

# MDN Stakeholder Expectations about Community Participation

During July 2016, I (Janet Swisher) conducted informal interviews and email conversations with various MDN stakeholders to collect insights into their expectations about community participation in MDN activities. This document summarizes those insights.

This effort supported [Epic 380](#), about understanding the impact of community-oriented activities, specifically [User Story 387](#):

[Research] Understand stakeholders expectations about community so that we will be able to design a better community engagement strategy.

The stakeholders involved were identified based on the [MDN Stakeholders list](#) compiled previously by the MDN team. The categories in this document vary somewhat from that list, as there were clear commonalities among stakeholders based on the domain of MDN that they are concerned with. That is, views on participation were similar across partners and team members depending on whether they focus on content or on platform development.

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## Governance

Stakeholders interviewed: Jascha Kaykas-Wolff, Chad Weiner

The success of MDN's community is inseparable from the success of MDN. If MDN is not growing and reaching more people, it doesn't matter if the community is a success by some other measure.

Jascha sees MDN as containing three "rings", so he thinks about participation in terms of ways that people can contribute to:

1. Core curriculum
2. Supporting content (reference, etc.)
3. Distribution of content beyond MDN

Participation can be viewed as a simple “pipeline”:

1. People who potentially can be recruited.
2. People who are in the “I’m interested” stage.
3. People who are actually participating.

It’s possible to have more sophisticated measures, such as frequency, subjective quality, etc. But these are the basics.

## Influencers

Stakeholders interviewed: Sai Karthik (B2G OS), John Bernard (Connected Devices), Amy Tsay (Add-ons)

Influencers are representatives of other areas within Mozilla that have a need for content on MDN. Responses from influencers varied widely, depending on the nature and maturity of the area. B2G OS and Connected Devices are not ready to have any major documentation efforts. Sai raised a couple of specific issues that I have conveyed to the team.

Add-ons has recently migrated their docs to MDN, without being aware of the de-emphasis on Mozilla products by the MDN team. Amy Tsay said she has mainly interacted with Will Bamberg on the staff team, without any visibility into community contributions. Historically, the add-ons community has mainly contributed to docs in the form of blog posts, with a few contributors deeply involved in MDN. There is potential for enhancing engagement of the Add-ons community with MDN, and of the MDN community with Add-ons content.

## Development

Stakeholders interviewed: Ben Sternthal, John Whitlock, Stephanie Hobson, Matthew Brandt

Team members and management of the MDN platform team agree that the current development environment is a huge barrier to entry for community participation, and until that is resolved, there is no point encouraging participation. As Stephanie put it, onboarding a new contributor is like saying, “I will help you walk into this brick wall.” Helping a new contributor get set up takes 3-10 times the effort of a staff member fixing the bug. It takes about 4 contributions before a platform contributor is able to focus on the bug and not the environment. There are a few current contributors who have reached this point, but in general, the time investment is not worthwhile for staff members already pressed by a weight of technical debt. They have intentionally reduced interaction with contributors and currently avoid encouraging new contributors. Interacting with contributors can also be very disruptive to the development workflow, which makes it even more costly.

In order for this situation to change, it needs to be elevated to the deliverable level. The planned improvements to the development environment will be helpful to both the staff team and volunteer contributors. Other changes that are specific to contributors need to have measurements, targets, and priorities. For example, one measure could be “time to install MDN”; this might need a different target for contributors than for staff.

Community-oriented work and interaction needs to be prioritized just like other work, not be hidden, extra work. Training as well as time are needed in order for staff to be skilled at helping others contribute.

Similarly to development, QA is an area where work needs to be done on infrastructure before contributors can easily help.

## Content

Stakeholders interviewed: Julien (Sphinx), Saurabh Nair, Sebastian Zartner, Jean-Yves Perrier, Eric Shepherd, Chris Mills, Florian Scholz

Stakeholders with a content perspective voiced similar ideas about the types of activities that contributors could do, though collectively they enumerated a wide variety of specific activities.

The general areas of activity were:

- Content creation
- Content localization
- Content maintenance
- Events related to MDN
- Evangelism on behalf of MDN
- Platform code contribution
- Engagement in discussions, planning, prioritizing, and mentoring others

There was broad agreement that community participation is expected to lead to improvement in content quality, as well as enhancement of MDN’s reputation for quality. Other effects of community participation that were cited included:

- Improvements in contribution pathways, via feedback from contributors
- Growing the community, in a virtuous circle
- Learning by contributors about MDN topics
- Improved focus on web developer needs

I also asked core contributors about what they expected from MDN staff. Their expectations of staff that they felt were being met included:

- Being welcoming in communication channels
- Guiding contributors towards the tools they need, including those outside of MDN, like Bugzilla

- Being responsive to questions and requests for help

Areas where reality is not in line with expectations were:

- Enabling contributors to find things to do without having to ask someone
- Providing clear pathways to more advanced contribution
- Communicating priorities so that volunteers know what areas most need contributions

Existing tools help with the first of these. Discovery of those tools, and learning about advanced ways to contribute are both more difficult than they could be.

## Developer Marketing

Stakeholder interviewed: Ali Spivak

Ali Spivak brings a unique perspective as people-manager of the MDN content team, former Head of MDN, and now Product Owner of Developer Marketing.

She feels that a revitalized community is essential to the health of MDN. MDN can best serve a broad diverse audience of web developers by fostering a diverse community to support it. “The more people are providing input, the more likely you are to get it right,” that is, by documenting the right things, and implementing the right features.

The focus by staff on quarterly goals and durable team deliverables has led to an inward focus. It seems like the MDN community used to be more vocal with opinions about what MDN should be doing. It’s an unresolved issue how to integrate community into activities when those activities are so tightly constrained and measured.

From the Developer Marketing side, she’s worried that Marketing has lost touch with community, but hopeful that MDN can provide a proof point for the value of community, and an example of involving community in the durable team model. She’s also interested in integrating community into the “top of the funnel” that Dev Marketing focuses on, and driving participation in all developer-oriented activities.