

## Best Practices for Increasing Volunteer Productivity

Written by Tom Johnson  
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Many project leaders have high hopes when they see 20+ volunteers on their projects, but they soon realize that numbers alone don't translate into productivity. Finding a way to make your team of volunteers more productive is a constant challenge. A team of 50 or more volunteers may still yield low productivity if the project leader doesn't understand how to lead community volunteers.

Despite the techniques managers have in leading employees, the techniques for leading community volunteers can differ substantially. Volunteers are located remotely, they work according to different schedules, they have varying time commitments, they are driven by different motivations, and they possess a variety of skill levels. Leading a successful community project requires you to take all of this into account as you orchestrate your plans. The following are seven best practices for increasing volunteer productivity.

### **Invite Volunteers to Act**

When volunteers join a project, they may not know where to start. They often feel like they need permission to act, especially if they joined the project after it already started.

To help volunteers get started, point the new volunteer to JIRA and personally invite him or her to select a task. JIRA allows you to divide up any technical task for your project.

It's best to invite volunteers to do something when they first join the project, and then re-invite them to take tasks during your weekly meetings. Use your weekly meetings as a time to evaluate which volunteers have tasks and which do not.

### **Start Small, Then Move Up**

Try not to assign a critical, time-sensitive, high-skill task to a volunteer you don't know. Start volunteers with low-priority tasks to gauge their abilities. By assigning a low-priority task to start, you lose little if they don't complete it or if they complete it poorly.

Tim Riker, a community project lead, explains that he likes to assign new volunteers bugs to reproduce. If they do well posting useful feedback about reproducing the bugs, he ramps them

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up by pointing them toward the source and asking if they can fix the problem. This gives the volunteer an opportunity to work on the code. Tim doesn't push volunteers to this advanced level from the start.

### Match Skillsets to Tasks

Some volunteers may not have the skills needed to tackle advanced tasks. In that case, find out what skills the volunteer does have and select a task suitable for his or her skills. For example, if a volunteer lacks developer skills, you can ask him or her to test a feature or fixed bug.

Testing can suit nearly all skill levels. If a volunteer designer lacks Photoshop or HTML skills, you can ask him or her to provide feedback on existing designs.

You can review a volunteer's skills by looking at his or her Skills profile on [tech.lids.org](http://tech.lids.org). This profile can give you an initial idea about the volunteer's abilities, perhaps highlighting strengths in some areas you overlooked. Try to match strengths to the appropriate project tasks.

### Simplify the Tasks

Remember that a volunteer's time is limited. Unlike full-time employees, volunteers will not likely have all day to complete a task. Because of this time limitation, try breaking down complicated tasks into simple ones. Almost every complicated task can be broken apart and simplified in various ways.

Steve Mann, one of the community project managers, says, "During the last conference, we would sometimes just give a team member something he could edit in less than an hour. We'd do this just to get the volunteer started." Completing a simple task can help build a volunteer's confidence.

Even though you simplify the tasks, this doesn't mean the end result will be trivial. The more you can distribute simple tasks among larger numbers of volunteers, the more volunteer hours you can accrue toward your project. Communicate Regularly

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Regular communication with your group will help maintain volunteer interest and activity. Alan Smoot, business manager over the community projects, says project leads should be communicating with their teams at least three times a week or more. Lack of communication can cause volunteers to quickly lose interest in projects.

What should you communicate with your team? Here are few possibilities:

- Tasks that were recently completed
- Newly identified bugs or issues
- Team meeting recaps or announcements
- Service day schedules and attendance
- New members who joined the group
- Updates to the project's wiki page
- Requests for feedback on strategies and directions
- New project requirements
- Progress towards release dates
- News about the community

Your e-mail communication doesn't need to be lengthy. Just be consistent. When you think of something to communicate, jot it down and send it out. This ongoing conversation with your team members will help maintain their motivation and interest in volunteering.

### Accommodate Volunteer Schedules

Remember that people's schedules fluctuate. Volunteers usually have full-time jobs, families, and Church callings, so they're squeezing in what little time they have to volunteer. A volunteer may have a lot of time during a specific season, such as summer, or excess time on the weekends, or an upcoming vacation. Just because a volunteer isn't currently active doesn't mean that his or her schedule won't open up in the future.

If a volunteer says he or she currently doesn't have time but wants to stay in touch with the project, find out when the volunteer's schedule changes. Note it on your calendar, and follow up with the volunteer at that time to find out if he or she can devote more time to the project.

### Share Your Vision

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Volunteers may not always share your vision of the product's roadmap and feature list. If you find a lack of response and engagement, ask the volunteer whether he or she has feedback on the direction you're going.

You can surface these concerns with regular communication through e-mail and meetings. You might ask questions such as, *Does anyone see any limitations with our current plan? Do you have any feedback about the direction we're headed?*

If the volunteers complain about a feature, ask what their proposal is for fixing it. Turn negative comments into positive ideas. Then nurture these ideas by getting volunteers more engaged about the issues they're interested in.

Alan Brown, a community volunteer, explains the need to share the vision regularly: "Occasionally a project manager will jump into the development cycle too quickly without making sure the team has a shared vision. Project managers should devote time to teaching the vision and foundational principles and roadmap for the project. When individual contributors get the big picture, they can see how their smaller slice of the project really does contribute to moving the project forward, and then they are more motivated."

Your project's wiki page should clearly state your vision. Whenever you update the vision, let your team know that you updated it. You might point new team members to the vision in your welcome e-mail. This will help remind everyone of the vision on a regular basis.

### Conclusion

Be realistic about participation on the web. Even the most successful collaborative projects, such as Wikipedia, have only a small fraction of heavy contributors. Jakob Nielsen, a well-known usability researcher, says participation on the web generally follows a 90-9-1 rule. 90 percent of volunteers will remain quiet lurkers. 9 percent will make small contributions intermittently. And 1 percent will make substantial contributions (see [Participation Inequality](#)).

Despite this 90-9-1 trend, a skilled project lead can shift these statistics toward more favorable percentages. It requires effort and awareness. Following these seven best practices will encourage more participation and productivity among your teams.

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*This article is part of an ongoing series of community guidelines published on the [Community Guidelines for LDS Tech projects wiki](#)*

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