The Couchers.org Contributor Guide

Welcome to the Couchers.org core team! Thank you for offering your time and skills to this project and our shared cause. We're really excited to start working with you!

We're sure that through your involvement with the project you'll meet a number of passionate and skilled people, find fulfilment in working towards improving our community and the experience of its individuals, and be able to further develop your skills whether technically or in organisation and leadership.

Couchers.org is built by a global team of skilled volunteers — like you — in their spare time. The purpose of this guide is to outline the structures we have in place to make sure this model is efficient and successful. Our goal is to make sure the platform is built efficiently and to a high standard, and to make sure that volunteers in different areas can rely on each other, allowing them to focus on their own role. We want to make sure that any work you put towards this project will be brought to fruition in a completed product.

The Couchers.org Vision

The project was initially started by Aapeli and Itsi, who form the Leadership Team and will do so for the foreseeable future. In early 2020, they laid out a vision by identifying issues with the current couch surfing landscape and suggesting a set of solutions. These form the basic "founding documents" and are the groundwork for the vision and plan on what we are building. Everyone who joins the team must agree on this unified vision in order for us to be on the same page on what we're working on. This also ensures that you know that any work you contribute now will not go towards any different vision in the future.

In short: our goal is to replicate the good elements of existing platforms while making some fundamental improvements to fix systematic issues with them. Once we have reached this point, we will continue to further iterate and improve the platform.

Over the long term we have an expansive and inclusive outset. We believe that couch surfing is a wonderful experience for individuals, and has a broader benefit to society in making people more generous, open-minded and trusting. We want to introduce as many people in the world as possible to couch surfing in a sustainable way that preserves the integrity of the overall community.

Project structure

In order to implement this vision, we believe that having a hierarchical organisational structure is essential to best harness the skills of the community and get experts on board. We also believe that this needs to be complemented with strong communication channels between teams and with the community to listen to feedback from our users. This is in contrast with other projects with similar goals that have used structures based on committees or are built around an explicit lack of structure.

High-level structure

The organisational structure of the project is designed to best accommodate volunteers who can put in limited hours each week. Fundamentally, we believe in making decisions quickly, putting things out to the test with the community, receiving feedback and iterating. Volunteer time is most effectively spent on

implementation rather than discussions and meetings. We want to avoid decision paralysis and decision-by-committee where possible, while making sure we avoid echo-chambers.

We as a team believe that effectively making decisions is a key part of being able to move forward in quickly developing a platform and adapting to future changes in the couch surfing world. Decisions are best made by small groups of people, and our focus should be on testing things out with users and receiving feedback so that we can iterate.

"Core contributors" refers to the core group of people working on the project, who are actively involved in one of a variety of avenues such as development, design, marketing and community growth. The core contributors are organized into a hierarchy, with the Leadership Team responsible for strategic decisions, and a number of dynamic teams responsible for implementation decisions. Most of these teams are permanent (e.g. Development teams, Community Team) and some are created and torn down as needed (e.g. temporary teams to aid in large feature design).

Final say on arguments, decisions, and disputes within the project rests on the Leadership Team. They lay out the long term strategy and make a variety of executive decisions as the project unfolds. However, they do this on behalf of the team and must make those decisions within the constraints and spirit of the core values of the project.

Teams are responsible for the day-to-day execution of the vision, and make decisions on implementation details pertaining to their team. Each team has a team lead who is responsible for making the decision making within their team and delegating tasks and interfacing with the Leadership Team and other team leads.

Communication channels

Decisions should not be made in a vacuum. We aim for continuous feedback: topics in the forum, discussions in slack, direct feedback from individual contributors, chats whenever we talk to new contributors, and of course being users ourselves. We also aim to gather targeted, structured feedback: the signup survey, contributor votes (name change, logo), talking to experts in the contributor team, putting posts on the forum to gauge opinions, and setting up "working groups" on specific issues. We believe a small group of experts (such as a team) is able to efficiently and quickly make great decisions given this feedback.

We encourage you to use these methods to share feedback with the whole team. Additionally, core contributors who would like to discuss any ideas, concerns, or feedback that they have can chat with Itsi and/or Aapeli (via slack or by organising a meeting) at any time to voice their thoughts. Furthermore, as the project develops, we will build effective systems to solicit for feedback and concerns from the wider community.

We believe in transparency, and you will have visibility over the other team areas on slack and in the wiki; but we ask that you not distract them and their decision making processes. If you have ideas for the other teams, it is best to bring things up with individuals (such as the team lead), post on the #ideas channel on slack, or start a thread in the forum.

Our teams

There are four teams, each one with specific **goals** and **Team Leads** to execute those goals. Team Leads are the first point of contact and interaction. Each team will have a specific contributor guide that contains team-specific information.

Your Team Lead should be your first point of contact, and they will be able to get you up and running. They are responsible for scheduling a regular meeting for the team to convene and discuss past progress, future plans, and the direction of the team.

Frontend Dev

- **Team Lead**: Lucas
- **Goals**: to develop the frontend: the UI for the web platform.

Backend Dev

- **Team Lead**: Aapeli
- **Goals**: to develop the backend: the API, algorithms, databases, server management and deployment.

UI/UX Design

- **Team Lead**: Dom
- **Goals**: to design elements relevant to the User Interface (UI) and User Experience (UX).

Graphic Design

- **Team Lead**: Miuriel
- **Goals**: to create the graphic design and branding relevant to the platform and other areas of the project.

Marketing

- **Team Lead**: *vacant*
- **Goals**: to create the overall messaging, written content, and strategy relevant to advertising, publications, and communications with the users, including running the blog.

Community

- **Team Lead**: Itsi
- **Goals**: to expand the user and volunteer base via community networks, to create feedback channels between the community and the core team, and to guide the creation and continued support of local communities via the platform.

Support and moderation

- **Team Lead**: Jesse
- **Goals**: to define the policies under which the Couchers.org user base operates, the processes for acting on violation of policies, and to implement those processes.

We sometimes categorise the teams into *product teams* in charge of building and fostering the product (frontend, backend, UI/UX design, graphic design), and *community teams* in charge of building and fostering the community (marketing, community, support and moderation).

Expectations

What you can expect from us

- Your work will contribute directly to Couchers.org, and as such we will always remain non-profit and committed to our vision
- We'll be accessible. There will always be a channel open for communicating with the team and someone to respond to you in a timely manner

- We will maintain structure and momentum in the project, so that you can rely on other teams to work productively in order to bring the project — and your work — to fruition
- As a team member, you will be treated equally

What we expect from you

- We expect you to regularly check in and engage with others on Slack (though you are not required to keep up to date on all chit-chat on Slack)
- We expect you to uphold any commitments you make (e.g. completing tasks)
- We expect you to treat all other members with professionalism and respect, and adhere to the Code of Conduct

Code of conduct

The purpose of the Code of Conduct is to make sure everyone feels safe, comfortable, and valued as they contribute to the project.

As a contributor, we expect you to approach your work and other team members professionally. This means treating other contributors with respect and upholding any commitments you make.

Part of approaching others with respect means not subjecting them to uninvited or unwelcome behaviours. An example of unwelcome behaviour is inappropriately flirting with another team member, which often makes the other person feel uncomfortable. Please keep in mind that the Couchers.org team — nor our platform — is not for dating!

Onboarding tasks

To get started, do the following tasks:

1. Fill in the Contributor Information Form
2. Setup Slack: download the app on your computer or phone, upload a photo to your account (optional but strongly encouraged!), add a short description to your profile (View profile > Edit profile > "What I do")
3. Say hi to the team: go to #introduce-yourself channel and write a description about yourself, your history with the couch surfing community, and what you're going to help out on.
4. Send a message to your team lead to introduce yourself (if they haven't already). Please contact Itsi or Aapeli if you don't know who you should contact. Your team lead will give you the relevant team document that explains how that team functions.
5. Join the next team meeting where you can meet your new team!
6. (Optional) Join an online Couchers social event.

The Contributor Assignment Agreement

If you work on stuff that's for the exclusive use of Couchers.org, for example designs or written content, we ask that you sign the Contributor Assignment Agreement to transfer ownership of such intellectual property to the non-profit foundation. This allows us to build a solid brand and make sure we have the legal right to use work that everyone contributes.

The Contributor Assignment Agreement (CAA) clarifies what happens to intellectual property that you contribute and produce while working on Couchers.org. This is explained in more depth in the "Legal Stuff" section.

Workflow

Please always use UTC time when communicating with the team. We want to avoid using times like CET, EST, AET, etc. You can convert UTC times to your own local time with a tool like MyTime.io. If you organise a meeting, please use WhenIsGood with (time zones enabled) to find a time that works for everyone.

Slack etiquette

The purpose of these guidelines is to be respectful of other team members' time: a lot of people have limited resources they can contribute, and we want to make sure we foster an environment where they can get their work done efficiently. Endless irrelevant notifications on Slack causes people to turn their notifications off which hinders work.

1. Try to find the appropriate channel or person to post your message in: post in the smallest channel that contains the people who need to hear your message, or write to them privately
2. Please write **all your thoughts about one topic in one message**, and draft through it to make sure you're articulating your thoughts concisely
3. Use **threads** when replying to a topic, this keeps channels cleaner and helps find content in the history
4. Please do not post on #updates, but you may respond in a thread
5. Be very mindful of posting in #general, it's for project-wide notifications only

Overall, keep in mind that what takes you a few minutes to write can take a combined hour for a whole channel to read and digest. Try to write in a way that minimizes read time at the expense of a bit more write time.

Unless you are a team lead, please do not organise a meeting without speaking to Itsi or Aapeli first. A general meeting can attract up to 20 people and take over 2 hours, which is a valuable 40 hours of volunteer time. We want to be conservative with when we have meetings.

Our collaboration tools

Slack is our communication tool. Download the app on your computer and/or phone. You can expect that everyone will regularly check Slack. We use it to:

- Give updates to members of the core team
- Organise and discuss tasks
- Meet, discuss ideas, and hang out with others in the team (it's a social place too!)

GitHub hosts our codebase. This is the central place where development happens. If you are a software engineer, you should receive write access from Aapeli. The developer contributor guide explains how and why we use GitHub in detail.

The Couchers Wiki hosts long-term changing documents and other accumulated know-how. We strive to keep important documents there and Slack for ephemeral things only.

Google Drive is our tool for keeping and editing documents and tables.

OTOBO is our ticketing system. Access is given on an as-needed basis for ticketed flows like community outreach and support.

For a full list of contributor resources, see the General Resources wiki page.

Representation outside of Couchers.org

As a core contributors with Couchers.org, we encourage you to promote the platform when the opportunity arises, but please follow these guidelines:

- When expressing opinions about the project, be sure to clarify that they are your opinions and not necessarily the opinions of the project
- Do not troll or start unhealthy debates, arguments, or flame wars
- Guide like-minded people to our forums where they can join dedicated discussions

Legal stuff

The Couchers.org project is supported by the Couchers.org Foundation. This is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee for charitable purposes based in New South Wales, Australia, formed specifically to oversee the Couchers.org project, guard its assets, and give team members protection from legal issues. The constitution of the Foundation includes a not-for-profit clause, meaning that the Foundation cannot change into a for-profit entity and can't sell its surplus assets to a for-profit company.

We ask you to sign a Contributor Assignment Agreement (CAA) to assign your work to the foundation if you're contributing something that's for the sole use of Couchers.org. That's most things apart from source code. The purpose is to protect the foundation and you from legal issues.

The source code for the project is licensed under the MIT license and all contributions are made under that license. In a nutshell, you retain copyright for your work but allow the Foundation (and anybody else) the right to use and redistribute the code under this license.