

Someone suggested Stack Overflow for Teams in a chat room ‘Hey could this be useful?’ And the offer was instantly convincing: Only document the things your team wants to know at any given point. That benefit was obvious.

DAVID ÖSTERREICHER
HEAD OF ENGINEERING AT RUNTASTIC

With Stack Overflow for Teams, Runtastic turns a good onboarding experience into a great one.

As part of the Adidas group, Runtastic develops a continuously evolving portfolio of apps and online services to track fitness and health data. Their product is used by 142 million fitness enthusiasts and those wanting to become more active. The team committed to an agile development philosophy, but as it grew from 20 developers to an engineering team of 120, the leadership team recognized there was a challenge in maintaining that culture. Stack Overflow for Teams became a central tool to enable collaboration across offices and department silos.

THE CHALLENGE(S)

Protect a culture of flowing communication in a growing tech department

Founded in 2009, Runtastic grew from a small team to a 250-person-strong organization spanning Salzburg, Pasching, and Vienna. With many of the core team members still around, they had to adjust from a place where everyone was catching up with everyone on a daily basis to one where information flows through static written sources. Here they faced the problem many development teams face: “The documentation ends up more than you needed.” David Österreicher Head of Engineering Premium describes one of the inherent problems of documentation.

“You sit down to write a piece of documentation in a wiki, in our case Atlassian Confluence, but the person writing documentation never knows how many details to include. You then need all these smaller clarifications around it, so you ping someone on Slack, and get more context.” This additional conversation would then be lost, not searchable, in the Slack timeline. With the result of the team answering the same question over and over again. “We were just repeating ourselves constantly.”

So Österreicher was instantly convinced when the Stack Overflow for Teams announcement came: “Someone suggested it in a chat room ‘Hey could this be useful?’ And the offer was instantly convincing: Only document the things your team wants to know at any given point. That benefit was obvious.”

THE SOLUTION

Documenting only what’s needed, while indexing existing wiki in a bite-sized way

Runtastic saw the advantages of Teams filling in a gap between their Wiki and chat tools. Engineering still uses the wiki for things their system architect Roman Zavarnitsyn describes as “heavy

documentation” with “lots of charts, lots of explanations, lots of mentions, lots of action points.” But as Stefan Damm, VP of Engineering, agrees, the strong point of Teams has been to surface just the bite-sized information that people ask for. “We still write and update documentation in the wiki. But Teams works as an index.”

Establishing a standard during adoption

The roll-out initiated by Österreicher on the backend team was later adopted by all product development teams. Team members were required to add example questions to the Team. “We followed the onboarding recommendations from Stack Overflow. Finding example questions was easy, we just looked at the questions in chat for the last two weeks.” Leading by example quickly resulted in establishing a good standard for questions. Österreicher “I believe people experienced first hand if they put in the effort, format a question nicely, re-read it, then they get a better answer in return.”

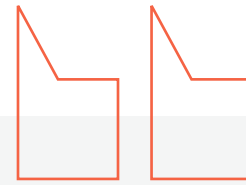
“We saw a slightly different usage than on public Stack Overflow. People don’t just give a straight answer, they also add some context. Like ‘Oh we did a project just like it two years ago’ or something like that.”

Slack integration leads behavioral change

The staff and management saw it integrate into communication processes instantly. “The impulse still is to ask a question on Slack first, but with the notifications, it so easy to then prompt someone to as a second step create a question on Stack Overflow for Teams.” Here the integration with Slack has become daily use,” Österreicher says, with employees using the button to suggest to each other when something would be a good fit for a Stack Overflow for Teams question. “But for the not time-sensitive questions people will go straight to Stack Overflow, so we cut out a lot of the noise we would previously get through Slack.”

Together with a dedicated internal champion, each team at Runtastic has set up tags for specific teams, technologies, and platforms. Which Österreicher says sits well with the matrix model in which they are structured. So tags reflect not only the teams of engineers working together but cluster around fields of expertise.

Zavarnitsyn sees the benefits here of working across different teams and offices. Conversations that would have happened in a smaller group are now visible to the whole company. “I am in Linz, so it really helps to just post something under, say, the Android tag. And then we have a Slack channel set up for that, so everyone at the company will see that question.” As



We saw a slightly different usage than on public Stack Overflow. People don't just give a straight answer, they also add some context.

DAVID ÖSTERREICHER
HEAD OF ENGINEERING AT RUNTASTIC

an active user of the public Stack Overflow site Zavarnitsyn enjoys the additional means to notify members in Runtastic's private instance. "My favorite feature is that on the private instance you can mention a specific person who might know the answer."

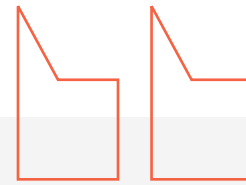
Adding context and history to formal onboarding documentation

Not only did the quality of answers improve massively to those previously shared hastily in an email or chat, but Österreicher also notices that because Stack Overflow for Teams isn't full-blown documentation, the kind of questions sometimes have a conversational aspect them. "I call this Runtastic lore: decisions and context that otherwise, only two people would mention over coffee." He gives an example of a backend service called VEGAS, which is confusing to new starters. Initiated Runtastic members know it stands for Very Excellent Gamification Service. While this is an example of an in-joke, Österreicher appreciates that Stack Overflow for Teams has become a place to ask for more context, especially during onboarding. "It adds a bit of history to the otherwise straight-forward documentation." Österreicher says "We might see questions like 'Why do we do backend development in Ruby?' So I could have just answered that in Slack. But then the answer would have been gone forever. Even though it is quite an interesting answer."

Surfacing tech discussions on the team

Not only does Teams improve collaboration between engineers, it also offers leadership insights into the technology question that move the team. "As a VP of Engineering leading over 100 people, it has brought me closer to the work again." Says Damm. "I saw what the people are concerned about in the day to day work. What questions do they have that need to be answered? It gave a better picture of where to focus certain initiatives, how to improve the onboarding."

One of the most useful questions in that regard are those that are no longer on Teams says Österreicher. "At some point, certain architecture discussions happen on Teams. Where we then knew these more fundamental questions need some space for opinionated exchange. So even though we closed the question, it had surfaced the need to address the discussion."



As a VP of engineering leading over 100 people, it has brought me closer to the work again. I saw what the people are concerned about in the day to day work. What questions do they have that need to be answered? It gave a better picture of where to focus certain initiatives, how to improve the onboarding.

STEFAN DAMM
VP OF ENGINEERING AT RUNTASTIC