers who wish to organize MDN events. However, these events have mostly not led to increased contributions by their participants beyond the event. The same is true for one-off events led by staff, such as representing MDN at the “Writing Day” of the Write the Docs conference.

One-off events can be useful to raise awareness of MDN among a target audience, but they do not lead to sustained participation as clearly as periodic events like “Wednesday Docs” or the past series of doc sprints.

Community meetings

Starting in late 2010, the MDN community has held [bi-weekly public meetings](#) in the #mdn IRC channel. IRC was chosen as the medium to accommodate users on low-bandwidth connections, and those whose native language is not English. Text-chat is an easier medium for non-native speakers to process, keep up with, and contribute to than audio or video calls.

Meetings are held on Wednesdays at 10 a.m. Pacific Time, and are announced on the dev-mdc mailing list, usually on the Monday preceding the meeting. An agenda page for each meeting is created on the wiki, which also serves as notes after the meeting.

While this meeting has been on-going for over five years, we have made changes in the format from time to time, for example, to encourage discussion rather than reporting. Nonetheless, currently, the majority of participants are MDN staff members, with a handful of volunteers

attending. In Q4/2015 and Q1/2016, we experimented with holding every-other meeting at a more Asia-friendly time slot (5 a.m. Pacific). However, despite outreach to volunteers in Asia, participation from Asia was low or non-existent, so the experiment was discontinued.

Gear giveaways

We have occasionally provided gear as an incentive or recognition for participating on MDN (t-shirts), or as promotion for MDN (stickers). Offering t-shirts as an incentive was an effective strategy for attracting participants to virtual doc sprints. For MDN's 10th anniversary in 2015, anniversary t-shirts were sent to many long-time contributors.

Stickers have been given away at conferences, such as the Write The Docs writing day, or to Twitter users who asked for them.

Online recognition

Badges

From April through December of 2015, we experimented with a badge-based recognition system for MDN. In order to make the experiment lightweight, we did not implement badge infrastructure on MDN, but rather used badges.mozilla.org to issue badges. The [MDN badges](#) are described on the wiki.

- MDN Starter: Recognizes that a user's first (or early) contribution is constructive and helpful
- MDN Star: Recognizes significant contributions to MDN
- MDN Contributor of the Month: Selected from MDN Star nominees in a given month

The MDN Starter badge had the greatest potential for encouraging new contributors to continue contributing, as it indicates to the contributor that "someone has seen what you did, and judged it as good." During the period when the badge was used, about 50% of recipients logged into badges.mozilla.org to claim their badge. That is especially significant, since many recipients logged into MDN using Github, and therefore had to create a separate Persona login in order to access their badge on [badges.mo](https://badges.mozilla.org). However, we did not find that recipients of MDN Starter badges made additional contributions any more often than newcomers who did not receive badges.

It is possible, though unknown, that implementing the badges directly on MDN would have resulted in higher levels of retention. If recipients had been sent *back to MDN* to claim their badges, and had their badges displayed on their MDN profile page, they might have been more likely to contribute again on the site.

The MDN Star badge was about recognizing existing contributors. Nominations could be made by any user. After an initial flurry of awards, in which pretty much all core contributors were nominated for the badge by other core contributors, nominations tapered off sharply.

The Contributor of the Month badge was designed based on a similar badge used in the FSA program. However, after 3 months, we abandoned this badge as not helpful to the MDN community. Our community is much smaller than the FSA program, and a “competitive” badge was felt to be divisive rather than incentivising.

Displayed list of page contributors

In 2014, a feature was implemented on MDN that displays the half-dozen or so most recent contributors to a page as miniature avatars near the top of the page. The user can click a toggle to display avatars of all contributors to the page. Contributors’ user names are also listed at the bottom of the page. Avatars and user names can be clicked to see the user’s profile page.

This feature was implemented as a way to recognize contributors to a page, and also highlight the wiki-ness of MDN to readers.

Social media

When Danielle Vincent started actively managing MDN’s Twitter account, she would occasionally tweet calls for contribution, such as needing reviews on particular pages. She would also tweet thanks to specific contributors. She stopped these types of tweets in Q1/2016, when we blocked new accounts, since there was no point in asking for help when people couldn’t create accounts.

Blog posts

From November 2011 through June 2012, we ran a roughly bi-weekly series of blog posts on Hacks.mozilla.org called “State of the Docs”. These posts summarized recent changes and activity on MDN, recognizing contributors for notable work since the previous blog post.

These posts were compiled manually and tediously. When the Hacks blog came under the editorial management of the Evangelism (now Developer Relations) team, this series was discontinued, as it was felt to be not of interest to the web developer audience that Hacks was targeting.

The “Contributor of the Month” award included being recognized through a blog post about the contributor. After the award was abandoned, we continued for a few months with a “Meeting an MDN contributor” monthly profile post; this form of recognition was abandoned due to lack of time to devote to it.

Meta-documentation

“Getting started” page

During the “Hack on MDN” weekend of 2014, a new [Getting Started](#) page was created on MDN, to replace a longer and more confusing one. The newer guide offers 3 steps to contributing, with 5 options for types of tasks. Newcomers can self-select for task types, based on their preference for working with words, code, some combination, or translation. This page is linked from the welcome email messages sent by both MDN and the dev-mdc mailing list. That it is used is evidenced by users whose first contribution is to mark the “SEO summary” of a page -- an activity that they could learn about by only reading this guide.

Documentation about MDN

Another improvement to meta-documentation was made in Q4/2015, when the “/MDN” section of MDN was restructured with an improved information architecture. Outdated material that had accreted over time was archived, to avoid it distracting users from the current information.

Doc status pages

A third example of meta-documentation that supports contributions on MDN are the documentation status pages, [implemented in Q2/2014](#). Each [topic area](#) and several locales have programmatically-generated status pages that show the state of the section, based on several criteria. These include pages that need tagging or reviews, bugs or requests that need documentation changes, and known missing or outdated pages. The doc status pages enable contributors who are interested in a particular topic or locale to easily see what maintenance needs to be done. Some localizers have said that these status pages have completely changed their workflow, enabling them to more easily maintain sections once they are translated.

Direct engagement

Directly engaging with contributors is a high touch activity, but with high potential for pay-off. By personally interacting with contributors, we put a human face on MDN and give them a point of connection.

Most of the engagement the MDN staff team has with new contributors is passive and reactive: We wait until they post something in IRC or a mailing list, and then respond. We respond to users who email the mdn-admins list because they were blocked by the spam filter, or because

they want page-creation or page-moving privileges. We send friendly but corrective messages to localizers who accidentally overwrite English pages.

In Q2/2014, Jean-Yves conducted an experiment of actively engaging with localization contributors, across 22 locales, with promising results. However, managing and tracking these interactions was nearly a full-time job. The MDN team briefly had an open position for a localization community manager, but staffing priorities shifted, and the position was never filled.

Janet has periodically made efforts to proactively reach out to new subscribers to the dev-mdc mailing list with a personal welcome, in addition to the automated welcome from the mailing list software. Searching for the person on LinkedIn can give clues about their potential interests on MDN, enabling personal touches such as “As a student, you may be interested in the Learning Area.”

It is possible that using a CRM would help to scale these activities, through tracking and dashboards about contacts.

It would be even better if we could distribute these activities by enabling existing active community members to help with reaching out to new contributors. However, Mozilla’s privacy policy limits us from sharing member email addresses, and we have no on-site means for members to contact one another.¹

Conclusions

The themes that emerge from this review of engagement activities are that *personal*, *positive*, and *predictable* lead to good results. Contributors tend to stick around and continue contributing when they have personal interactions with other community members. Interactions that are positive and appreciative are more likely to encourage participation than blocking or correcting ones (as necessary as those may be). Predictable activities that happen on a regular schedule and are known well in advance are easier for contributors to plan for and participate in.

¹ It is possible for users to expose their email address on Github, so it is possible to click from an MDN profile page to a Github profile page to look for an email address. However, most users do not use this feature of Github.