

The Developer Advocacy Handbook

Christian
Heilmann

The Developer Advocacy Handbook

Jens Oliver Meiert and Christian Heilmann

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About this handbook

This handbook will get you on the way to be a great developer advocate for any product or company. Naturally, your approach may need tweaking for different markets and audiences—and in accordance with your own personality—but the main principles are the same for everybody and anywhere in the world.

Developer advocacy is a comparatively new field of work and the first hurdle you will encounter is people asking what a developer advocate is and why any company would need a role like that.

Eleven years ago I wrote this book for exactly that reason. I had hit a wall in my career. I was a lead developer and the next and only role to get higher up the ladder for me was manager, which I didn't want to do. I already had started reaching out to developers about my company, but there was no recognition for it as it plain and simply wasn't my job. This is why I came up with the role of "developer evangelist" not only as a good idea, but as a full time job in a technical company. Lucky for me, the company agreed that it would be a beneficial thing to do. That's why I wrote this handbook to help other people to get the same opportunity.

About this version

Fast forward to now. I had a long career as a "developer evangelist" in a few companies and this handbook has inspired a lot of people to go the same route. Developer Relations (DevRel) with all its different roles is a much more common market now. Many companies have taken on the ideas outlined here and in the follow-up books, posts and videos. There are dedicated mailing lists, communities and even conferences that don't only feature DevRel people but are exclusively about DevRel.

Naturally this brought a lot of change along the way. I also stepped back from the role of Developer Relations and went into Program Management. Mainly because I found it time to let other people bring in their ideas and skills that speak to a newer audience.

When someone approached me about a print version of this book, I took a look at it again. I found it at times quaintly outdated, speaking about now defunct tools and products, but the general message and ideas still valid. Even more so, that in a world where you can drown in an avalanche of information about developer advocacy, I took a "zoom out" approach and concentrated on what you should consider and achieve and not the how and which products to use to get there.

I also took a deliberate renaming approach from "Developer Evangelism" to "Developer Advocacy." The reason is that "evangelism" is a religiously loaded term, whereas "advocacy" has a nicer ring to it. You are the advocate for the developer world—the voice to the outside and the person asking for great developer experiences inside your company.

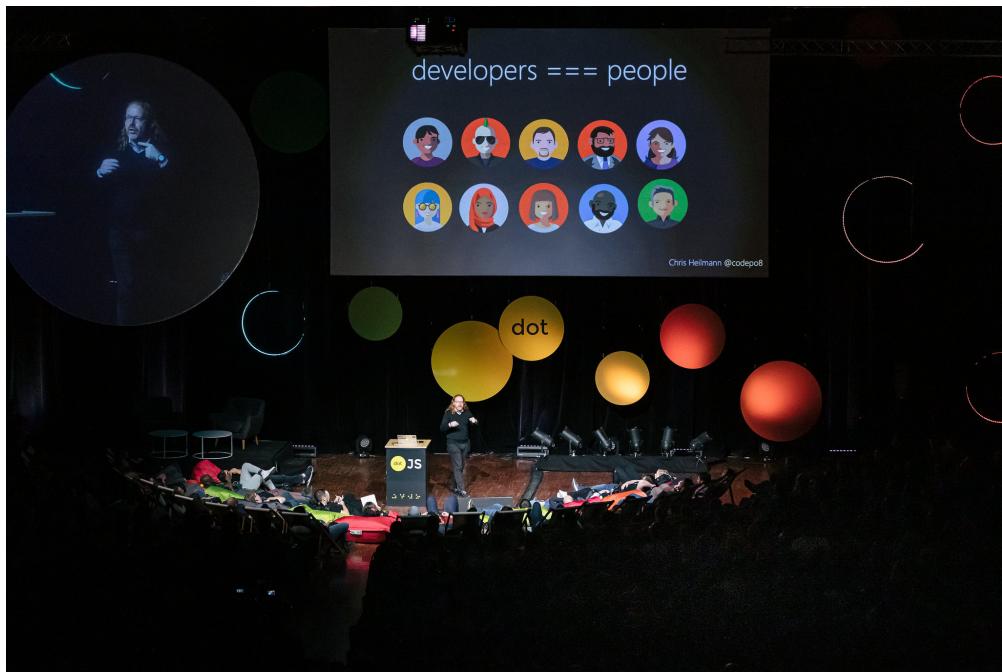
About the author



Christian Heilmann.

Christian Heilmann has been working as a web developer for over 20 years and spent the last 10 as a developer evangelist/advocate for companies like Yahoo, Mozilla and Microsoft. He spent his time speaking on average at about 20 conferences a year and led teams of developers and developer advocates. He published two books and contributed to 6 more. He's been content editor for various online magazines and originally worked as a radio journalist before he considered the web his new home. He blogs since 2005 at christianheilmann.com and can be found on Twitter as the name of [codepo8](https://twitter.com/codepo8). He lived and worked in Germany, India, United States and the UK. He currently lives in Berlin, Germany and works as a Principal Program Manager at Microsoft.

What is Developer Advocacy?



Chris Heilmann presenting at dotjs 2019 with a slide saying developers are people.

Defining Developer Advocacy

A developer advocate is a spokesperson, mediator and translator between a company and its technical staff and outside developers. Every day millions of dollars are wasted in companies because non-tech people and tech people either don't communicate at all or completely miss each other's points.

Developers make the computer world work. Great products start with a good idea. Information Architecture, Design and User Experience make it work for users but to make it work for computers in the first place you need developers. Sadly enough developers are generally considered "deliverers" rather than "thinkers," which is simply not true. What this also means is that telling something to developers as a company or getting them excited is quite a task.



Tip: If you are a clever company you open your products to third party developers and release interfaces to the world. This could be as simple as a data feed, APIs, SDKs or going all in and releasing the whole thing as open source. The benefits are that millions of developers out in the world can find issues with or uses of your products that you never thought of. Innovation can happen anywhere—not only in a meeting room inside your company. It also means that you can hire people that can hit the ground running as they already have experience with your products. But you need people to get them excited about your products and to aid their contributions in the first place. And this is where developer advocates come into play.

Both the world and your company is full of dedicated, highly skilled technical people that are ready to solve anything technical that needs solving. You can get them as excited as a 10 year old on a sugar rush who gets a puppy to play with—for us geeks the puppy is code and the sugar technology platforms.

You can make developers find solutions for almost anything—if you speak their language. If you don't then they will most likely appear as weird and non-communicative. They can also seem to be generally not as excited about working for the company as—for example—the marketing department is. If you fail to excite them they take their solution finding energy elsewhere—into their own pet projects or by contributing to other open products.

The trick is to understand that to be a developer—especially a web developer—you need to have a certain way of seeing the world. And this way of seeing the world makes you suspect things to fail in any which way. If your message means less work for the developers out there it is a great start. If your product gives them more insight into why something failed, also great. If your message means extra work on top of what is already on their plate (and developers always get maxed out) then you'll be out of luck.

Start with the right mindset

The main thing never to forget as a developer advocate is the technical part. It is easy to get into the habit of just writing one presentation after another and re-use materials but this way you will not have much impact.

If something new comes out of your company that should get out to developers take it and access it like an outside developer would. Develop something with it, then document what you have developed. Then write about how you build the thing—and voilà—you've got half an article or presentation already finished.

As a developer advocate it is important that you have experience as a developer. The more projects the better, as working in an agency is different to working for local government or a large multi-national company. Your job is to make your company's technical offerings attractive and interesting to a large variety of developers, and you can only do that when you know their pain.

Of course it is important to be a technical expert, but there are so many more little annoying parts to delivery inside a company that you should be aware of. If you don't have the experience in having to deal with them (and the frustrations they bring) you will have a much harder time giving developers the arguments they need to sell your services to their boss.

Developer advocacy is a role that is a change for developers, not for people coming from HR, PR or marketing. Your main job is still to develop—but this time examples, training materials and explanatory demos rather than live products.

Find your role and play to your strengths

Not everybody can and should be an all-around developer advocate. It is enough if you find your place in the whole spectrum of advocacy. Think about what you love to do the most and then start creating something. The most common parts of the whole job to go into are:

- Writing code tutorials
- Blogging
- Public speaking
- Training
- Social web coverage
- Streaming
- Community support

Check the rest of the handbook and see what resonates best with you. Then start advocating. You have nothing to lose and will most probably be surprised how enjoyable things become if you concentrate on one job at a time.

Work with your own company

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Remove the brand

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Working with your competition

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Work with the competition

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Show respect to the competition

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Acknowledge when the competition is better

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Know about the competition

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Offer Brownbags

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Ask questions at conferences

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Be a presenter people want to invite—publish your presenter terms

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Travel and conference participation

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Getting your travel and accommodation sorted

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Who pays what?

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Be at the event

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Give the event some social media love

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Use the event to build a network

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Keep track of your conference participation

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Prepare takeaways

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Be honest and real

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Say what it is—don't sugar-coat it

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Size matters

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Add media

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Structure your content

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Time-stamp your content

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Cite to prove

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Final Words



Chris Heilmann drinking coffee.

And that's about all I can think of right now. When I first published this handbook it filled a massive gap and I couldn't have hoped that it helped jump-start the world that is Developer Relations right now.

I guess the main part was that the book started from experience. I was lucky to have had access to both the corporate world (working for Yahoo back then) and get the freedom to run my own blog and advocate my own personal brand. Well, luck was one part of it, but being daring enough to flat out demand a change was the other side of it. I came from a position of power. I was a lead engineer and the market just started kicking off again, and, having hired other engineers, I knew how much it costs to hire someone and—even more important—to have someone leave for the competition.

Being able to be your own voice has become quite common but back then was pretty much unheard of. “We pay your cheque, why don’t you talk exclusively of our products?” was the mantra these days. I successfully managed to convince my company to become a “Developer Evangelist” and thought it may be a good idea to write down what I did to get there.

Now, some 15 years later, having spoken at times at 30 conferences a year, having recorded lots of podcasts, shows and training courses, I’m baffled as to how big this market has become and how many people work full-time in DevRel.

It’s been one hell of a ride and I am still humbled by all the opportunities the change into DevRel brought me. May that be traveling the world and seeing new things, creating an excellent network of people to nudge when I need to get access to some company or monetary benefits from secondary incomes or living on expenses.

That said, it is also a draining job. You are always in the spotlight and anything you do can and will be turned to support or dispute some cause of people who envy you or try to become you. To a degree it feels like being a small celebrity and I got a lot of empathy for people always on the presentation platter.

I made a lot of friends on the way, found and supported some excellent talent and I am proud to see how they developed just after having a small conversation that was a “hey, I really think you can do this. If you need some help with the basics, I’m happy to show you...”

I also made some enemies and, without wanting to, hurt or offended people. This is hard to deal with and even more draining. But, it is something to carry and try to find the best way to deal with. After all, even as the most kick-arse Developer Advocate, you’re also human.

Colophon

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