Wikimedia depends on volunteers
Wikimedia depends on an influx of volunteers
How can we attract (more) volunteers?
Where do volunteers come from?
Where did you come from? What motivates you?
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?
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
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.
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.
Recruiting Volunteers through Outreach
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
What demotivates volunteers? What burns them out?
What demotivates you? What burned you out?
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 financial 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...
Outreach is the standard approach to gaining volunteers...
But much improvement is possible in retaining "organic" newbies,
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
Discussion & Questions
THANK YOU

Keep in touch!

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