

# Winning Teams Join to Qualify for \$1 Million Netflix Prize

By Eliot Van Buskirk [✉](#) June 26, 2009 | 6:19 pm | Categories: [Crowdsourcing](#), [Media](#), [Miscellaneous](#), [People](#), [Search](#)

Rank	Team Name	Best Score	% Improvement	Last Submit Time
1	<a href="#">BellKor's Pragmatic Chaos</a>	0.8558	10.05	2009-06-26 18:42:37
Grand Prize - RMSE <= 0.8563				
2	<a href="#">Pragmatic Theory</a>	0.8562	9.80	2009-06-25 22:15:51
3	<a href="#">BellKor in BigChaos</a>	0.8590	9.71	2009-05-13 08:14:09
4	<a href="#">Grand Prize Team</a>	0.8593	9.68	2009-06-12 08:20:24
5	<a href="#">Data</a>	0.8604	9.56	2009-04-22 05:57:03
6	<a href="#">BigChaos</a>	0.8613	9.47	2009-06-23 23:08:52
Pragmatic Prize 2009 - RMSE = 0.8634 - Winning Team: BellKor in BigChaos				
7	<a href="#">BellKor</a>	0.8620	9.40	2009-06-24 07:16:02
8	<a href="#">Growth</a>	0.8634	9.25	2009-04-02 18:31:32
9	<a href="#">Data Solutions</a>	0.8638	9.21	2009-06-22 05:53:30
10	<a href="#">vladimir</a>	0.8639	9.20	2009-06-26 13:49:04
11	<a href="#">wangliang</a>	0.8639	9.20	2009-06-26 07:47:34
12	<a href="#">ProjectDenoKasGrowth</a>	0.8641	9.18	2009-06-02 17:08:31
13	<a href="#">Data</a>	0.8642	9.17	2009-06-24 14:34:14
14	<a href="#">majaz2</a>	0.8642	9.17	2009-06-23 08:07:50

The Netflix Prize, a computing challenge that's been compared to scaling Mount Everest and flummoxed programmers for more than three years, has been summited.

Two front runners in the contest, Team Pragmatic Theory and Team Bellkor in Chaos, joined forces and submitted an algorithm that was 10.05 percent better than the one Netflix uses to recommend movies to its subscribers. The result was published on the [Netflix Prize leader board](#) on Friday.

Assuming the results are verified, that's enough to edge the 10 percent improvement requirement by a hair and qualify them to win a \$1 million prize, first announced in February 2006.

"We joined with team BellKor in BigChaos, and our combined team (BellKor's Pragmatic Chaos), has breached the 10 percent mark (10.05 percent actually)," Team Pragmatic's Martin Piotte told [Wired.com](#) via e-mail.

The contest is an example of so-called Prize economics, where competitive incentives are offered as an alternative to in-house research and development. Netflix has said that winning a 10 percent improvement on its recommendation algorithm for \$1 million would be a tremendous bargain. Other examples include the XPrize.

Automated recommendation algorithms are seen as a key competitive edge in e-commerce, allowing retailers to guess the types of products and services customers are seeking by looking at their past behavior. For Netflix, [a 10 percent improvement on its algorithms could help move substantially higher numbers of movies](#) and increase customer satisfaction, with a direct boost to profits, the company told *Wired* magazine in a 2008 article.

Such algorithms have potentially wide applications across digital services of all stripes, but have yielded spotty performance to date, and even [drawn ridicule in the past for wildly inappropriate suggestions](#). ("Tivo thinks I'm gay.")

According to published contest rules, the rest of the contestants now have 30 days to submit a better algorithm. If they can't, Bellkor's Pragmatic Chaos will face a verification process to ensure that it followed the rules and completed the task as required. Once they clear that hurdle, they should collect the \$1 million after they "describe to the world how [they] did it and why it works."

Clearing the hurdle wasn't easy. Thousands of teams tackled the problem for more than three years, sharing their results and algorithms along the way. Improvements would come in spurts, followed by long periods of no gains, or slow ones.

Last week, [as his team edged closer to winning the prize](#), Piotte told us, "For a long time, we weren't sure if 10 percent was even achievable."

Steve Swasey, Netflix's vice president of corporate communications, confirmed late Friday that BellKor's Pragmatic Chaos broke the 10 percent barrier. "This has been terribly exciting. It's like watching the Belmont Stakes, the Preakness and the Indy 500 all at once — for geeks."

The team that spurred past the 10 percent mark includes Martin Piotte and Martin Chabbert of Montreal, from [Team Pragmatic Theory](#); Yehuda Koren, Bob Bell and Chris Volinsky of Bellkor (AT&T Research); and Andreas Töschler and Michael Jahrer of BigChaos ("commendo research") from [Team BellKor](#).

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### Comments (3)

Posted by: zirtoc | 06/27/09 | 12:52 am

Thank god Netflix can target me 10% more efficiently now.

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Posted by: sleepyhead157 | 06/27/09 | 1:15 pm

Wow, I didn't even know they had these competitions. Like the commenter above said, now Netflix can throw more stuff my way and send me emails with some more recommendations. Can't wait (sarcasm)

<http://ziggytek.com/>

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Posted by: ks2problema | 06/27/09 | 1:55 pm

I liked Netflix when I was a subscriber but the affinity selection algo sucked bigtime, as do most of them. The title "Tivo Thinks I'm Gay" really hits home.

Don't get me wrong, most affinity engines seem to suck, no question. Don't even start me on why a Captain Beefheart fan wouldn't necessarily be a fan of Frank Zappa's "Sheik Yerbouti" or why someone who likes Leonard Cohen wouldn't necessarily like Billy Joel.

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