



Microsoft is one of the world's largest and most well respected technology companies. But even after four decades in business, the firm continues to evolve. "Microsoft in 2014 began a cultural transformation, really one from a culture of knowing to one of learning," says Ryan J Salva, a director of product management for the company's developer services division. "How are we collaborating internally? How are we facilitating better conversations among our developers, product teams, and sales field."

There are more than 50,000 developers working at Microsoft. Until recently, conversations and questions about products and services happened over email or group chat.



Any email that was sent to a discussion group or a distribution list would get archived in this one place. The challenges with that was that it wasn't discoverable. It wasn't easy for users to find that existing information.

Laura MacLeod | Program Manager, Developer Services Division

Because it was difficult to know if a great answer already existed, support teams were often left putting out the same fires over and over again. "We struggled for the longest time with our internal knowledge management," said Daniel Stefaniak, a program manager with an Azure ready product group. "People kept falling back to email and direct messages." When the team analyzed the data, they were shocked. "The same question was being asked three times a month and about 70% of questions were left unanswered."

"When Microsoft as a whole was looking in the mirror and self-evaluating, one of the things that we found was that communication itself was pretty inefficient," says Salva. "We did have an internal Q&A system, but it only had about 900 users."

So starting in 2016, his team began searching for a different solution. "We set about the job of trying to better understand how developers and product teams would like to communicate. There were three key points that teams needed. First, we needed easy onboarding. We also needed well structured content. Last but not least, we needed a really low friction way to create the content."

Escaping the email trap

What Microsoft discovered was that many of their developers were using the same tool to manage knowledge around code, just not internally. "While Microsoft oftens creates tools for problems that we see unsolved, we saw that this was a problem that has already been solved, and solved well with Stack Overflow," says Salva. "We approached Stack Overflow to have a conversation about how we could create an enterprise organizational community of questions and answers that could service our internal teams. Just two and a half years later, we have over 70,000 users asking 80,000 questions."

MacLeod was one of the internal stakeholders charged with trying to build an engaged community around Stack Overflow inside of Microsoft. Luckily, the software developers who made up the bulk of early users were very familiar with Stack Overflow, as most used

For every new question asked, users find

35x
answers,
allowing them to quickly solve problems and get back to other tasks

7.5 hours

On average, new problems are solved in less than a single workday

the public site on a regular basis. “When new users join, they come in, and from day one they know how to use this tool,” says MacLeod. “When we launched our internal Stack Overflow instance at Microsoft, it took off like wildfire.”

These changes resulted in a major boost to productivity. “Historically, people are used to finding distribution lists and sending questions to these distribution lists. They would end up getting answered by other people, but there is not historical storage of this data and reuse of data, which means that when somebody in the team makes an investment in answering a question, it does not get reused at all,” says Suraj Gupta, a program manager with the Cloud Test Team. “When these questions are on Stack Overflow, I get to be more productive because I don’t have to answer the same question twice.”

The impact has quickly rippled out from internal questions to customer facing support.



Our colleagues at Microsoft are some of the early adopters of our identity technology. By answering their questions, we get a heads up on the needs of our customers around the world, and we’re able to take the output from their questions, analyze the root cause, and then update our external facing documentation or create new documentation. And by doing that, working with our internal colleagues and answering their questions actually benefits all of the users of Identity around the world.

Barbara Seldon | Knowledge Management, Microsoft Identity team

Stefaniak sees the change in the support work he does every day. “It feels like repeat questions do not happen anymore,” and a much smaller percentage of questions go unanswered. “Collectively, there has been a great sigh relief.”

Useful to more than just developers

Initially, Stack Overflow was used internally at Microsoft only by employees working directly on creating software or supporting clients using that software. But as word spread about this new tool, it quickly it became clear that this kind of Q&A wasn’t just for helping programmers resolve an error message.

The platform also began to spread to employees who didn’t work directly on building software. “It’s been a resource for our entire company,” says Salva. “Not only for developers to solve problems, it’s also enabled ours sales field to answer technical questions that help them close deals. It’s permeated the company in every way,”

Salva believes that the internal changes driven by Stack Overflow ultimately have a positive impact on public consumers. “A lot of what I do is help those teams think about how they can collaborate more effectively, how they can bring their teams together and sharing information and sharing processes, systems, and methodologies,” says Salva. “Stack Overflow is not only a means to an end for users who are eager to find a quick answer to accomplish some task, but it’s also a way for our product managers and engineering teams to suss out where we can do more to solve problems in an intuitive way and ultimately deliver a better user experience.”

After adopting Stack Overflow for Teams, repeat questions have

dropped by 33%

