

GDEVS - [SOTR069] Search Off the Record - 69th episode - Video

[00:00:10.71] - **John**

Hello and welcome to another episode of Search Off the Record, a podcast coming to you from the Google Search team discussing all things search and maybe having some fun along the way. My name is John and I'm joined today by Lizzi from the Search Relations team, of which I am also a part of. Hi, Lizzi.

[00:00:30.45] - **Lizzi**

Hi, John.

[00:00:31.47] - **John**

Today we also have [Phonetic spelling 00:00:34] Aaseesh Marina who is a product support manager for Search Console at Google. Hi, Aaseesh.

[00:00:40.29] - **Aaseesh**

Hi, John.

[00:00:41.19] - **John**

So Aaseesh, tell us a little bit about yourself. What does a product support manager do?

[00:00:46.17] - **Aaseesh**

Product support managers at Google typically run support programs for all the different products at Google. What I do is I work with product managers and engineers at Search Console, and I work with them to ensure we're providing the right tools and support for site owners so that they can continue to create great content.

[00:01:06.12] - **Lizzi**

What does support mean?

[00:01:07.86] - **Aaseesh**

So support here means the site owners have the right documentation, the right tools, and if necessary, help from their peers and Google to actually fix the problems they have and ensure their content appears on search.

[00:01:25.26] - **John**

Okay, so a lot of that I imagine is in the help forums?

[00:01:29.58] - **Aaseesh**

Yeah. The help part especially.

[00:01:31.32] - **Lizzi**

Does that mean that you are answering all of people's questions when they come to the help forum?

[00:01:35.40] - **Aaseesh**

I would love to, but no, I don't think I can handle all those questions.

[00:01:39.06] - **Lizzi**

So if it's not you who is replying to these kind of questions that come up in the help community?

[00:01:44.76] - **Aaseesh**

It's mostly other site owners and we basically have like a great group of super users. You can call them super users. And we call them product experts because they are experts in this domain of search engine optimization and just creating great content for search. And these folks are really kind enough to help each other. And also all the new users with all their questions on how to fix their search-related problems.

[00:02:13.56] - **John**

I imagine a lot of those questions are things where there's no objective answer, like you're trying to do something in Gmail. How do I send a message? Like someone can tell you, you click these five buttons. with a lot of the search questions it feels like it's not that straightforward. So it seems like a tough problem for them.

[00:02:32.01] - **Lizzi**

I mean, even the like mechanical questions where it's like, how do I submit this thing to a report? You would think that that's objective. But if they get stuck with out-of-date documentation or there's like a mismatch with what they're seeing or what they're trying to do, then they might come to the forum to point that out. Like, hey, like I tried to follow this, I got stuck. What do I do?

[00:02:51.18] - **Aaseesh**

Yeah, there's like a wealth of knowledge in the forums because the forums have been, I don't know, what, like 50 over 15 years? So you have questions from like the very beginner basic questions to like really complex questions on like super hard implementations, especially with all

these site migrations and so on. So I would say forums have a place for all kinds of questions, and they're also a great place for having discussions on specific topics and different kinds of implementations that people do.

[00:03:21.45] - **John**

Cool. So what kind of people post in the forums? Is it anyone who makes a website or are there specific qualifications? Do they have to do something special in Search Console to get to the forums?

[00:03:32.70] - **Aaseesh**

Hopefully posting in the forums is easy enough for everyone. I'm hoping we've made it that way, but there's no restrictions. The only restriction is whether you can create a Google account or not. If you have a working Google account, you can post on the forums.

[00:03:46.14] - **John**

So cool. Okay. And the people who are replying, these are probably all certified experts, right?

[00:03:51.81] - **Aaseesh**

Again, not necessarily. There is an expert program. I've mentioned the Product Expert program just now. So because we have like a bunch of really great super users, our support programs try and give some sort of credence to the super users so that people can recognize, I guess, what you can call it, an authoritative answer or authoritative response. So the Product Expert program, I think people may recognize it by different names. If you've been in the field long enough, I think it's been called Top Contributor program. And even before I joined Google, I think there was something called Bionic posters. But the gist is the same, because we know that there's these great folks who are experts at what they do. We sort of give a badge to them, and there's like different kinds of levels to the badges, and all these levels have different perks as part of the program. But the end goal is when users see a response from a super user or a product expert, they would know that that response has some sort of credence from Google.

[00:04:57.48] - **Lizzi**

So you mentioned that they're experts. Do you have to prove that you're an expert? Is there like a job application and how do you up level? How do we know their level of expertise?

[00:05:08.20] - **Aaseesh**

Thank you for asking that question. This is a good time for me to plug in the Product Expert program. We'll drop a link to the Product Expert program in this podcast. But anybody who thinks they have knowledge in this field and they like to help their peers, anybody can sign up

for the Product Expert program, but once you sign up, you will, based on your responses, your cohort or other product experts will sort of check out your answers and help you, if necessary, help mentor you. And once you've been in the program long enough, and once your responses are helpful enough, you will just get onboarded onto the Product Expert program.

[00:05:48.70] - **Lizzi**

So typically our people replying to posts before they apply to be a product expert, or fill out the thing that you mentioned on that website, or can they just go straight there and then answer questions? How do you typically see people ramping up?

[00:06:02.20] - **Aaseesh**

You can go straight and answer questions. At the end of the day, it is still a community and a forum, and you don't need to be part of the Product Expert program to just participate in the forum. The Product Expert program is more from what I've heard from other product experts too, they see the program as a nice community where they can learn from one another and also like share their knowledge about different tools and different issues that they see in this space. So by signing up for the Product Expert program, they also get to meet with different product folks from Google who work on all these different products, and they can actually discuss their ideas with product folks and even give feedback on any changes that they'd like to make.

[00:06:45.88] - **John**

Cool. So I guess maybe I should look back first as, like, I was active in the forums way in the beginning before joining Google as well. And one of the things I found valuable was even outside of any official program is you see a lot of different kinds of problems where if you're working on your own website, you see kind of, I don't know, the weird things that you run into, but you don't get a lot of experience with other kinds of weird problems. And I found it really helpful, insightful, a good learning opportunity to just see, like, oh, there's so many problems out there where maybe there's a technical issue that someone needs to solve. Maybe it's more of a strategic question like, should I make this kind of page or this kind of page? And I found it fun, almost like mental exercises to look into those problems, try to help, maybe discuss with other people in the forum what kind of approaches are useful there. So I always found it interesting, and it's something where I noticed the people who tend to go to the forums more regularly, for the most part, they're pretty friendly people who are kind of there because they want to help other people.

[00:07:56.14] - **Aaseesh**

So I had this problem during tech check and it got resolved, but now I can't hear you again.

[00:08:04.60] - **John**

All right, looks like we had a brief audio issue there, but hopefully things are back now. Maybe sounding slightly different. Lizzi, you had a question?

[00:08:14.20] - **Lizzi**

Yeah. So posting on online forums can be a little bit nerve wracking. I know for me, anytime I've gone to ask a question in public, it feels like you're asking in front of thousands of people. And I'm always a little bit nervous about whether or not it's a safe place to ask a beginner level question, or if people are going to come after me in the comment section. Can you describe what the community is like in the Search Central forum?

[00:08:37.60] - **Aaseesh**

So from my experience, the Search Central forums have always been like a very nice, welcoming place and people can ask all kinds of questions. Beginner questions, expert questions, doesn't really matter. Of course, we do have a bunch of community guidelines that are in place to ensure people feel that this is like a safe place to ask questions and they don't get, you know, mean or rude comments on the kinds of questions that are being asked. Besides this in the background, we also have like an abuse team that looks at any posts that violate the guidelines and removes those kinds of posts. So we do have like a bunch of steps that we take to ensure people can ask even silly questions.

[00:09:18.13] - **John**

So good. Okay, so would you say it's a place more for small sites, or can big sites ask questions there too?

[00:09:26.56] - **Aaseesh**

Again, I think everybody can ask questions. In fact, we encourage pretty much everyone to use the help center, use the community for asking questions, because I'm sure, John, you know this very well. We have an honest business policy, for search at Google where search and ads are very fully separated. So it doesn't matter if you're a client or a partner for other products at Google. You still, for any search related questions, you still have to go through the same exact processes as any small site or non-paying client of Google to get support. And all support provided by search, at least the search team, is publicly available and everybody has access to all of the support that we have. Whether it's a small site or a big site, the forums are a great place to ask and get answers for your issues.

[00:10:20.60] - **Lizzi**

Yeah, I think there's like a level of like it's embarrassing to ask this question if you know the site that I'm talking about or that people will come and look to see like what other problems I might have, but it is, I think, a helpful learning tool for other people. When you share your problem, then other people can see and investigate better as well. So to have that link, I think that's usually the first thing that people ask for is can you show me an example or what link are you talking about so I can help debug?

[00:10:43.55] - **John**

So cool. I think that's kind of the ideal approach. When people come to us with a question that is out of bounds for something that we would be able to help with personally, we do try to send them to the public places, and I imagine you have to jump over your shadow a little bit if you're working on a big site and want to ask a question, but it's kind of the right approach to take. And probably for a lot of questions, you don't even have to mention your site, like, how long can I make a sitemap file? You don't necessarily have to mention which website you're working on.

[00:11:16.46] - **Lizzi**

Yeah. I mean, this has happened even with people we know working at Google. So people maintaining the developers.google.com site that the Search Central documentation lives in have asked us a sitemap question, like, I think they came up through the escalation path through the documentation internal thing to report a problem. And the bug comes to me and because they're a Googler, they're CCed on the request. And I have to reply to them and say hey, I can't give you direct advice, but you have to go to the help forum to post over there. And they did. So they went over there and said that it was about developers.google.com and ask their question out in public, which is kind of fun to see.

[00:11:54.50] - **Aaseesh**

One good thing we're trying out is the community managers can try and reach out. This is being done across all support forums at Google, and the community managers can reach out to folks if they need example URLs in a direct message within the community so that they can safely share their site URL without it being public.

[00:12:14.90] - **John**

Oh, that's pretty cool. I didn't realize that was possible. So, nice.

[00:12:18.65] - **Aaseesh**

Yeah, we're just starting to do that.

[00:12:21.02] - **John**

One of the things we also have is on our documentation, a way to give feedback directly, is that something that the product experts also do where they're like, oh, this random question came up in the forum, and if only the documentation were clearer on that.

[00:12:35.90] - **Lizzi**

100%. And I really appreciate the PEs submitting feedback like that, because they have direct experience with the scope of a problem. So they can kind of represent, like, hey, I answered 20 questions about this thing. Can you please just fix this? And if you just clarify this sentence here, that would resolve all of these things. So with the real examples and explaining the scope of the thing means that generally the feedback coming from PEs is high quality and very actionable for me, to the point where I've added like a PE button so that they can click that specifically and then I know it's coming from them because it's so helpful.

[00:13:11.87] - **John**

Oh so cool. Okay, so they kind of have a way to highlight things that they've seen, I guess, in the forum. Aaseesh, do you know if that's only in the documentation or is that something that also maybe Search Console also looks at the product expert feedback as well?

[00:13:28.82] - **Aaseesh**

Search Console also looks at product expert feedback. In fact, one of the perks of being a part of the PE program is you get to participate in a small private community of other PEs, and all the escalations that are made by product experts here are seen by... we have a proper escalation mechanism from our product experts. And all of these are seen by not just Search Console engineers, but depending upon the product, relevant engineers take a look at all the escalations that come from PEs.

[00:13:59.18] - **Lizzi**

Yeah, so they can post internally as well, which is something that I subscribe to to see like what they're posting. And there's a particularly helpful PE in the Arabic PE community that notifies if there's going to be something that's wrong with the way that we have right to left, a lot of language issues. That has been super useful to me, and I think it ends up impacting all of the other languages. So if that PE reports something that's like, hey, this is translated in a weird way, or if you could make this label better in Arabic, actually, if I fix it in English, it solves that problem for all the other language translations. So it's been useful for documentation, but I think also for technical issues they will flag like hey, sitemap or robots.txt, various things that maybe we didn't know was happening.

[00:14:42.92] - **John**

So cool. So one question, I kind of expect over the years is we've been running this forum for, I don't know, you mentioned 15 years or longer. When do you think all possible questions will have been asked?

[00:14:54.98] - **Aaseesh**

Yeah, I think when Google stops launching new stuff, maybe then.

[00:15:00.05] - **John**

Of, of course, every time we make any change...

[00:15:03.62] - **Aaseesh**

No more core updates, no more helpful content updates, and the questions will stop.

[00:15:07.34] - **John**

I don't know. We'll probably have to continue improving things in search anyway, so I guess that means we'll keep the forums for a while. So, good. How do you see things kind of progressing in the future with regards to the forums? Do you think it'll continue to be kind of like this community where people ask questions and other people just help out, or have you seen changes over the years with regards to almost... I don't know, the processes, the interactivity?

[00:15:35.77] - **Aaseesh**

I've definitely seen a lot of changes in, say, from a technical standpoint, the platform, the forum uses has been changed I think a couple times now. So from a user experience standpoint, we've made it like much easier to ask questions, search for questions and so on. But the core aspect of people asking questions and getting help from their peers, I think that will stay.

[00:15:59.86] - **John**

Yeah, it feels like, I don't know, when I interact with SEOs in the office hours or elsewhere at events or online, then there are always new angles that people bring up as well, because it feels like the internet is also constantly evolving and people's expectations keep evolving as well. So it feels like this, I don't know, interactive element of primarily being able to interact with peers is something that feels kind of useful. You're getting almost like subjective advice rather than like an absolute answer.

[00:16:34.54] - **Lizzi**

Ah, so the discussion, like multiple points of view and examples are helpful as compared to a chatbot, you get one answer and okay, but with a forum you could have multiple people replying with different perspectives.

[00:16:50.41] - **John**

Yeah, I don't know, like maybe there'll be some chatbot thing in the future that also helps work here, but it feels like people have a lot of experience in different areas, and that's something that's hard to replace with purely technical documentation.

[00:17:05.47] - **Aaseesh**

I would definitely agree with you there. In fact, we've been having a few users using, I guess, LLMs to post responses, and those have not really been good. And the PEs have actually said those are spoiling the experience of the community, and we've been reaching out to folks asking them not to do that, because if you post an LLM-related answer, whoever's asking the question can simply use that specific LLM to get the same answer. So there's no value that's coming from the forums. And mostly from what I've seen, those responses are just a bunch of links and like snippets of what we already have in the documentation. While responses from peers and PEs have actually been a lot more helpful in terms of their angle or perspective for resolving a specific issue.

[00:17:59.68] - **John**

I imagine there's a lot of potential for conflict there in the future, because LLMs and AI is all in the news everywhere, and they try to answer all of the questions that are possible. I imagine especially in a forum that opens room for conflict in the near future. So I think it'll be interesting to see how that evolves. But I really like the angle that the product experts are pushing back on this a little bit and saying like, oh, this should be more of an, I don't know, personal response to the actual question rather than something automatically generated. But maybe in the future there'll be some mix, I don't know. And the other thing you mentioned was there was one product expert with Arabic language. Does that mean the forums are available in other languages as well?

[00:18:45.34] - **Aaseesh**

Yeah, we actually have about 17 languages that we are currently operating the Search Central forums on. Obviously like different Google products have forums open in different languages. Search Central has 17 languages and each language has a dedicated community manager. So you can expect the same level of responses for any escalations that users may have through PEs or so on.

[00:19:09.79] - **Lizzi**

I think this is really useful to point out that it's not a direct translation. You're not seeing a translated version of the post. They're actually different posts from people who are working in that community. Do you notice any trends, different types of questions in different languages?

[00:19:24.70] - **Aaseesh**

Yeah, definitely. I mean, I would say questions asked in, say, the Japanese community or the Indonesian community, they focus on different kinds of issues. For example, we've seen a lot more questions on sitemaps in the Indonesian community, while we've not really seen too many sitemap-related questions. In the Japanese community, it's a lot more questions on canonical-related issues, especially with all the large e-commerce Japanese sites we've seen a lot of questions on indexing and canonical issues. So yeah, different markets, different problems.

[00:20:00.85] - **John**

So cool, I don't know, initially I thought everyone would be having the same kinds of issues, but it kind of makes sense that the websites in different languages or different regions are different. And then the kinds of questions that come up could also be questions. So cool. So maybe to wrap things up a little bit, do you have a weird question that you saw in the forum where you're like, oh, this is so surprising?

[00:20:24.22] - **Aaseesh**

It wasn't surprising because I've seen a similar question asked offline, too. But when we've launched the Hindi forum in India, we had a user asking for support in terms of helping him with new PBNs, where he can find links that are actually giving him better juice than the ones he's already using. So that was definitely, yeah, weird.

[00:20:47.05] - **John**

So PBN is a spam thing?

[00:20:50.80] - **Aaseesh**

Yeah. Private blog networks. So it is common, I mean, I won't say common, but it is used in many Indian site owners use it. I'm sure other site owners from other countries use it too, but they swear by it where they say the links from PBNs help them with their rankings. But yeah, if you have any links, please share them with me. My friend Dewey from the Webspam team loves to hear about these things.

[00:21:19.06] - **John**

Oh, no. Okay. Yeah. Do you take action on sites that post in the forum? I mean, I could imagine some site owner be like, oh, I saw this weird technique on YouTube and now I have created this

spam empire and they don't realize that we would consider it spam. Would you take that and pass it on to the Webspam team, or would you say the forum is a safe place, they can ask questions and learn that they shouldn't be doing this?

[00:21:46.99] - **Aaseesh**

So typically, no. Typically we don't really scour through the forums for spam. If people have spammy sites, they typically don't share their URL, so there's no point anyway. But even if they did, it's not a great lead for our spam team to go through the forum. So typically it's not done.

[00:22:05.95] - **Lizzi**

So usually if people are posting about that, they didn't know that they're doing something that's maybe spammy or bad. Is that like an accurate...

[00:22:13.48] - **Aaseesh**

Yeah. If these people don't know... if product experts... I'm sure they've seen these kinds of questions over the years so they generally are very helpful and ask folks not to do similar stuff. And to be honest, even if there was some kind of action taken on your site, it need not necessarily have been because you've posted on the forums. Our spam teams get leads from all over the place. So anybody looking at the forum and see that you've posted something could submit a spam report if they think any user can do that. So there's multiple ways the spam team gets leads.

[00:22:49.24] - **John**

Okay, well, I hope the people who post in the forums are working to improve their sites, so hopefully that shouldn't be a big issue. Cool. Okay, well I think that's it for this episode. Thank you for joining us here, Aaseesh. It was super insightful. If you're curious about the help forums and the Product Expert program, again, check out the link that we put into the description here. In the next episode, we'll probably have something a little bit more technical SEO related with one of the product experts actually from the forum, so stay tuned for that. We've been having fun with these podcast episodes and I hope you, the listener, have been finding them both entertaining and insightful as well. Feel free to drop me a note on Twitter or chat with us at one of the next events that we go to if you have any thoughts. And of course, don't forget to like and subscribe. Thank you and goodbye.

[00:23:49.16] - **Aaseesh**

Bye. Goodbye, John.

[00:23:50.00] - **Lizzi**

Bye.