

Motivating and Retaining Volunteers

CEE Meeting 2019



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# Wikimedia depends on volunteers

**Wikimedia depends  
on an influx of  
volunteers**

# How can we attract (more) volunteers?

# Where do volunteers come from?



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Where did you  
come from?  
What motivates you?



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# Some volunteer motivations

- Help my language community access information
- Using my knowledge to benefit others
- Practicing my knowledge/skills through writing
- **SAVING THE WORLD:** providing information about topics important for future of mankind (wars, inter-human relations, preservation of nature, energy consumption etc.)
- Being invited to contribute

# Some volunteer motivations

- Language pride
  - "How could it be that we don't have this in our language?!"
  - "How come we have fewer articles than X language?"
- Language preservation
- Inspired by others' work
- Campaigns

# Some volunteer motivations

- Obsession: "I CAN'T STAND THE RED LINKS!"
- "someone is wrong on the Internet!"
- Sense of responsibility/ownership
- Encouraged by others' building on my own work
- Joy in working competently
- Force of habit
- Sense of pioneering, groundbreaking work

Okay, but how do we find these people?



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# Accumulating volunteers

1. Volunteers are **coming to us all the time!** We just need to **not drive them away.** (the good-faith ones)
2. **Outreach:** proactively proposing volunteering (ideally, multi-session and/or specific-audience)
3. Defend against **burnout:** *lose fewer* volunteers.

Retaining new volunteers



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# Getting newbies to stay

- **Distinguish** between good-faith and bad-faith newbies. Usually, we do OK reject bad-faith newbies, but can **improve reception** of good-faith ones.
  - Remember: not **every** person can be motivated to Wikimedia work. The model *doesn't* work for everyone.
- Different motivations require **different onboarding**
- Help promising newbies **deal with setbacks**

# Getting newbies to stay

- **appreciation ==> motivation**
  - Identify promising newbies and appreciate them!  
(e.g. using [Quarry](#) queries)
  - Also appreciate "oldies" and "techies"
  - Off-wiki appreciation (treats, merchandise, ...)

# On-wiki appreciation

- The **thank** button
  - Statistics show thanked people are more active
  - Thank someone everyday!
- **Barnstars, medals, etc.**
  - Their value is proportional to your respect for the person who awarded you the barnstar
- **Appreciation projects**
- Your examples?

# Engaging newbies off-wiki

- Try to have **low-barrier, recurring activities**
  - e.g. a photo walk, taking pictures and uploading them to Commons, while discussing [Freedom of Panorama](#)
  - Recurring/regular -- meetups, WikiThursday
- Lets you engage immediately at the moment when interest is generated (e.g. "our next photowalk is in seven days!" (rather than in seven months)

# Off-wiki volunteers and allies

- Given diverse volunteer profiles (interests, capacities, motivations), not everyone can or wants to write articles (or patrol, or proofread...)
- Keep an open mind on how to harness good-will
  - But don't compromise on principles
- **Non-editors can help** a lot in organizing off-wiki activities; it's desirable as long as **active editors** are **also** involved; negative results likely otherwise.
- Local professionals (lawyers, accountants, media experts) can help without editing



# But I need volunteers for X!

- Describe what you need; describe why X is the thing to do
- But accept that not everyone may share the interest in X
- If you can't find enough volunteers, you may need to change your plan. Go with the energy!
- In time, build more volunteer interest with your original plan.

# Key principles

- We're open to everyone, but *not* everyone will be interested; not everyone interested will manage to adapt to our norms; **and that's okay.**
  - Spend time cultivating promising people, not fighting to keep people who are a bad fit
- Try to match skills and motivation to roles and tasks.
- **Keeping** the newbies who come anyway **is easier** than **actively attracting** people who weren't already interested.





# Outreach

- Outreach is better understood, and better documented, so not the subject of this session
- But quick tips:
  - Single-session general-audience **doesn't work.**
  - Sparking interest is easy. **Supporting** the newbie through the full integration process is hard.
  - **Experiment!** Innovate! Adapt!
  - Outreach-recruited newbies benefit from the same things as "organic" newbies (appreciation etc.)



Reducing burnout



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# What demotivates volunteers? What burns them out?



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**What demotivates  
you? What burned  
you out?**



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# These things demotivate

- Endless, circular discussions.
- Indifference and lack of collaboration, e.g. board proposes X and are the only people doing it.
- Feeling unappreciated, taken for granted. Lack of feedback.
- Being criticized by people who aren't helping/working themselves.
- Feeling unheard, lacking a voice, lacking influence.



# These things demotivate

- Bureaucracy in "real life", paperwork, accounting...
- Lack of consensus on core policies (e.g. copyright)
- Admin work on controversial topics or high-conflict users
- Having to work with unmotivated people, e.g. students just wanting a grade

# These things demotivate

- Repetitive labor
- Not daring to delegate
- Patrolling burnout: using more time to patrol, than to create new articles; spam overload.

# Reducing burnout

- Have we mentioned **appreciation**?
  - Not just on-wiki; not just in-person; e.g. tweets, press releases, interviews
- the **delegation trap** leads to burnout. Ask for help.
- **Face** issues, don't repress them. Ask if help is needed.
- Try to match skills to roles; but *also* be flexible and let people switch and experiment.
- What if we just don't *have* some skills?



# Building team skills

- not everyone is a born speaker, teacher, report-writer, etc., BUT **anyone can be taught** at least some competence in e.g. public speaking, conflict resolution
- providing **training for volunteers** is important and valuable; **WMF supports** such activities; external training can be invited or even purchased.
- **Mentorship**: Bring a volunteer colleague with you to observe you (and learn from you); learn from others.



# Easier said than done...

- I know... :)
- These aren't guaranteed recipes. Avoiding burnout takes attention, empathy, and patience.
- If a challenge seems impossible, cut it up into more manageable goals.
  - E.g. we don't have enough volunteers to run an education program! But can we get a regular meetup going? Can we gradually train volunteers?



# Mismatched volunteers

- Sometimes the person and the role are not a good fit
- **Discuss it.** Gently look for ways to improve it. **And if you can't,** find a way to re-assign roles.
  - "Founder Syndrome" is an extreme case of this
  - The fact X is the only person who volunteered to do Y still doesn't mean X will do a good job.
- **Staff/volunteer** roles and tension

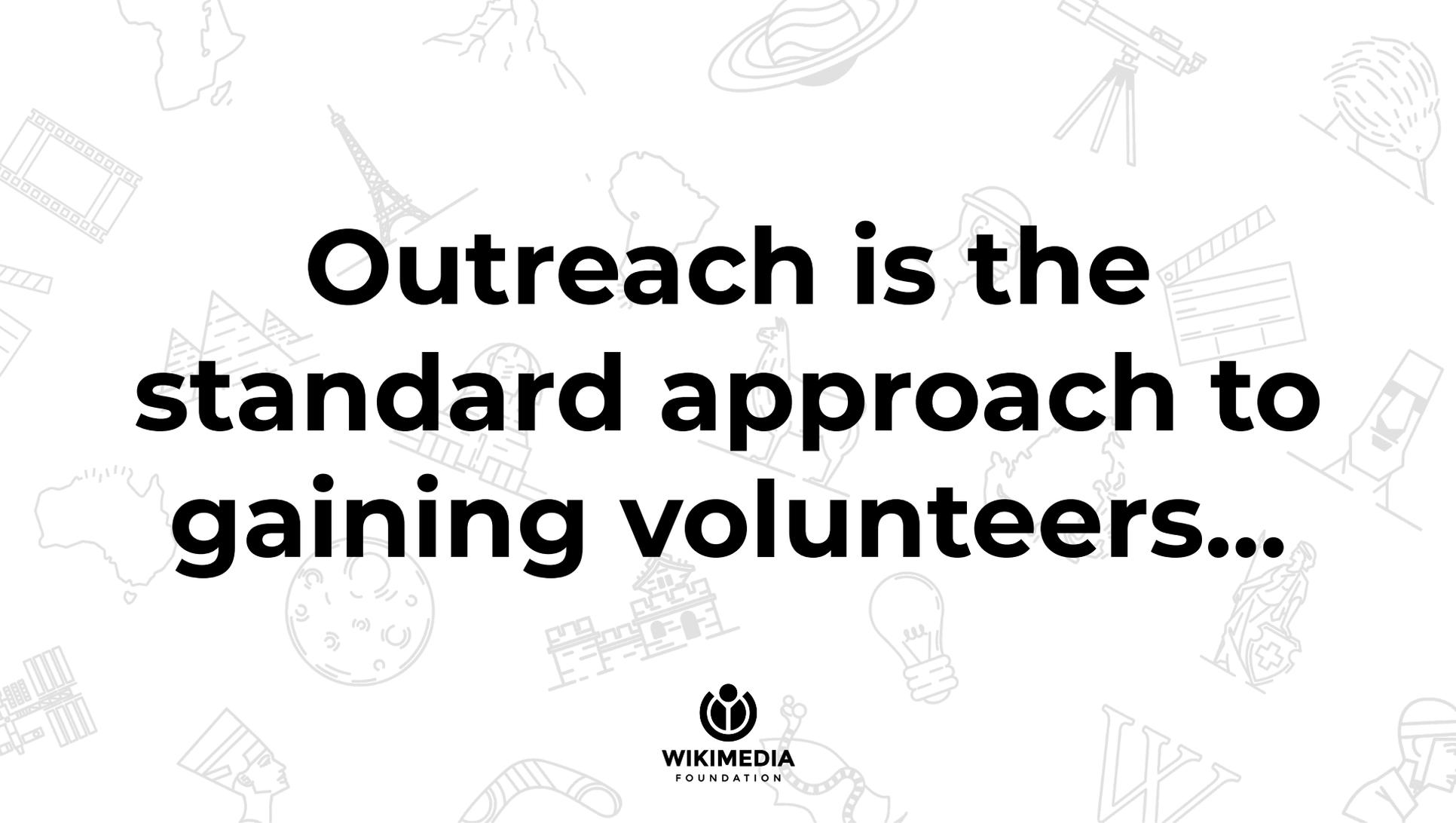
# And from the VSN:

- **Vision:** Wikimedia volunteers know that they are doing something valuable and important. They make a difference by striving for free knowledge in a visionary, unique and powerful movement.
  - Volunteer supporters can help to overcome borders. The volunteers' undertakings should not be hindered by surmountable organizational, technical and financials limits and their ideas should flow freely.
- **Fun:** Volunteering to Wikimedia projects is fun. It is **joyful** to share knowledge and to contribute to a project with like-minded people.
  - Emotional support covers different areas such as rewarding and recognition of the volunteers' work. Volunteer supporters also need to face the possible threats of the volunteers' disillusion and frustration.
- **Skills:** Volunteering in Wikimedia projects **contributes to self-development** in terms of individual knowledge, critical thinking, sense of responsibility, self-confidence and sophistication. It helps to develop professional skills and expertise which are useful even beyond Wikimedia projects.
  - Volunteer supporters can raise the awareness of these skills and acknowledge them in a comprehensible manner. They can help to develop and shape these skills.
- **Community:** Wikimedia volunteers enjoy a sense of belonging, a special collaboration experience and an often global network of personal contacts.
  - Host events, online social-media groups; encourage socialization among volunteers.
- From [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Volunteer\\_Supporters\\_Network/Landscapes\\_of\\_Volunteering](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Volunteer_Supporters_Network/Landscapes_of_Volunteering)

In conclusion...



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**Outreach is the  
standard approach to  
gaining volunteers...**

**But much  
improvement is  
possible in retaining  
"organic" newbies,**



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**And in reducing the  
number and  
frequency of people  
burning out.**

# The Volunteer Supporters Network

- A group of people specifically focused on **supporting** (other) volunteers.
- [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Volunteer\\_Supporters\\_Network/Resources](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Volunteer_Supporters_Network/Resources)

# Discussion & Questions



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# THANK YOU

Keep in touch!

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