

Design Lessons from the Fastest Q&A Site in the West

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This paper analyses the Stack Overflow site and tries to understand what makes the site so perfect for its goal - helping programmers find actionable technical answers to their questions and how this can be replicated in other CSCW sites. Individuals increasingly rely on our social networks to find information and seek advice - this is exemplified by our usage of sites like Quora , Yahoo Answers etc. However, as any developer would tell you, the quality of answers in SO is far better than the answers the same questions would elicit in other Q and A sites. Answers in SO are technical, to the point and are of archival value. What design choices give rise to this ?

The authors conduct both a quantitative analysis of the SO answers dataset and interviews with the founders and users. The three major reasons for the success of SO are -

- Competitive nature of the SO platform : In SO, a technical and to the point answer gives you upvotes and increases your reputation points. These reputation points also added value to the programmers in areas external to SO. This motivated the users to provide high quality answers.
- Popularity of the founders : The founders of SO leveraged the popularity they had in the software engineering space to gain a critical mass of highly engaged users who respected the design of the site and were willing to give it a try.
- Rapidly evolving design : The design team of SO is in a continuous feedback loop with the community through the meta SO forum where a small set of regular and highly vocal users voice out their issues and suggest changes.

The SO approach of deep community involvement is very different from the traditional human centered design approach where the designers have a short period of intense deliberation with the users and ship the product. It also makes it hard to replicate it in other Q and A sites. This also gives rise to a very important question - is it possible for outsiders of a community to foster knowledge sharing with the right set of tools ?

Another important factor in the success of SO and that can be replicated in other Q and A sites is the idea of content moderation to ensure that the user base is in sync with the site's vision of technical answers over conversational answers. Contrast this with Quora - a much larger Q and A site with no sense of content moderation apart from NSFW moderation. The signal to noise ratio of answers in quora is as low as it can get. While Quora started on a very good footing with lots of quality answers, the lack of content moderation has made it into an essay writing competition where

everyone wants to say something even if it has been said before or wants to place phony advertisements. However , on the other hand , Reddit has managed to keep the quality high in most of its subreddits by using effective content moderation policy and a very good use of badges and upvotes.

This leads to an important question - is it better to give everyone a voice and lower the quality or is it better to bring in a sense of exclusivity and keep the quality of content high for everyone. This paper ends with a note saying that the most innovative work in social computing is no longer happening in the academia but in dedicated startups immersed in the communities they cater to. The authors state that “ academic research should not be relegated to studying exciting communities created by others”.