



Build a Better World

Website gives instructions on how to make all manner of interesting things

The start of a new year is a time when many people resolve to make their lives, or the world, better than it was the year before. The areas in which they vow self-improvement range from health to finances to relationships and more. As for helping the world, they may vow to be more charitable or adopt greener living habits.

Of course, not all resolutions need to make you perfect or save the world. There are many things you can strive for that will improve your life, or the world, in smaller ways. Learning a new skill — such as cooking, crafts or carpentry — can lead to a more fulfilling life, and it will improve your little corner of the world. How and where do you acquire these new skills?

Instructables.com is a website, as well as a mobile app for iOS and Android, full of instructions for all types of do-it-yourself projects. A group of Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduates created it as a spin off of their research

company. The company, Squid Labs, innovates in a wide variety of areas including technology, cooking and engineering.

Creative collaboration

The website started as a place where they could document their creations, but it soon grew to include work submitted by registered users of the site as well. It now claims to have more than 100,000 projects on the site.

The site is an eclectic mix of art, technology and craftsmanship with a hint of nerdiness. Nicely designed pages with good-quality images, typography and navigation are the norm, although the color palette does spin out of control on some of the inside pages.

The home page features a large, colorful slide show of holiday-themed projects, including art, crafts and cocktails. A list of searchable categories — everything, technology, workshop, living, food, play and outside — is superimposed over the alternating images.

Below the slide show is a grid of featured projects. Each project has a photo, descriptive title and a byline for the creator. Clicking on a project takes you to the step-by-step instruction page for that item.

This is where the site can get a little weak. Overall, the design and function of Instructables.com is top notch. But the user submissions are all over the place. Obviously, when you're dealing with people from all walks of life and all parts of the globe you're going to get a mish-mash of ability levels.

Inconsistent quality

Many of the instructions are well written and have illustrated guides that are easy to follow. Others suffer from poor English skills or sub-par photography. Some don't give enough information to really complete a project, or assume the viewer possesses specialized knowledge that most lay people don't have.

In fact, many of the projects require skills that not everyone has, such as electronics, woodworking, metalworking or sewing. For instance, I reviewed a project that detailed how to make a hunting knife. It was explained thoroughly and accompanied by good images, and the finished product was beautiful. But, it seems like it would take a high level of craftsmanship and experience working with metal and wood to get the pictured result.

It would be helpful if the site had a system of rating projects

for difficulty or level of expertise needed. In fact, some of the projects could be hazardous, so the site should address that as well.

Community of creators

There are multiple ways creators can share their projects on the site. Step-by-step instructions with photos, videos and ebooks are all supported. Instructions can be viewed online or downloaded for offline viewing. You also can search for projects by the various formats as well as subject matter. Similar projects are grouped in collections that can be viewed.

The site also offers ways for users to interact both virtually and in the flesh. Several contests are featured, such as Bracelet, Homebrew & Cocktails or Supercharged, that allow users to compete for prizes. There also are online forums and social media integration. The most interesting possibility for collaboration is the Artists In Residence program, which allows winners to spend time at the Instructables lab in San Francisco to work on projects with a team of creative experts.

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