



Developer Relations

How to Build and Grow a Successful Developer Program

Caroline Lewko
James Parton

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DEVELOPER RELATIONS

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DEVELOPER PROGRAM

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Developer Relations: How to Build and Grow a Successful Developer Program

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Caroline:

*To Mom and Dad (posthumously) for letting me
carve my own path.*

*To Alain, my spicy frog, because
it's already been discussed.*

James:

To my parents for their love, security, and patience.

*To Michelle, Jacob, and Holly – everything is for you
and because of you. x*

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Dana Fujikawa – for his big red pen

*Carlo Longino (posthumously) – a key contributor of
many of the early DevRel frameworks and ideas*

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About the Authors

Caroline Lewko is an accomplished visionary and entrepreneur who has spent over two decades helping develop groundbreaking technology and nurturing community connections and innovation. She started WIP, the first boutique Developer Relations agency in 2006, after founding a community and incubator for mobile startups. She'd led consulting engagements and developer events in over 20 countries, spanning a wide range of platforms and technologies, from edge computing and machine learning to mobile. She's a regular keynote speaker and conference moderator.

Now as CEO of Revere Communications, she continues to work with the top ranks of the Fortune 500 and Global 500 to fast-growing startups, with a focus on training and mentoring the next generation of DevRel leaders.

When not speaking, training, or traveling, Caroline can be found gardening, biking, and wine tasting in her beloved Vancouver, BC.

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James Parton created and ran Developer Programs for O2 (O2 Litmus) and Telefonica (BlueVia) before joining Twilio in 2012 as their first hire outside of the United States to launch and run their European business. He did that successfully for five years, leaving just after Twilio's IPO in 2016. James has held board positions with the Application Developers Alliance and the Mobile Ecosystem Forum where he championed the needs of developers with industry and government. He regularly advises startups, corporates, and venture capital firms on their Developer Relations strategies via his boutique agency Land and Expand.

In addition to his Developer Relations activities, James is the Managing Director of the Bradfield Centre in Cambridge, which provides entrepreneurial opportunities for students at the University of Cambridge and acts as a tech community hub for Cambridge and the wider east of England region. He is also a cofounder of the Triple Chasm Company, which provides data-driven tools, training, and content to help companies successfully scale.

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About the Technical Reviewer

Phil Leggetter has a broad experience of Developer Relations, from hands-on execution through to strategic planning with C-level executives, justifying multimillion-dollar budgets and successfully achieving multimillion-dollar revenue targets. He has led DevRel teams within startups through growth, acquisition, and accelerated growth at a publicly traded enterprise. Phil supports the DevRel community through actionable knowledge sharing such as the AAARRRP DevRel Strategy Framework that has helped numerous Developer Relations teams map company-level goals through to team activities that bring value to a business. He continues to lead DevRel teams in addition to holding Developer Relations and experience advisory roles at a small number of startups.

Foreword

In the 1990s, Java was a young, exciting programming language that made it possible to write portable applications easily. I was overjoyed and spent the better part of the six years after university graduation training, educating, and promoting this world-changing technology to anyone who would listen.

These efforts were given a platform (and at the time an amplifying megaphone) at BEA Systems, the market leader in Java application servers, where I carried the title of Chief Evangelist. Developers, at the time, were seen as fickle, idiosyncratic, and with low influence authority in the IT decision-making structure.

Little did I know that “evangelism” was how early technology companies were establishing a Developer Relations function. At the time, we were thrilled when developers attended our workshops to acquire new skills or when our articles outlining innovative techniques in Java programming were published in hip trade magazines. Evangelism was, in many respects, fun because while we were spreading essential technology insights, it kept our own knowledge growth curve piqued.

In the following 20 years, developers have become an economic force. Businesses that build products sold to or consumed by developers generated \$40B in 2020 annual recurring revenue, putting developers at the center of the multitrillion-dollar IT industry. More than 1200 companies have created commercial products within this landscape, and it’s growing 19% annually. With more than 20 million professional software engineers, and 250 million knowledge workers transitioning into civilian developers through low-code technology, the influence of developers will be increasingly as important as advertising in the Super Bowl or the reach of TikTok.

Developer Relations has emerged as the professional practice by which organizations build sustainable and endearing relationships with developers in their new role as economic influencers.

The industry’s understanding of Developer Relations is in its infancy. Only 24% of the Fortune 500 companies have established developer program management offices, and cursory scans of job boards show DevRel positions available in only the best-funded venture capital technology startups. And, in the companies that I’ve invested in, only one third have established DevRel programs even though it’s always highlighted as essential in the boardroom!

When Caroline Lewko told me that she was combining her and James Parton's many years of Developer Relations experience into a book that outlines a recipe for creating, building, and growing a Developer Relations group, I knew that their efforts would have a profound and lasting impact upon marketing, product, and customer success organizations.

Well-run DevRel groups have a significant impact on the bottom line. By reaching developers to facilitate solving their technology problems, businesses can expect a lower customer acquisition cost, lower support costs which improve gross margins, and lower customer churn rates improving the net retention rate.

In *Developer Relations, How to Build and Grow a Successful Developer Program*, Caroline and James provide a blueprint for organizations to build high-performing DevRel organizations.

In Part I: Develop a Common Understanding, they define Developer Relations and articulate how it is different from B2B and B2C techniques by laying out a framework that combines education, marketing, experience, and success, and emphasize the value of the Developer Economy.

The definition of a developer changes with the nature of technology, and with low-code systems making nearly every knowledge worker a developer, there may be up to 500 million reachable professional developers in the coming decade. In Part II: Key Differentiators, Caroline and James provide the constructs necessary to define, segment, and identify different categories of developers, and the companies they work in, which inform the nature of how your marketing and education investments will be made, and the type of monetization strategy you might deploy.

Developers as buyers are more likely to buy from companies implementing a Product-Qualified Lead motion rather than the traditional, sales-heavy Sales-Qualified Lead process. In Part IV: Go-to-Market, Delivering Your Strategy, Caroline and James codify the PQL experience from discovery through activation and scaling. It delves you into the mindset of the developer to help you address key questions that must be addressed at every stage of engagement with developers. Combined with Part III: Alignment on Goals, they also emphasize, whether it's a Product-Qualified Lead or a Developer Relations Qualified Lead, the importance of collaborating with the sales and other teams inside your organization.

Successful DevRel programs are tribes that leverage the collective experiences of team members and your user community to become stronger together. In Part V: Managing and Growing Your Program, Caroline and James provide actionable processes, frameworks, strategy, and tactics to measure and grow your DevRel team and investments.

This book is more than a how-to guide for DevRel professionals. It'll help your organization gain years of knowledge without the years of trial and error so many groups have gone through previously. I hope it becomes a reference that you turn to frequently as you build and grow your DevRel team.

—Tyler Jewell

Managing Director, Dell Technologies Capital

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Introduction

What Is Developer Relations?

This is a question of fierce debate within the DevRel community and one not well understood outside the DevRel community. That this question has yet to be conclusively answered reflects the multifaceted nature of DevRel. We must also recognize that DevRel is a relatively new endeavor, with its origins in the Apple Macintosh marketing team of the early 1980s.

There is a growing body of work that's been created by DevRel professionals to improve the strategy and tactics of the practice. This work has been driven forward by various DevRel books, podcasts, events, and communities including WIP, DevRel.net, DevRel Weekly, and others. There is also specialist research and data from a new breed of industry analyst firms focused on the Developer Economy like SlashData, RedMonk, and EDC.

We want to support the drive to further professionalize DevRel as a practice and achieve board-level recognition for it. We believe any company with a developer program or an ambition to engage with the Developer community should appoint a Chief Developer Relations Officer. The CDRO role would represent the voice of the developer at the executive team level and ensure the DevRel effort is coordinated and connected to the core strategy and objectives of the company.

To support this goal, we have created, updated, and tested frameworks and tools for DevRel professionals. We've used our 20 years each of experience and combined it with the experience and input of the wider DevRel community, who graciously supported the development of this work.

If you are a practicing DevRel professional or aspire to be one, this book will equip you to create and pitch your strategy. It will also teach you how to engage developers, build a DevRel program, hire a team, and measure your activities' impact.

If you are a stakeholder in a business that has an existing Developer Relations program or is thinking of creating one, this book will define and demystify the activities of DevRel and show you how to ensure alignment with your overall corporate objectives.

We have open-sourced all of the included frameworks, and we look forward to seeing them adopted, adapted, and extended by the community.

—Caroline Lewko and James Parton

This Book Is for You If...

- Your company wants to **start a new developer program**, and you've been tasked to lead the initiative. You need to understand how to get started, hire a team, how to sequence the investment, and how to maximize the program's chance of success.
- Your company has an existing developer initiative, and you want to **audit and benchmark** the program's activities to increase its impact and to justify its continued existence.
- Your company has an existing program and wants to **launch a new product or tool** successfully.
- You need standardized language and tools to set and manage your **internal stakeholders' expectations**.
- You come from a business background and need to understand **how working with developers is different**.
- You **come from a technology background**, and you need to have a **better handle on marketing to developers**.
- You think you might want to **become a Developer Relations practitioner**, and you want a better understanding of what it is all about and the tools needed to be effective.

Good news!

The strategy and many of the tactical challenges around engaging developers are common regardless of company size, type of product, or business maturity. Whether you have the luxury of a blank sheet of paper in an early-stage startup or are trying to turn around a supertanker, this book is for you.

Let's get started!

Develop a Common Understanding

To get your Developer Relations initiative off on the right foot, everyone involved must have a common understanding.

The “everyone” translates to you and your stakeholders. This shared understanding starts at the top of your organization – the CEO and your board of directors. It also includes departments that will interact and support the Developer Relations activities such as the CTO office, marketing, product, customer support, and others. It may also include teams external to your organization, such as marketing agencies, PR firms, or other contractors, and of course your team needs to be on the same page too.

As we outlined in the Introduction, we strongly advocate for the Developer Relations team to report directly into the executive team to aid this alignment. However, we recognize that this is not always the norm at the time of writing this book.

Therefore, ensuring everyone is on the same page is crucial, no matter your starting point – a brand-new program, launching a new product, or reviewing/rebooting an existing program. This ensures that overall corporate goals and messaging are aligned. It also ensures there is an understanding and recognition for the Developer Relations effort in the company, one which has a relevant place and priority and contributes to the overall company objectives.

You can establish these relations via one-on-one interactions, but we recommend you host a kick-off workshop to get all your stakeholders together simultaneously. This type of gathering ensures consistency of message and allows interdepartmental questions and issues to be tabled and resolved up front.

Alignment is not a one-off activity. Invest in maintaining and strengthening these crucial relationships and alliances that support your activities, including regular meetings to cascade program updates.

The shared understanding includes the following:

- What is Developer Relations – its components and differentiators.
- Who are developers, and why they are relevant to your business.
- How Developer Relations is activated in your organization, as a separate program or integrated into other functional departments.
- What the business model of Developer Relations is, and which variation is specific to creating value for your business.

We walk you through these in turn in the upcoming chapters.

What Is Developer Relations?

The focus on developers as a route to market¹ is a relatively new field. As such, it's not currently recognized or taught in universities or postsecondary schools, and there is no professional body or association. This immaturity means there is a lack of standard definitions, frameworks, measurements, and tooling for Developer Relations practitioners to adopt. It also accounts for the lack of awareness and understanding of Developer Relations in the broader business world.

Perhaps more challenging for professionalizing this nascent field is the misconception of executives who have limited exposure to the world of Developer Relations. The classic proverb “*A little knowledge is a dangerous thing*” holds true here. To them DevRel is simply hack days, hoodies, and laptop stickers. As we will discover, it is so much more than that.

¹ A route to market is the strategy and tactics used to get your product or service to your target customer and/or end user.

In general, practitioners in the field have agreed on “**Developer Relations,**” shortened to “**DevRel,**” as the all-encompassing term. This term includes developer marketing, developer evangelism, developer advocacy, developer support, Developer Experience, developer education, developer success, developer community relations, and the management of developer programs.

Throughout the book, we interchange Developer Relations and the abbreviated “DevRel” to talk about the profession overall.

Developer Relations is both:

- The **professional practice** of engaging with developers as the primary user of a product, generally outside of one’s own company².
- **The program or set of activities within an organization** that interact with Developers on their journey with your product and company.

Let’s review the core components of DevRel before we dive into the rest of the book. Often the terminology is confusing, as the relationship between distinct areas and how they all fit together can overlap or be ill defined in an organization. Let’s start to clear this up.

The Core Components of Developer Relations

Creating a single diagram that describes the individual components and their relationships was perhaps one the most time-consuming tasks in writing this book. To increase the chance of adoption by the profession, we strove for something to simplify a complex subject while being memorable.

After hours of debate and prototype designs, there was an epiphany around the idea of a stylized tree to represent the **Developer Relations Framework** and the core elements of successful Developer Relations Programs as seen in Figure 1-1.

Around the core of “**Developer Experience,**” there are three main areas of the practice (the branches of our tree):

- **Developer Marketing**
- **Developer Education**
- **Developer Success**

²There are some DevRel activities that work with developers inside one’s company.

The final component, which gives the tree and your program life, is the **Community**, represented as the tree trunk and roots.

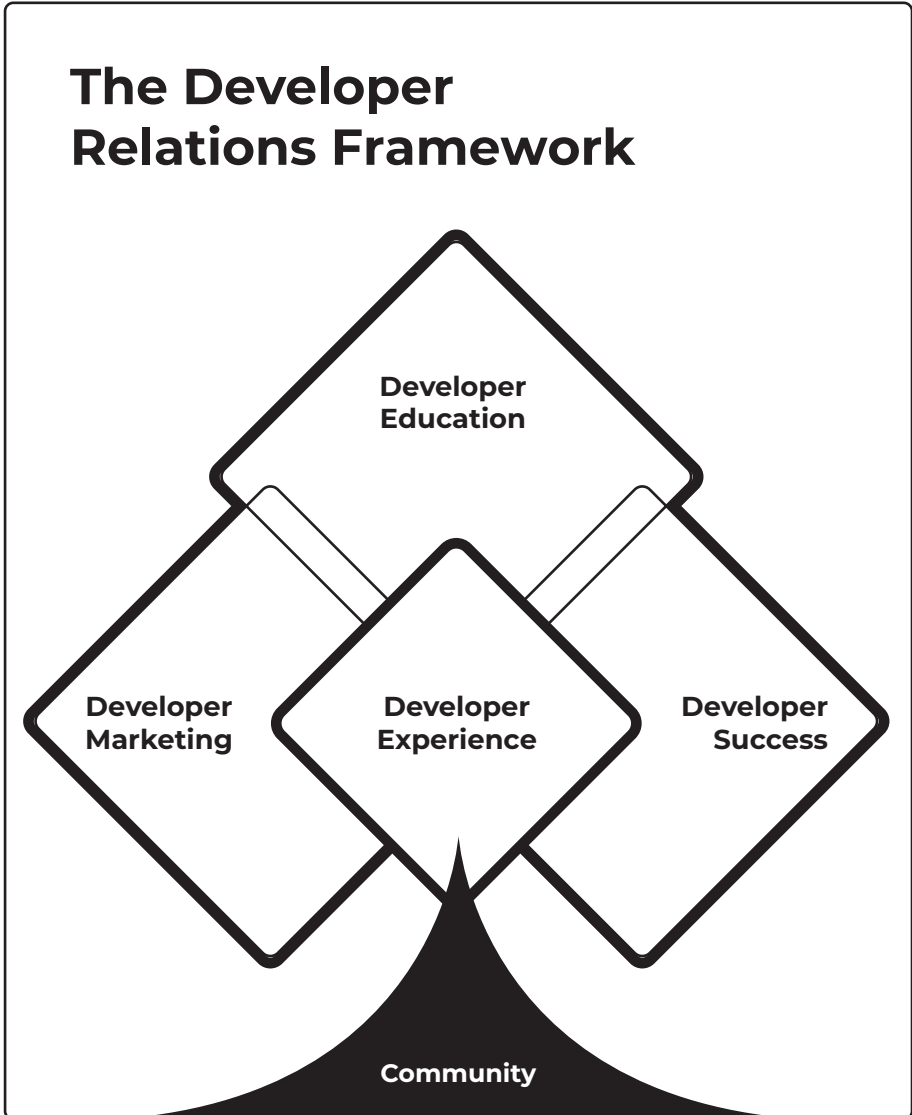


Figure 1-1. The Developer Relations Framework

Let's review these components.

Developer Experience

At the heart of the tree, or the core of any successful developer endeavor, is the Developer Experience, also referred to as **DX**. It is the equivalent of User Experience (UX) where the user of your product is a developer. DX includes their interactions with your product, developer hub, and documentation as they learn and begin to build. Functionally, DX sits with Product or sometimes the CTO office depending on company size.

Developer Marketing

Developer Marketing is the set of outreach activities designed to create awareness as developers discover and evaluate your product and program. Functionally, developer marketing can sit in the marketing department but often overlaps into product. Sales activities also interplay here.

Developer Education

Developer Education, also referred to as **DevEd**, is critical to the adoption of your product. You will need to provide a comprehensive set of content and learning resources in a variety of formats.

Developer Success

Developer Success provides support to developers as they go from trialing your product to building a full-blown commercially scaled product. As a functional role, Developer Success varies and may overlap with product, engineering, sales, support, and your community team.

Community

Critically, a tree cannot exist without its trunk and roots, analogous to a successful program being predicated on a vibrant **community**. The whole point of your program is to engage, serve, and nurture your community. This is what your success will be built upon. Without a healthy, sustainable community, you have little chance of success.

We'll continue to explore these components, and how they work together, throughout the book.

Summary

We've established that DevRel is multifaceted, containing the functional areas of Developer Experience, Developer Marketing, Developer Education, and Developer Success. A vibrant community gives life to the whole framework.

In essence:

Developer Relations is enabling a developer to be successful with your product, while aligning with your corporate goals.

Next, let's see what influences Developer Relations and where it fits in an organization.

Where Does Developer Relations Fit?

In this chapter, we'll take a deeper look at the multiple roles Developer Relations plays, where Developer Relations sits within an organization, and how you can determine its influencers and influences.

Confusion over roles and responsibilities can creep into DevRel, especially in larger organizations. To the untrained eye, elements of the DevRel role can be perceived as overlapping with existing departments' activities. In this chapter, we will look at the different functional areas of DevRel, some common functional reporting structures, and the vital role DevRel plays as an information valve.

Functional Activities

If you come from a product background, understanding your target customers' needs and designing a compelling product experience for them is the norm. But you might believe that your support ends as soon as the product is shipped. That's not the case in DevRel.

If you come from an engineering background, you might think marketing, or heaven forbid, sales, is something you have no interest in at all and that it couldn't possibly be related to anything to do with developers. You might believe that as long as the product is strong, and you continue to build in new features, the company will find success. But, have no doubt, there is commercial intent behind the vast majority of DevRel activity.

If you come from a marketing background, much of what you see in a typical Developer Relations program will look very similar to traditional **marketing and sales** efforts in either B2B (business-to-business) or B2C (business-to-consumer) companies. So you might believe that you can stick to your traditional tactics, but as we'll discover, developers are an entirely new audience to understand.

If you work in **community management**, you might think Developer Relations is the same, in that the style of the interaction is more akin to one friend helping out another to solve a problem or enhance their creativity, rather than making them feel they are a sales prospect. Talking directly to your customers and potential customers in a direct, friendly, nonsales, noncorporate way and amplifying and showcasing your customers' work, achievements, and community contributions are not exclusive to any one business model.

You'll soon see the differences in how and where value is created and adoption occurs in Developer Relations' business models as well as in its sales funnel. These differences affect the way DevRel community management is undertaken.

Developer Relations shares traits with all of the preceding business functions, but also has distinctive characteristics. As we dive deeper in the book, you'll see that DevRel differs from the traditional style and tactics used in sales and marketing efforts, and from an engineering support perspective, the audience is different from what you might be used to in a partner or ISV¹ program. You'll see there are also subtle differences in the type of community interactions because of the business model. We will look deeper into these distinctions in Part II.

Functional Reporting

There is no one dominant functional reporting structure for DevRel within a company, according to studies and our own observations. This aspect of DevRel is perhaps unsurprising given it's a new field and as it sits at the intersection of several traditional roles.

Figure 2-1 shows data from the State of Developer Relations Report 2020 showing that overall marketing has a small lead in functional reporting; however,

¹ An ISV is an Independent Software Vendor.

the CTO Office/Engineering is a close second.² However, Marketing’s lead should not be misinterpreted. If the Engineering and Product results are combined, they demonstrate a majority of organizations have DevRel reporting into technical departments, rather than marketing departments.

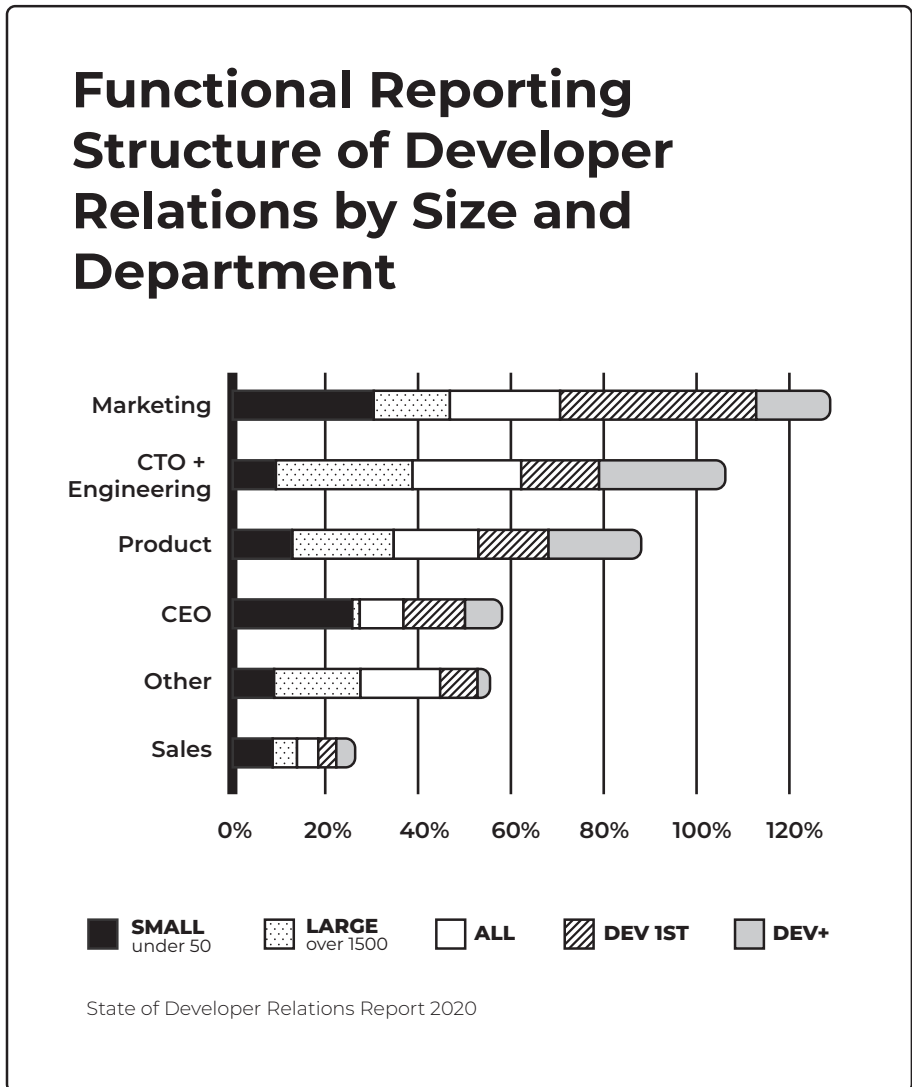


Figure 2-1. The reporting structure for Developer Relations per the State of Developer Relations 2020 Report

²State of Developer Relations Report 2020.

Regardless, there is no single blueprint that defines how your DevRel program should be structured. It will skew toward certain functional areas depending on variables like the type of organization or the maturity stage of the product or company.

What is important is to have a good understanding of which functional areas influence Developer Relations to aid and tune your strategy, discussions, decision-making, and relationships within your organization.

Department Influence Mapper Tool

Do you know which way your program leans – either by department or function? Initially, your intent may be to have democratic and equal influence from all departments. However, that is normally unrealistic. Plotting the influence various departments or functions have on your program is a useful exercise to complete. We've created the Department Influence Mapper Tool to give you a clear visual representation. This insight can be helpful once you understand the overall goals of your business and how the DevRel effort can aid your business to achieve those goals.

How It Works

Complete this exercise within the DevRel team and also with your stakeholders to help uncover bias, misalignment, potential for conflict, and allies. Ask each participant to score the influence they feel is appropriate for each department on the program. You can then plot individual scores by department or, as shown as an example in [Figure 2-2](#), the aggregate scores of the DevRel team members and the other stakeholders.

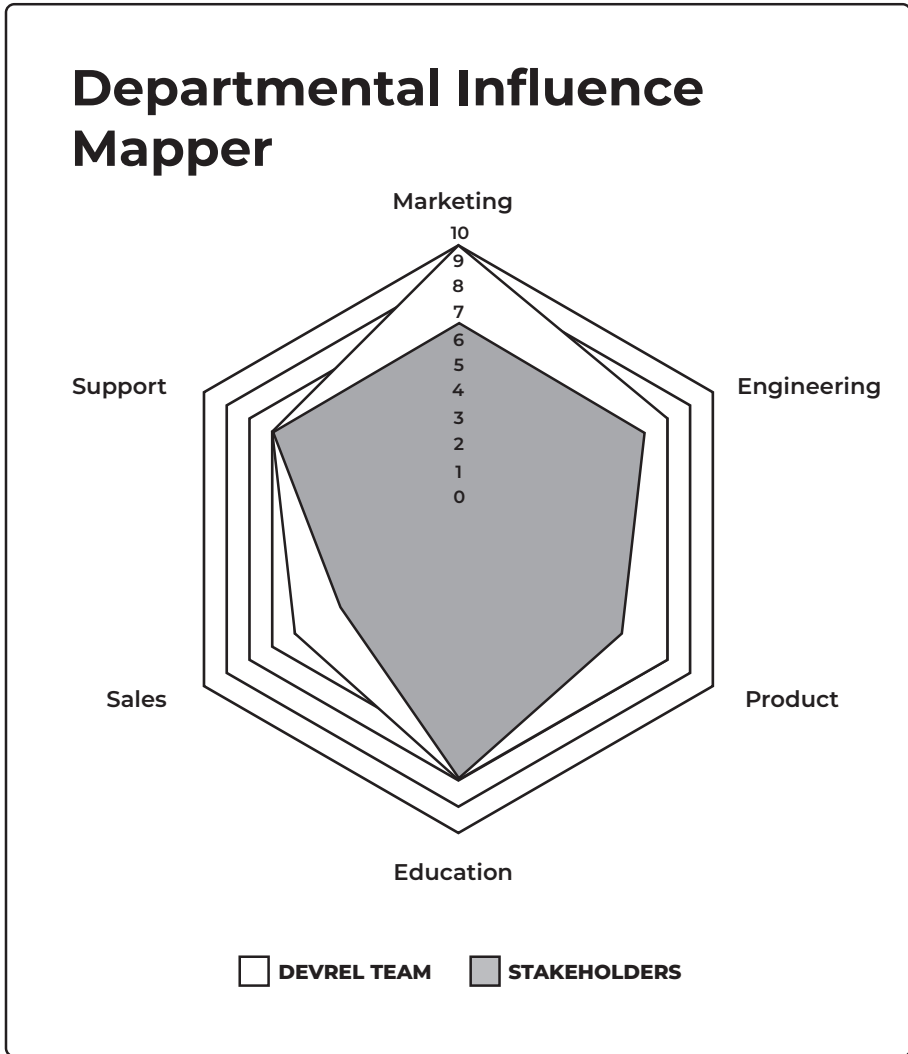


Figure 2-2. Developer Relations Department Influence Mapper Tool example

Using the Tool

This exercise is perfect for the program kick-off workshop we recommended you hold. We also strongly recommend regularly revisiting the exercise to assess how effective your internal interactions have been, to ensure you still have alignment, and to uncover any changes in influence, changes in the strategy, or changes in sentiment toward your program from other departments. It can help you decide on your direction, information you may need to gather to inform everyone, as well as staffing decisions.

An Information Valve for Your Company

One role that DevRel plays is as a critical liaison between the company and the external community of developers it serves. This community may include influencers, prospective customers, active customers, previous customers, partners, and even media. Figure 2-3 outlines the type of information flow that DevRel facilitates.

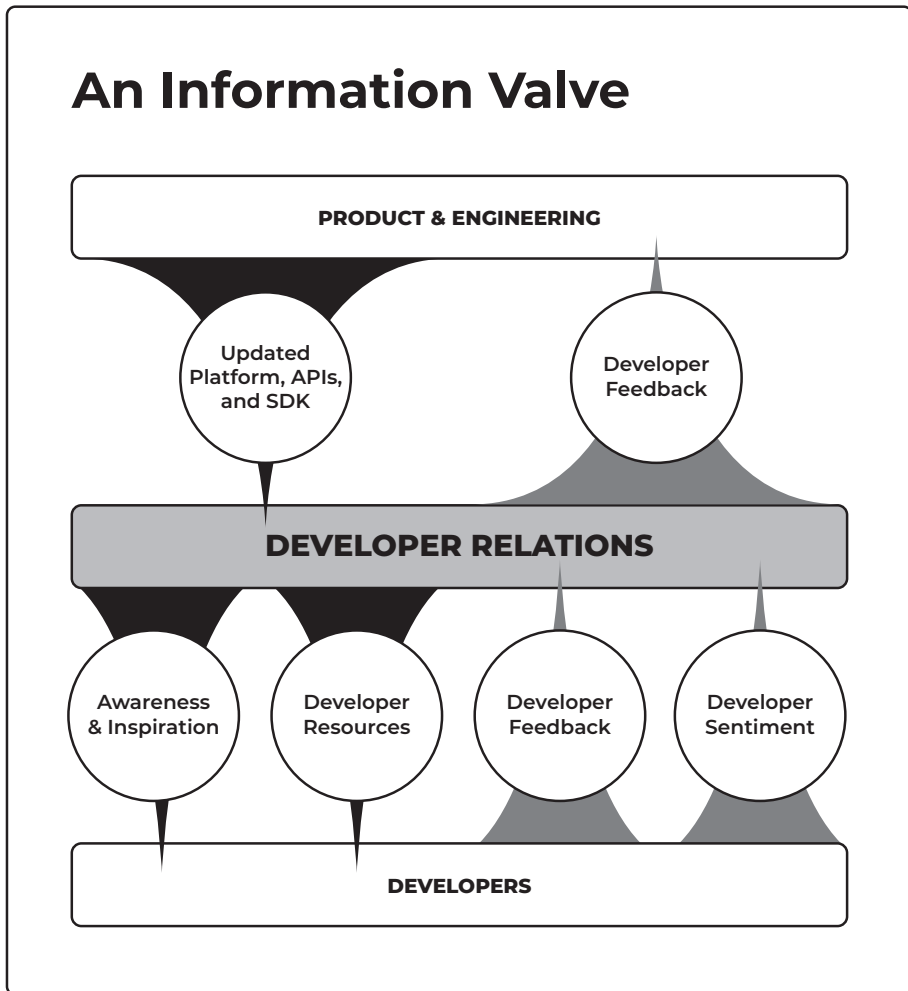


Figure 2-3. Developer Relations is an information valve for your company

In her book,³ Mary Thengvall attributes this quote to Ewan Davis:

**“To the community, I represent the company
To the company, I represent the community
I must have both of their interests in mind at all times”**

Because of this vital role, DevRel practitioners must be sensitive and skilled at cross-team communication and collaboration. However, it is essential to note that the internal effectiveness of the DevRel team is not only predicated on their skills and style. Their reporting structure and line management also influence it. Their department’s internal influence and reputation affects how much attention and priority the DevRel team receives and the results they are able to achieve. This is another key reason why we believe DevRel needs to have C-level authority.

If you are not quite sure if you should be reading further, or you are questioning if you are indeed working in DevRel – here’s a test for you.

The Developer Relations Test

Am I in Developer Relations?

- Your primary target audience is developers
- Your strategy & tactics are designed to change developer behaviour
- Your internal definition of success is predicated on developers

Did you check all 3?

Congratulations - you are in DevRel!

Figure 2-4. The Developer Relations test

³*The Business Value of Developer Relations*, Mary Thengvall.

Review your results:

1 – Your primary target audience is developers.

The choice of “primary” is deliberate. There is no ambiguity in this statement. Developers are the target you are trying to reach. You may also have secondary audiences as part of your marketing activity, for example, nontechnical corporate decision makers who control or influence the buying decision, but developers are your primary focus.

2 – Your strategy and tactics are designed to change developer behavior.

Just because you want developers to use your product, it doesn't mean they will come to you. There are hundreds of developer-oriented companies offering thousands of tools, all trying to reach the same people as you. Not only do you have to cut through the noise, but you also have to convince the developer to take that leap of faith and try your product. Then you must support them through experimenting, prototyping, and building, which hopefully leads to them releasing something meaningful into production. Fine-tuning your Developer Experience to remove friction at all stages is critical to your success. This is no small undertaking. Understanding the creative and technical development processes of people and companies within Developer Relations is critical for differentiating it from traditional functional areas.

3 – Your internal definition of success is predicated on developers.

If you and your program are measured by something other than your developers' actions and results, you have a severe misalignment in your program. We've seen organizations attempt to measure or benchmark their developer program against more mature departments. If left unresolved, it will likely be terminal for your program, as you will never be able to match expectations.

If you weren't able to check “Yes” to the questions in Figure 2-4, you might still be in DevRel, but you'll need many of the strategies and tactics in this book to align the goals of your company and program.

Summary

There is no one size fits all for Developer Relations roles, nor a standardization of functional reporting in the corporate structure. However, the data demonstrates that DevRel typically aligns with Marketing, Engineering, or Product. One aspect is certain – the DevRel team acts as a crucial information valve for your company and, with this in mind, requires the authority that comes from having a C-level leader.