On Launching Ask.CI, a Q&A Platform for Research Computing, Using StackExchange and Discourse
Birds of a Feather Session
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The goal of this platform is to aggregate answers to a broad spectrum of questions that are commonly asked as researchers utilize HPC resources, creating a self-service knowledge base for the community of domain researchers, facilitators, cyberinfrastructure engineers and others that do research computing. Our hope is that this site will become a platform for sharing frequently asked questions, comparing solutions, and generally leveraging each other's work pertaining to research computing. Making this knowledge readily available frees up time for facilitators and cyberinfrastructure engineers to focus on more advanced subject matter, thereby elevating the practice.

The platform project started in September 2017 and rapidly drew the enthusiastic support of the XSEDE Campus Champions. We have collaborated since December to build the site. We continue to reach out to others in the community, and SC18 is an ideal setting to accelerate this effort.

Throughout the development process we have been thinking seriously about what defines "research computing" in relation to other computing disciplines. The process has generated some very thoughtful discussion and we believe that it is of great benefit to our community to work on this definition as it relates to career development, and the emergence of research computing as a distinct sub-discipline. Our hope is that not only will Ask.Cyberinfrastructure.org become a great resource for the community, but that it will also provide public testimony of the reality of research computing and how it exists in relation to IT, Computer Science, and domain research.

STACKEXCHANGE AND DISCOURSE

As we investigated possible approaches, there was consensus about using a platform that supports a voting mechanism which enables crowd-sourced monitoring and pushes the best answers to the top; and moderation tools to manage spam/trolling. This led us to StackExchange, the gold standard for Q&A platforms.

StackExchange is the platform behind Stack Overflow and many other great sites. While it is not easy to establish a StackExchange site, it offers several advantages including: search engine visibility; built-in backup and maintenance; security and resistance to spam and trolling, and a clear question and answer syntax which yields definitive answers.

Launching a StackExchange site involves a rigorous four-phase process, including a restart if any phase exceeds a specified time limit. In our first iteration, which closed in May, we reached the second phase, and attracted a working group of volunteers that developed questions/answers to post on the site when it became functional. We prepared these on another platform called Discourse.org, which has its own benefits, and developed a methodology for culling nuggets of information from ad hoc user questions, and adapting them for use by a general audience. Although it does not have some of the strengths noted above for StackExchange, Discourse is a flexible and powerful alternative, and when our first StackExchange attempt terminated, we decided to make our Discourse-based site publicly available.

We launched the site in July and we hope this BOF will attract participation from HPC users, facilitators, engineers and other members of the research computing community attending SC18.

URL: https://ask.cyberinfrastructure.org