

CREATING A  
CULTURE OF  
DOCUMENTATION



DRUPALCAMP NJ 2023

---

ALANNA BURKE

2:30 PM - JADWIN A09

---

ALANNA BURKE  
(SHE/HER)



*aburke626*



*alannaburke@fosstodon.org*



*alannaburke*

*Community Manager,  
Developer Relations, and  
Documentation*



**amazee.io**

part of Mirantis



01 What is documentation?

02 Why is it important?

03 What makes good docs?

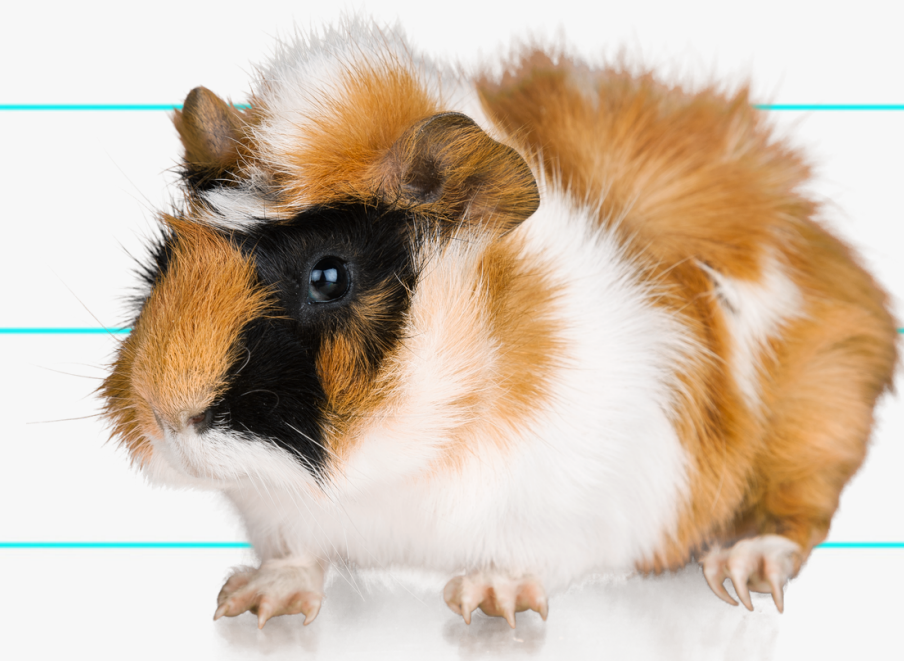
04 What makes bad docs?

05 What leads to doc failure?

06 What are the consequences of bad docs?

07 Changing your culture

08 What if it doesn't work?





WHAT IS DOCUMENTATION?

# WHAT IS DOCUMENTATION? (WHAT DOES IT DO?)

Guides users

Explains code

Shows thought  
leadership

Establishes  
processes

Onboards new  
customers



WHY IS GOOD DOCUMENTATION IMPORTANT?

# WHY IS GOOD DOCUMENTATION IMPORTANT?

Better	Faster	Retains
Onboarding	troubleshooting	users/customers
Improves productivity	Saves time Avoid miscommunication	Manage change



# WHY ARE GOOD DOCS IMPORTANT?

- 61% of professionals in distributed teams say it can be hard to figure out what their colleagues are working on.
- 44% say siloed digital tools make it hard to spot if work is being duplicated.
- 62% report missing opportunities to collaborate and achieve better results.







*"Humans are  
terrible at data  
storage"  
-Sergio Pereira*



WHAT MAKES GOOD DOCS?

# WHAT MAKES GOOD DOCS?

Easy to  
understand

Gets to the point

Good visuals

Vetted for  
accuracy

Includes author  
and date

Addresses the  
right audience



WHAT MAKES BAD DOCS?

# WHAT MAKES **BAD** DOCS?

Fragmented  
across platforms

Incomplete

Out of date

Makes  
assumptions

Uses jargon

Not tailored to  
the right  
audience

WHAT LEADS TO DOC FAILURE?



# WHAT LEADS TO DOC FAILURE?

*Docs are often everyone's problem and no one's job*

*No time*

*No incentive*

*No experience*

*Red tape*

*Information  
hoarding*

*Hard to keep up  
to date*

# WHAT LEADS TO DOC FAILURE?

## Excuses

"The code is self-documenting"

"It's too hard to keep it up to date"

"It adds too much time to my development"

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BAD DOCS?



# CASE STUDY - GOOGLE (2014)

- 48% of Google engineers cited bad docs as #1 productivity issue
- 50%+ of SRE issues cited problems with docs
- Docs were considered everybody's problem, but nobody's job



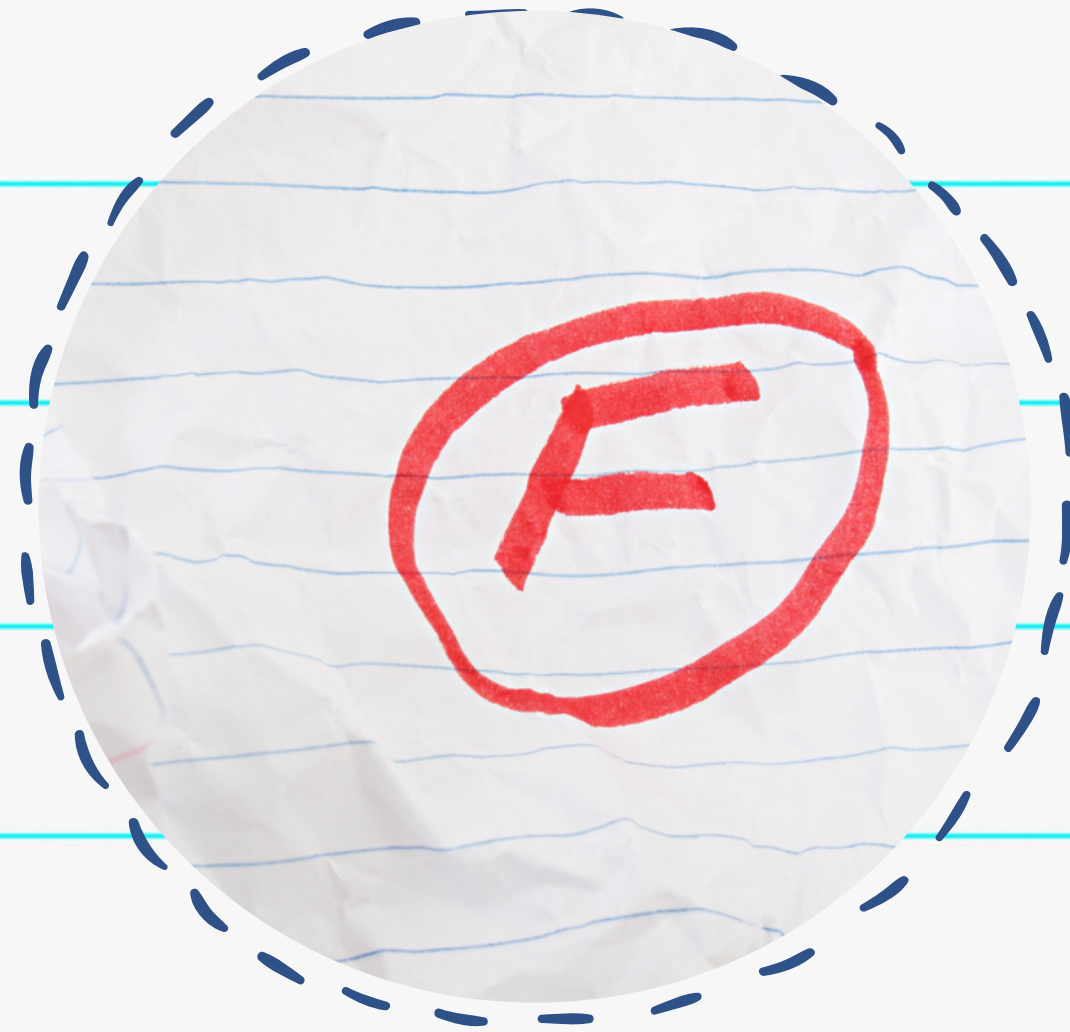
# WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF **BAD** DOCS?

Having to redo  
work because  
requirements  
unclear

Missing info on  
areas of  
codebase

Docs are hard to  
find and waste  
time





**BAD** DOCS ARE WORSE THAN NO DOCS!

# CHANGING YOUR CULTURE





*"Culture is not  
immutable"  
-Riona MacNamara*



# CHANGING YOUR CULTURE

*Start from the top*

*Choose someone to drive it*

*Make it easy*

*Start with standardization*

*Empower contributors*

# START FROM THE TOP

Establish that clear, concise, writing is the expectation from everyone

Higher ups and stakeholders lead by example with quality writing

# CHOOSE SOMEONE TO DRIVE IT

Make someone responsible for managing documentation.

This person also creates templates, trainings, and any other support needed to create docs.



# MAKE IT EASY

Choose tools that integrate into  
existing workflows

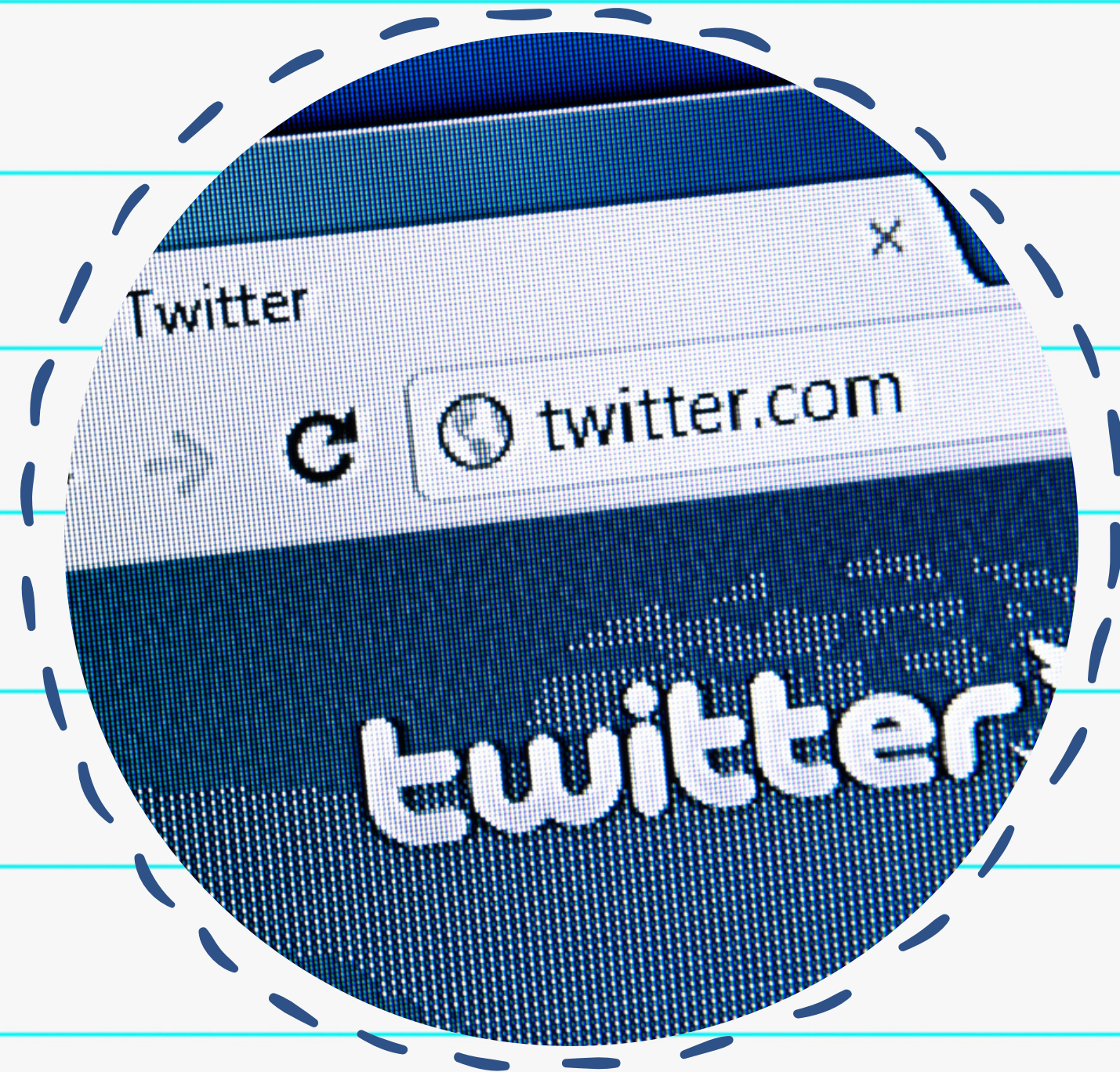
Let devs stay in their editor

Use Git

Ensure everyone has access

# CASE STUDY - TWITTER (2014)

- Back in 2014, Twitter had 3 technical doc writers.
- Encourage documentation via education and "DocDays"
- Build a new docs-as-code stack
- Create documentation templates





# START WITH STANDARDIZATION

Establish a tool set

Create templates

Create a style guide

Use spell checkers and linters

Have an approval process

Establish a maintenance  
schedule



# EMPOWER CONTRIBUTORS

Use a system that allows for contribution from everyone.

Give trainings on how to write docs.

Create a positive feedback loop.

Allow everyone to have a sense of ownership over docs.

WHAT IF IT DOESN'T WORK?

# WHAT IF IT DOESN'T WORK?

Don't accept  
merge requests  
that don't  
include needed  
documentation  
updates.

Make doc  
writing an  
official part of  
everyone's job  
description

Develop intrinsic  
value



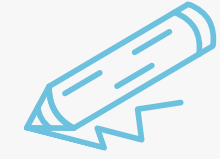


THANK YOU!

Questions?

*Let me know if you have any feedback for this talk!*

# REFERENCES



Andre, P. (2023, February 13). Motivating Developers to Care About Documentation. DX. <https://getdx.com/best-practices/documentation-culture-engineering>

Barney, D, & Oakes, J. (2018, April 26). Building a Documentation Culture. Kaseya. <https://www.kaseya.com/blog/2018/04/26/building-a-documentation-culture/>

Begly, N. (2021, September 7). How Google, Twitter, and Spotify built a culture of documentation. Doctave. <https://www.doctave.com/blog/2021/09/07/how-google-twitter-and-spotify-build-culture-of-documentation.html>

Donohue, W. (2018, October 15). 3 Ways to Create a Culture of Documentation. I Done This Blog. <http://blog.idonethis.com/3-ways-create-culture-documentation/>

Franklin, S, & Gargenta, M. (2014, May 5). TechDocs at Twitter: Creating the Culture of Documentation [Conference session]. Read the Docs, Portland, Oregon, United States. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6y4eQ6gYwdU>

# REFERENCES



Hinson, B. (2019, August 28). How to Build a Culture of Documentation. Hickam's Dictum. <https://hickamsdictum.com/how-to-build-a-culture-of-documentation-534bd75817d6>

ITGlue. How to Build a Productive Documentation Culture Inside Your MSP.  
[https://f.hubspotusercontent40.net/hubfs/445399/Crewhu-ITGlue-HowToBuildAProductiveDocCulture\\_Guide.pdf](https://f.hubspotusercontent40.net/hubfs/445399/Crewhu-ITGlue-HowToBuildAProductiveDocCulture_Guide.pdf)

Kutt, M. (2022, October 28). What is a documentation culture? (And how to create one). Qatalog.  
<https://qatalog.com/blog/post/what-is-a-documentation-culture/>

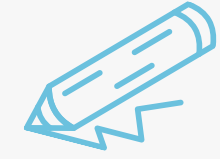
Lau, Y. (2021, June 23). Remote Work: Creating A Documentation-First Culture. Forbes.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2021/06/23/remote-work-creating-a-documentation-first-culture/?sh=40bab8295859>

MacNamara, R. (2016, July 11-13). The Knowledge: Towards a Culture of Engineering Documentation [Conference session]. SREcon16, Dublin, Ireland. <https://www.usenix.org/conference/srecon16europe/program/presentation/macnamara>





# REFERENCES



Pereira, S. (2023, January 23). How To Nurture a Culture of Documentation in Remote Teams. Remote Work Academy. <https://www.remote-work.io/how-to-nurture-a-culture-of-documentation-in-remote-teams/>

Projectindiana. (2021, March 8). Building a Documentation Culture – How to Get Your Staff To Start Documenting. ITGlue. <https://www.itglue.com/blog/building-a-documentation-culture/>

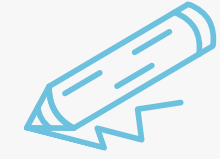
Qatalog & Cornell University. (2021). Workgeist Report. <https://assets.qatalog.com/language.work/qatalog-2021-workgeist-report.pdf>

Rabaino, L. (2016, July 29). On building a culture of documentation. Vox Media Storytelling Studio. <https://storytelling.voxmedia.com/2016/7/29/12299564/on-building-a-culture-of-documentation>

Scott, J. (2019, August 30). How to build a documentation culture. The Startup. <https://medium.com/swlh/how-to-build-a-documentation-culture-ffc6alefa271>



# REFERENCES



Thackston, A. (n.d.). Creating a Culture of Documentation. Allison Thackston. <https://www.allisonthackston.com/articles/culture-of-documentation.html>

Victorino, R. (2020, September 2). How Stripe Built a Writing Culture. Slab. <https://slab.com/blog/stripe-writing-culture/>

Vieira, T. (2020, August 26). How to build a design documentation culture from scratch. UX Collective. <https://uxdesign.cc/how-to-build-up-the-design-documentation-culture-a425ef5ecbf7>



# MORE TALKS I'VE GIVEN ON DOCS

Writing Inclusive Documentation

Documenting an Agile Team -

how to keep up

Documentation is like a plant -

you need to tend to it!

Documentation as a deliverable:

the business case for

documentation