Support, Social Technology, and Trust

Jeff Browning, 2008-11-09

As Don mentioned earlier this week, we took the plunge and entered Forrester's Groundswell contest. To me, I believe this is the ultimate testament to what you, the community, are doing on DevCentral everyday (check out this page - it's pretty cool). Back when we started this thing, it was simply to help folks learn how to tap into F5's groundbreaking iControl API. After asking users, we learned that folks needed some assistance getting started. Surprise, surprise - understanding terms like WSDL, SOAP, and related things were a bit new to F5's traditional users! With backgrounds in software, where forums have been around a while, we thought this would be a good tool to enable us to assist and support users as they played with this cool technology.

Honestly? Selling management on un-moderated forums was not a slam-dunk. There were (reasonably) concerns that someone might say something nasty. That said, we made a philosophical choice... to *trust* our users. We wanted them be as involved and invested in this community as F5 is. So - trust matters. Along the way, something interesting happened: the community even started to protect it's own turf!

The same thing happened when we weighed the pros and cons of moving ALL of our technical documentation to a wiki. (what? let ANYONE edit it? seriously...?). Yes - like the forums, there was plenty of debate. Once again, the notions of trust and enablement - all with the desire of supporting users through more free-flowing, 24x7, worldwide contributions - won out. The result? Well - just one example is the over 100 iRule samples posted in the Codeshare today - the vast majority contributed by real users working on solving real challenges everyday.

When looking at this whole contest thing, I'm sure some of the other categories could have applied. But, the "supporting" category is the most obvious choice. However, it's not exactly why most might think... When I step back and look at what everyone is doing in the community, what strikes me most is how - in significant part because of the social media technologies we've embraced - users are supporting each other. Without a free-flowing community, ideas and solutions created in Auckland may have never been seen by users in Munich. Or, a cool iRule trick from someone in London may have never reached someone in Tokyo.

Further, I'll be the first to admit this: there are some protocols or technologies that we'll NEVER know *as well* as some of you. You're work, day in and day out, with a specific protocol or application server - and specifically it's subtle quirks that come from working with it daily - help you bring a completely different dimension to other users wrestling with a similar problem. Sure - we can research and understand something academically. However, members' tribal, hands-on knowledge makes all of the difference when providing real, useful solutions.

Candidly, there are times when I ask myself this: how do vendors that DON'T enable this free-flow of ideas survive? With the growth of cloud, SOA, virtualization, etc., the technology hairball and the knowledge required cannot be owned by one all-knowing company, right?

I go back to the beginning; it's this notion of trust, free-flowing ideas and dialog, that makes this community all about support. Not just F5 supporting our technology (as it should). But, helping end users help each other to just get more... value... ideas... inspiration... support. All from others working to solve similar problems.

BTW - some serious props go out to F5 leadership for trusting and embracing the community as partners and co-collaborators on this journey. If not for that trust, I don't think we would see the dynamic interaction that happens each day on DevCentral.

So, if you've read this far, thank you for your participation in and involvement with DevCentral. If you feel like it, maybe make a visit to our entry page and make a comment and vote for DevCentral. Also - we've set up a Forum here on DevCentral as well for you to post your comments, thoughts, likes, etc. about DevCentral.

F5 Networks, Inc. | 401 Elliot Avenue West, Seattle, WA 98119 | 888-882-4447 | f5.com

F5 Networks, Inc.
Corporate Headquarters
info@f5.com

F5 Networks
Asia-Pacific
apacinfo@f5.com

F5 Networks Ltd.
Europe/Middle-East/Africa
emeainfo@f5.com

F5 Networks
Japan K.K.
f5j-info@f5.com