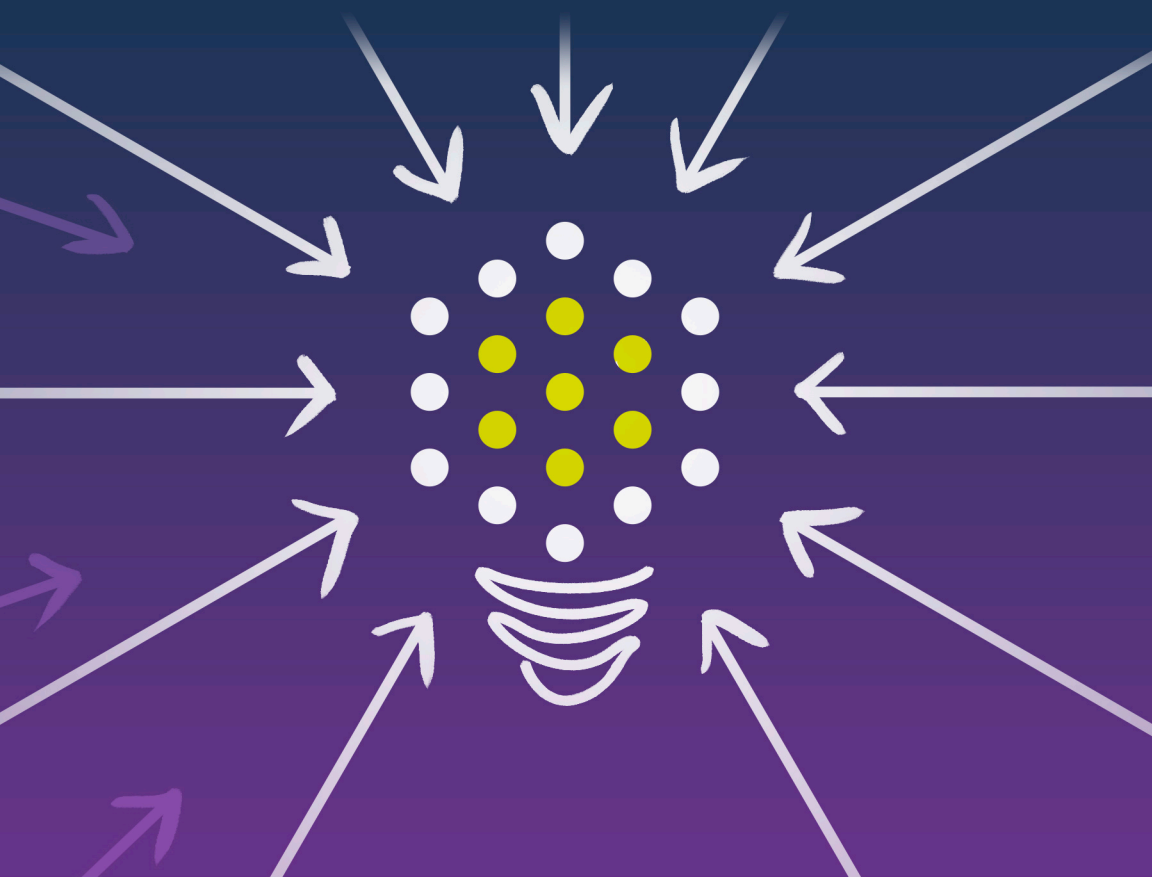


INTERNAL TECH CONFERENCES

Accelerate Multi-team Learning

VICTORIA MORGAN-SMITH
AND MATTHEW SKELTON



Internal Tech Conferences

Accelerate Multi-team Learning

Victoria Morgan-Smith and Matthew Skelton

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Introduction



Internal tech conferences can make a significant impact on an organisation's level of sharing, learning, and communication by accelerating multi-team learning across technology departments. An increasing number of enlightened organisations are using this powerful approach to spread and embed new ideas and practices.

In this book we share practical advice on how to prepare, run, and follow-up on an internal tech conference, together with some case studies from several organisations showing the approaches in common and the adaptations for each situation.

How to use this book

This book is for people involved in technology leadership in some form: people in “official” positions of leadership (CIO, CTO, Head of Engineering, IT Operations Manager, etc.) and those in more informal technology leadership positions, such as team leaders, senior engineers, and people who simply like to lead by example. Having been in such positions ourselves,

we (Victoria and Matthew) want to help other technology leaders to devise and run successful internal tech conferences to act as a key strategic differentiator for organisations building software systems.

- **Chapter 1** gives an overview of internal tech conferences and why you might want to run such an event. Read this chapter **if you have never run or experienced an internal tech conference before** to help you understand the purpose and the things involved.
- **Chapter 2** explains how to prepare for an internal tech conference. Read this to understand **what is involved, how long the preparation takes, and what kind of team you will need** to make the conference happen.
- **Chapter 3** covers the conference day itself. Read this chapter to understand **all the operational aspects of the conference** and to see what kind of help you may need on the day.
- **Chapter 4** deals with the weeks and months following the conference. Read this chapter to see how to get the most out of the day by **following up on talks and panel sessions** and how to ensure that the conferences are **an opportunity for learning and growth**.
- **Chapter 5** contains detailed **case studies** from a selected group of organisations. This chapter is different from the others in that the material is presented in a more linear, retrospective fashion (more like a story). Read this chapter to get a feel for **how real organisations have run internal tech conferences** and what they learned.
- The **Toolkit** at the back of the book contains tools and templates for planning and running an internal tech conference; these can be used and adapted as needed.

Chapters 1 to 4 deliberately read as “how-to” guides with quite specific recommendations. Chapter 5 has a more narrative flavour, befitting the case study stories. The Toolkit provides some templates and quick-start guides for getting results quickly.



Why we wrote this book

We met (appropriately) at a conference in 2015 where Victoria gave a talk about some early changes at Financial Times to create a learning organisation. We realised that we both had some similar experience of organising and running internal tech conferences and decided to write an article, published by InfoQ in 2016 [1]. As far as we could tell, this was the first online article to cover all aspects of internal tech conferences in detail, comparing approaches from different organisations, and it was included in the InfoQ eMag *Scaling DevOps* in May 2017 [2].

Since the article was published, we have been happy to see several new online articles covering internal tech conferences, and we know from speaking to people in the industry (at least in the UK) that the approach is becoming more widespread. We therefore decided to write this book to provide a template and set of guidelines for not just running the conference itself but how to go about preparing for one and how to get the most strategic and tactical value out of a series of conferences.



About the authors



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1. Benefits - why run an internal tech conference



This chapter will help you to answer these questions:

- What measurable benefits would we gain from running an internal tech conference?
- How would an event like this tie in to my broader organisational goals?
- What can this event do for the personal development of my employees?
- What different approaches should I consider?
- Is this something I want to invest in?

1.1 What is an internal tech conference?

An internal tech conference is effectively a technology conference run by and for the staff of a single organisation. Done well - as suggested by this book - an internal tech conference helps to bring together disparate teams and individuals in a shared celebration and examination of the current practices and approaches within the organisation, accelerating learning at a time of rapid technological change.

The conference could be a half-day event, a single day, or multiple days; it might be every few months or just once per year. Speakers and conference organisers alike are drawn from within the organisation, making the day a real “team effort”. The focus is on learning and improving together as an organisation in a setting where sometimes-sensitive details can be shared openly with colleagues. With many public tech conference tickets costing upwards of €800-1000 per person, many organisations find that an internal tech conference is a highly cost-effective way of training and developing staff whilst simultaneously improving cohesion and camaraderie.



1.2 The business case

Modern software development has co-evolved with cloud and IoT technologies to become a vital part of how successful organisations do business. Gone are the days of “death march”

software projects; instead we have long-term product-based or service-based ownership of business services and user experiences, all enabled by rapid infrastructure provisioning, ubiquitous automation, and high-fidelity instrumentation and telemetry.

Software delivery approaches such as Lean Agile and DevOps have demonstrated convincingly the value and power of focused collaboration on key aspects of technology and user need. Research from industry experts such as DORA and Google has shown that organisations that invest in technical and social practices for their teams consistently perform better than other organisations [46] [47]. Internal tech conferences are an excellent way to invest in team social practices.

In their 2018 book *Accelerate*, authors Nicole Forsgren and colleagues identify some key drivers of organisational performance, based on research involving thousands of organisations worldwide. Their research show that staff loyalty and how well members of staff identify with the mission of the organisation are important components of high organisational performance [48].

We believe that internal tech conferences are one of the best ways to increase staff loyalty and identification with organisational goals for several reasons that we'll explore in this book:

1. People see their work celebrated and validated within the organisation
2. People see their colleagues and coworkers on-stage, presenting their work in a compelling way, and can be inspired to do the same
3. People have a chance to reflect on recent achievements and consolidate their understanding of recent changes

4. People can see that the organisation is investing in learning and development in a very visible way
5. Where organisations run internal tech conferences on a regular basis, people can see that the organisation as a whole takes learning and improvement seriously. Learning and mastery are key to staff motivation [54] so learning helps with loyalty too.

By bringing people together in the same physical or temporal space for an extended period of joint learning, organisations help ideas and approaches to spread and align across many different teams [45]. Increasing inter-team cohesion like this helps to produce a culture of excellence based on mutual learning which in turn increases organisational performance.



1.3 Measurable benefits

An internal tech conference can be a powerful way of communicating and celebrating technology teams that build and operate the software systems that are increasingly essential to many organisations.

An event like this has many immediate, measurable benefits, as well as some hidden, long term ones. One major goal is to shape and promote a culture where people are encouraged to challenge the status quo and to get excited about new possibilities by having the space to experiment without the fear of failure. Psychologically, people are braver surrounded by people they know and trust; an internal tech conference

can help people get to know each other in an open context, allowing them to share opinions and ideas.

In our research for this book, we have examined the motivations of many organisations for running this sort of event. For example, employees at Metaswitch say that their conference “*reminds them they work with a great bunch of people*” [3] says Calum Loudon (head of architecture and conference organiser). Investing in a full day for employees to share the things that excite them enables them to appreciate each other afresh and boosts their engagement with the organisation (the full case study from Metaswitch is in [Chapter 5](#)).

Other organisations had similar experiences. In fact, three clear themes emerge as reasons for running an internal tech conference: Empowerment, Learning and Connection.



1.4 Empowerment, Learning, Connection

1.4.1 Empowerment

Successful organisations are increasingly finding that a vital part of organisational agility is the empowerment of teams. Giving teams localised autonomy over their work enables a tighter feedback loop between action and results, helping the organisation to self-steer towards better outcomes for customers and users.

If you are looking to introduce a more egalitarian mindset within your organisation - where employees are given more autonomy over how they work, have more opportunity to be creative, are expected to take more accountability for making smart and responsible decisions, then you need to engage them in the bigger picture. Empowerment needs to be taken, not given - and this is a great opportunity to create an atmosphere that will enable that to begin.

It is clear that the traditional model of having senior managers provide all of the answers, expertise and direction is severely limiting. This event can act as an implicit invitation to collaborate with leaders to take collective ownership of your department's health.

Most of the organisations in this book talk about their internal conferences being organised from the bottom up, by ordinary staff. Whilst in some cases there is a clear agenda set by leadership based on a theme they would like to address, many others facilitate an empowered curation of content. In both scenarios - whether leadership are asking the questions, or inviting the room to ask them - they are inviting the department to help *answer* them.

Internal conferences help to open the floor to all people, elevating voices not often heard. People do not necessarily need to be talking about weighty topics, simply the fact of being given the opportunity to design their own day is empowerment in action. Of course, if people do choose to join some debates about some of the options and choices made in terms of technology, ways of working, or department goals and structure, then that's going to have a huge impact on their levels of engagement.

1.4.2 Learning

Building and operating modern software systems is a challenging task: the pace of delivery is rapid and we need to draw on a wide range of skills and experience in a coordinated, joined-up way. As our world changes, and new ways of working and leading emerge, so should new ways of learning. Spending money on sending a handful of people out to public conferences no longer seems to make the impact we need it to, at least alone; public conferences are often too expensive for all staff to attend and they are not tailored to the needs of the organisation or individuals.



Talks, panel discussions and even classroom sessions are all great ways to promote learning at an internal tech conference. Image credit: Matthew Skelton

There are smart people working hard in technology departments the world over - experimenting, discovering new ways of solving problems every day - and yet most organisations

tend to look outside for learning. That is of course vital, but what the companies that feature in our case studies have also realised is that if they look at their own employees then they can learn a huge amount without going anywhere at all.

Hearing about the approaches other teams have used to solve problems can help you think differently about the challenges you are facing. Learning about how others ensure quality, for instance with different approaches to security, testing, monitoring or deployment, can inspire you to step up your own game. As an extra bonus, at an internal conference, these solutions are more likely to make sense in the context (infrastructure, regulation, culture) in which your organisation operates.

- Ben Maraney, formerly of Klarna [50] (Read more about Klarna in [Chapter 5](#).)

Empowerment is closely linked to the shifts in corporate culture that enable *emergent leadership*. It is held that by encouraging self-organisation and self-management, companies will end up with a better-led organisation.

The **Learning 3.0** approach is a response to this. Just as there are better ways to lead an organisation - encouraging everyone to be proactive in their quest to make their company a better place to be - there is also a better way for employees to learn than to passively receive information. In his book *How Creative Workers Learn* Alexandre Magno talks about emergent learning - people learn through experience and interaction, not through consuming reams of pre-prepared material. "Learning emerges from the connection of stories, ideas and practice", he says [5].

Whilst a conference that has the agenda driven externally can teach attendees something “theoretically”, an internal conference brings the exciting opportunity to explore ideas and challenges *within the context of the organisation*, with insights coming from the collective and not solely from a few appointed experts.

The Financial Times recognises the value of sending people out to public conferences, but their Engine Room conference *“ensures that we also learn from the brilliant people inside our company.”* Cait O’Riordan (CPIO) explains that *“Ideally that would happen anyway in the course of our daily lives - but putting some time in the calendar makes sure that sharing actually happens and happens at scale”* [5].

Furthermore, from the perspective of the speakers, giving a talk means doing a lot of learning themselves. In order to get up and speak authoritatively on a subject, speakers need to do some research into what else is being said in the industry on their chosen topic to validate or update their viewpoints. So this is their opportunity to further enlighten themselves on something. *“Be the protagonist of your own learning”* says Learning 3.0; an internal tech conference should be an enriching experience for speakers to grasp with both hands.

1.4.3 Connection

In the 2019 book *Team Topologies*, Matthew Skelton and Manuel Pais identify the need for regular learning and cross-team knowledge sharing using a range of techniques, especially internal tech conferences [45]. One of the challenges of the increasingly common culture of autonomy is that people often don’t take the time to connect with colleagues beyond

their immediate team. Agility has seen a move towards self-sufficiency, giving teams the ability to realise the value of their work without depending on anyone else who might slow them down. Although this self-sufficiency is generally positive, it does create its own problems. In particular, the desire by engineers to solve their own problems means that the same problems are often being solved repeatedly in the same department: autonomy without alignment.

There are benefits to connecting with other teams beyond the opportunity to learn and swap stories. It is hugely valuable for people to have the chance to break out from the normal team silos and to encounter other people in a setting that is not defined by project scope or operational problems. The parts of the conference day where the interaction is at its highest - whether it's in an open space discussion, lunchtime chit chat or evening drinks - are in many ways the most important parts of the day.

The informal interaction during the internal tech conference day is where people build up a healthy balance of “*social capital*” [26]. Each time social capital is boosted it is like an influenza jab, inoculating them against later conflict when a more difficult time appears. If people need help from each other, their interaction will be swifter and smoother after spending time chatting at the conference. If they need to present a challenge to one another, they will do so with more humanity. It is said that for technology departments and organisations today the only constant is change, which means that misunderstandings and conflicts are never far away. Social capital provides a buffer to help people pull together across the department when these changes arise, so anything that builds up those reserves is worthwhile.

Donald Clark's excellent article *Conferences – jumped up*

classrooms? [30] presents a challenge to prevent an internal conference from turning into a scenario where “*people turn up to be spoon-fed by sages on the stage talking at them [...] a lazy approach to learning*”. He urges readers to evoke some emotional response and to not fall into the trap of being a “forgetting experience”. For internal tech conferences, avoid anything that feels like pure instruction, and instead seek to stimulate some lively debates that will actively engage employees and trigger some shifts in mindset. The behavioural change that comes with new ways of thinking and seeing others is the lasting effect you can most hope for.



1.5 Define what speakers gain

Speaking in front of a large group of colleagues can be daunting for people, so be clear about the benefits for speakers. Management will also want to understand the advantages of investing time in training and preparing the speakers.

1.5.1 Celebrate unsung heroes

An internal tech conference is a great opportunity to identify and celebrate ‘unsung’ people, teams, and achievements; it’s a way to showcase team projects that might be forgotten or that do less exciting but crucial work. You may decide to deliberately look for people who have done particularly interesting, foundational, or transformative work - such as database upgrades that allowed them to shift platforms or

deployment automation that reduced outages - or perhaps someone who can describe in (painful) detail what it's like to be on the 1st-line support team.

1.5.2 Personal growth

Speaking at an internal event will help people to challenge themselves. The opinions they've been expressing on a daily basis to their neighbouring coworkers will need to be fact-checked if they want to express them on stage, then do a bit more research to be sure they know what they're talking about. A team can easily become a small echo chamber, so it's healthy for people to raise their head occasionally. Then they can say, "Hey, it's not just me - other people are saying this stuff too!". Many conference speakers will tell you that the biggest thing they get out of talking at an event is the extra learning they do in order to test and flesh out their message.

1.5.3 Confidence

To many people, public speaking is the most terrifying experience in the world; consequently many great ideas and opinions remain unheard. If an internal tech conference can help people tackle that fear of speaking, that's a huge gift. As we see in [Chapter 5](#), many people go on to talk at external conferences as a direct result of gaining confidence to do so at internal events.



1.6 Define what attendees gain

Attendees at a well-run internal tech conference should receive a huge boost to their awareness and enthusiasm for their work, but how do they know this beforehand? Take the time to spell out exactly how attendees will benefit.

1.6.1 Engagement with the organisation

One of the big benefits for attendees is the buzz of sharing insight and successes; this makes an organisation feel like a great place to work. The organisations in our case studies have all reported a general boost in morale after these events, as the chance to take time out and think about things in a different way and to hear inspirational stories from each other gave employees a renewed connection with the company.

1.6.2 Feeling valued

Metaswitch ran in-depth workshops that last 2-3 hours giving people a chance to get stuck into the new technologies like the Internet of Things - in parallel to talks on both tech and non-tech subjects, thus delivering something for everyone. Across disciplines, attendees felt a strong sense that they were considered worth investing in.

1.6.3 Learning and validation

Another benefit of internal tech conferences can be the validation that comes from hearing colleagues talk about practices used elsewhere in the industry too. Encourage some speakers

to talk about practices in other organisations by referring to books they have read or talks they have seen. By bringing a piece of the outside world into a company, everyone gains a better understanding of how their shared work makes up a bigger picture. Often this involves reinforcing that they're doing the right things already - a big motivation.



1.7 What types of events work?

There are several options for the type of event you run. The format you choose will depend on what outcomes you seek from your event, as you can get quite different results with each format. The following examples provide a flavour of the different kinds of events that have been proven to work well.

1.7.1 Financial Times: 1-day annual event with internal speakers only

The Financial Times (FT) is a global news organisation with roots in London, UK. The FT team decided to run a full day event with a mixture of content and debate from a diverse set of people across the department, joined solely by an internal audience. The conference consisted of Lightning Talks, Panel Debates, Open Spaces and a game, rounded off with beer, chatter, and more beer. The conversation-based sessions proved hugely successful at capturing the mood and stimulating changes in the department [7].



A lively panel discussion at FT during their first internal tech conference. Image credit: Thurston Tye

A panel at the FT's Engine Room Live event get ready for a question on its way from the audience - complete with soft blue throwable microphone [8]!

1.7.2 Metaswitch: 2-day annual event with internal speakers and "friends"

Metaswitch, a software for telecommunications company, ran an energetic multi-stream 2-day event, incorporating a mixture of full-length talks and workshops, with team-led social events in the evenings. The audience is almost entirely internal, but with a few "friends of Metaswitch" as guest speakers. It's described as a highlight in the company calendar, and has directly influenced employee engagement within the engineering department.

1.7.3 Klarna: 1-day internal off-site event for all in engineering

Klarna is a major European bank based in Sweden. Since 2014 Klarna has run an annual 1-day internal tech conference in Stockholm, bringing together an increasingly large engineering community to share ideas and discover new approaches.

Klarna found that by mentoring and training their own staff in speaking and writing talks, the quality of talk submissions has grown each year. All speakers are now drawn from within Klarna and this helps to make the event highly relevant for all attendees [10]. The main conference (attended by everyone) is a 1-day event, but Klarna also use the day before the conference for additional workshops and roundtable sessions for smaller groups; this is the only time in the year when they have all the engineers in one place.

Read more about the Klarna, Metaswitch and FT examples in the Case Studies in [Chapter 5](#).

1.7.4 Paddy Power Betfair: off-site, with some external speakers

Other organisations have found different formats that work well for them. For instance, the online betting and gaming company Paddy Power Betfair hold an annual DevOps Community conference for everyone in Product and Technology [11]. Rich Haigh, former Head of Delivery Enablement at Paddy Power Betfair, explains:

“On the morning we invite vendors to come and talk about how we have used their products – what’s coming up in their roadmaps, etc. In the afternoon we open the floor to talk about projects they have been working on, interesting tech, R&D they are doing, etc. We then have a social event in the evening. ... We hire an external venue ... and we video everything so we can share the knowledge further after the event.”

1.7.5 ING: internal and external speakers, with a specific theme

At the Dutch bank ING, an internal change from older, silo-based ways of working to a more fluid, DevOps-inspired approach was accelerated by running an internal conference based directly on the DevOpsDays conference format, combining external invited speakers, internal talks, and short ‘lightning’ talks of 5 mins each. This event helped to “stir up the discussion” around new ways of working and inspired people to attend and help organise a public conference (DevOpsDays Amsterdam) [12].

Furthermore, after the ING people blogged about their conference and shared the slides, a team at US retailer Target were inspired to run their own conference [28]. The recently-published *DevOps Handbook* by Gene Kim et al has more on the approach at Target [40].

1.7.6 UK-based ticket retailer: 6 monthly half-day event, all staff invited

An online ticket retailer in the UK opted to invite teams outside of technology to learn what the tech teams actually did, as that was a mystery to many people; the sessions were known as ‘Engineering Day’. All staff in the London office were invited. The first installment was a full day session with many different speakers from the engineering teams (and some from other departments too). Subsequently, the team ran focused half-day Engineering Day events every six months which allowed more people to attend as they found it easier to spare a half day rather than a full day. Teams in

India were included via video conference and eventually the show went ‘on the road’ to the teams in Edinburgh [9].

Consider an “unconference” if your organisational culture is right. An unconference is a learning event that prioritises peer-to-peer learning, usually with a schedule developed on the day itself by the participants. This format works well in situations where those involved are confident about presenting and sharing ideas [55].

1.7.7 Permission to pause

There is no ‘right way’ to run an internal tech conference - it depends on what your team, department or organisation needs. An important thing to consider early on is the audience: who should we invite? Who would benefit most from the conference? The answers to those questions should help to frame your conference planning: as the attendee list grows the focal point of discussions stretches to fit the audience, whereas a more compact group of attendees allows the focus and aims of the conference to remain tighter.

However you choose to run your internal conference, it’s important to give people enough time and space to immerse themselves in the event: help people clear their calendars so they can ‘shake the every-day out of their hair’. This is a chance for people to give themselves permission to pause - they need to be ready to get as much out of the day as possible.



1.8 Learn from external events

Much can be learned from looking to successful external (public) conferences for inspiration. In a blog post *How to run a good tech conference* [44], Matthew Skelton identifies nine key things to address:

1. Find a fabulous organising team
2. Choose a venue wisely
3. Make the conference practitioner-led
4. Make the conference inclusive
5. Find good sponsors and suppliers
6. Plan the money side carefully
7. Use a decent ticketing platform
8. Treat all people involved with respect
9. Find great keynote speakers

Of these nine points, only point 5 (sponsors and suppliers) and point 7 (ticketing) do not really apply to an internal conference. A strong and passionate organising team is essential (see [Chapter 2](#)). You may be restricted to company offices for the venue, but if you have the option of hiring an out-of-office venue, look for a venue that does not “split up” the conference, so that every one of the attendees can feel part of the same shared experience.

Build the organising team with representatives from across your engineering organisation. This is particularly important for the people who solicit and review talk proposals. If attendees know that the organisers and speakers are practitioners like them, they interact as equals and feel able to share more; make sure to encourage practitioners to get involved,

particularly those who are from underrepresented groups or those who have not spoken before. An inclusive, diverse conference will generate better engagement and discussions than a conference with the same faces that always speak.

As we have seen, many of the challenges and activities between external and internal conferences are similar, but there are some differences that are worth bearing in mind, which we explore in the following sections.

1.8.1 Tickets

External conferences generally have two sources of income to cover the costs of their event: ticket revenue and sponsorship. For an internal conference it's unlikely that you would want to charge your employees money to attend your conference. You might use a ticketing platform for convenience, but keep the tickets free.

1.8.2 Sponsorship

Whilst sponsorship for your internal conference might be possible, it is something to approach with caution. Your conference is probably focused on things that are core to your organisation and will most likely only include external people as guests. As such it is unlikely to be appropriate to introduce someone else's brand/context to your event or hugely beneficial to any potential sponsor; you should expect costs to be covered entirely by departmental/divisional budget. Use the [example budget](#) in the Toolkit to help you establish what the budget should be and adjust your plans accordingly.

1.8.3 Marketing

An internal conference will need some marketing and promotion to attract staff but probably not to the same degree as an external conference. Consider how to create a “buzz” around the event without making things too polished or formal. Whether people are expected to attend or the conference is optional, how can you make it exciting or interesting?

1.8.4 Publicity

The organisation probably expects some kind of positive publicity from the internal conference, but you will need to be careful with some of the photographs, videos, and details - it's likely that some of the material in the talks will be confidential or for internal-use only. At a public/external conference, it's normally safe to assume that all the material has been checked for sensitivity, but this is not the case with internal conferences. Check with relevant people before publishing details of talks. Of course, the fact that you are running an internal tech conference should be something to publicise; make people want to join the organisation so they get to find out more details about the talks!



1.9 Chapter Review

Every organisation is different, and what you decide to do will be dependent upon your context. Use the ideas here to help you decide what you want to do.

Some benefits are “tangible” and immediately measurable:

- Working groups forming to tackle a cross-team problem
- Projects transformed through “lightbulb” moments
- Social capital injection avoiding wasted time and energy in future conflicts

Ask yourself: What tangible benefits would you hope to see from your event? And how will you measure them?

Other benefits are harder to measure, but arguably far more significant:

- Empowerment - and the resulting responsibility
- Learning - peer-education, shared lessons
- Connection - improved relationships and collaboration

Ask yourself: What goals do you have in your department that would benefit from improved inter-team relationships?

Provide lots of opportunity for personal development:

- Participants - confidence, public speaking skills, grasp of their chosen topic
- Attendees - engagement, new knowledge, relationships, validation
- All - sense of being valued

Ask yourself: In what ways would you like your employees to grow and develop? How can you use this event to help them do this?

Choose the approach that will give you the outcome you want:

- “By the people, for the people” - a bottom-up approach
- A specific theme for the day
- Showcase your group to the rest of your organisation

Ask yourself: What do you want to achieve from this event? What opportunities or constraints might you have that help determine your approach?

Decide whether this is something for you:

Consider how you could experiment and learn whether this is really for you. Set a limited budget, run it once, and review whether to scale up or down the following year.

Ask yourself: How much are you willing to invest in this?

2. Preparing for the conference

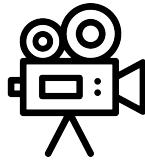


This chapter will help you to answer these questions:

- How do we get started?
- What format and structure should we have?
- How do we choose our speakers?
- What planning activities are involved?
- How do we inspire employees to attend?

(This chapter is not available in the sample)

3. Running the conference

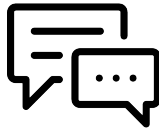


This chapter will help you to answer these questions:

- What should we expect on the day?
- Who do we need extra help from on the day?
- What are the potential pitfalls?
- What extra things should we be doing?

(This chapter is not available in the sample)

4. Follow-up



This chapter will help you to answer these questions:

- How will I know if this has been a successful event?
- How do I stop people from forgetting about it?
- How do I maximise the results?



(This chapter is not available in the sample)

5. Case studies



This chapter consists of case studies from three organisations:

- The Financial Times (FT)
- Metaswitch
- Klarna

5.1 Case study: The Financial Times

The Financial Times is one of the world's leading news organisations, recognised internationally for its authority, integrity and accuracy. It is part of Nikkei Inc., which provides a broad range of information, news and services for the global business community.

The story of the FT's experience of internal conferences is deeply fascinating. Internal conferences offer a window into what is happening within the broader Product & Technology department and provide opportunities to communicate any changes within the team.

During the four years covered in this case study, the FT saw three things emerge:

A dramatic growth in pride and recognition of product and technical excellence

Showcasing innovation and letting people tell their stories at these events all encouraged more experiments and boundary-pushing by teams afterwards.

Enabling the sharing of pain points across teams galvanised people to break out of their silos and find creative and tangible solutions to problems.

Dedicating time to talking about what their engineers were proud of triggered a new passion for setting and raising the standards, for inspiring each other and generating excitement that was longer lasting.

Open debates brought Product and Technology together to form a powerful partnership. Previously two separate groups,

the Product and Technology departments came to recognise each other and ultimately combine in 2016 - leading to far smarter decisions being made around their business model and tech strategies.

The conference was a manifestation of cultural change and then a yardstick for measuring it

The department saw *emergent leadership*; opening up the floor to questions and topics encouraged new voices.

Open debates and the freedom to discuss topics led to the evolution of a *deep democracy* for some difficult departmental changes such as adopting DevOps and shifting ownership for Quality Assurance to engineers.

The *bonding experience* of the event created connections that continued far beyond the day - peer coaching and training activities were spun up and a new rhythm of bootcamps and rotations between teams helped conversations to continue.

The FT became a destination employer - a place people wanted to be

Everyone started to take responsibility for making the FT somewhere they wanted to be, no longer relying on the leadership team to set the rules.

More people started talking about diversity & inclusion, psychological safety, empathy and respect. Employee-led initiatives and groups started to form around mental health, diversity, coaching and mentoring, in addition to various engineering specialisms.

Engineers started to contribute to the wider community, such as engaging with coding clubs for under-represented groups outside the organisation, talking at conferences about

what they do and providing open-source toolkits for building accessible websites.



“Nudge”

An internal tech conference cannot possibly take all the credit for a cultural transformation, but it can play a big part and mark out a useful rhythm of checkpoints.

Thaler and Sunstein coined the term *Libertarian Paternalism* in their book *Nudge - Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness* [20]. It refers to the desire to give people the freedom of choice whilst also keeping an eye on what is good for the person. It means creating opportunities for people to make decisions - and making it easy for them to make the decision that is in their best interests, without removing their right to make a “bad” decision.

So all these activities - inspiring a forum where conversations that are happening in small pockets could reach a wider audience for debate, and then gently encouraging some of the spin-off activities it triggered - could be viewed as simply a series of nudges. Neither the conference, nor its agenda, nor even the follow-up activities were created by the leadership team but were merely the conditions for them to happen.

5.1.1 How it all began

Unwittingly, the FT triggered their first event just as a cultural shift was trying to happen - so what started out as a conference about technology became a catalyst for real change.

That change can be mapped out across the next four years - each conference not only nudging that transformation along a bit, but also acting as a mirror to reflect on just how far the department's culture had evolved since the previous event.

The decision to run the event came the day after some engineers and their CTO attended a large external conference. This group realised that the recent changes that had already happened at the FT - a massive growth in investment in technology, accompanied by a broad move towards agility in terms of methods, processes, engineering practices and technology choices - meant there was a huge amount of knowledge and experience within the department already. The challenge at that time was not a lack of knowledge, but a lack of *knowledge-share*.

Much has been said about the challenges of empowered teams and about the silos that happen as a direct result of team autonomy. Independent structures are great for streamlined decision-making and agility, but dreadful in terms of sharing ideas, services, skills, experiences and best practices.

Not only that, but there were an awful lot of *opinions* that weren't being shared. Leadership would talk about agility, about empowerment, about wanting a collaborative culture - but if they were the only ones doing the talking, then change was going to be very slow indeed.

The decision was made: run an internal technical conference, "by the people, for the people". This would mean a group of volunteers from within the department creating it from scratch, calling upon their colleagues to generate content.

5.1.2 2015 - it began with a vision

Over the past few years there has been an almost exponential increase in the speed of change within the technology sphere. Coupled with this has been the growth of the FT Technology department in terms of numbers and expertise. The size, scope and speed of delivery is greater than ever. It is close to impossible for individuals to keep abreast of all these changes.

However, communication, in a friendly, inclusive environment, can help. By communicating we can address the challenges and increase the benefits of this rapid change. We can and should learn from each other so that great ideas, useful tools and smart ways of working can be shared.

Vision statement:

- **Engine Room Live** is an internal conference for the FT Technology department, an opportunity to learn from each other and make connections between teams to increase communication, productivity and innovation.
- **Participants** get a chance to take part in a conversation that matters to them, and to test out their public speaking voice in a safe environment.
- **Attendees** get to discover and take away good ideas and new channels of communication with other attendees. A chance to lift your head from the weeds and think about something other than delivering the next feature.
- **The company** gets better working practices spread around more teams, happier staff and improved communication between teams and people, so that job satisfaction, productivity and efficiency can increase.

They sold it to the rest of the department as a chance to ‘lift

your heads up from the coal face for a day and maybe even choose a better pickaxe' [40].

FT's tech department leaders showed their support for the event by joining in as delegates on the day. The department's Delivery Coach kicked things off with a short introductory talk on how much the FT Technology department had changed in the last few years and how a conference fitted in perfectly with the 'always learning' ethos of the FT's then parent company Pearson [22].

Having set the scene, a day of panel discussions followed - some of which were written up enthusiastically by attendees on the FT's blog [23]. Having invested a lot of energy and excitement into the day, the results were remarkable.



Questions during panel discussion at FT. Image credit: Michal Huniewicz

No-one quite anticipated just how much impact the day could have. Here is what emerged:

- Teams came away saying they would definitely be trying new ways of working (the organisers followed up - they did!).
- A monitoring “action group” emerged as a result of opening up a discussion on dealing with alerting overload in the world of microservices - one team’s problem became a department-wide challenge to focus on.
- A centralised Dev Tooling team, who owned the automated deployment mechanisms, committed publicly to making small individual tools for dev teams to free them from the perceived tyranny of central control.

Most importantly, there was a real sense that people had started to think about how they could change things. The event itself - and the CTO’s talk at the end of the day about how people needed to take empowerment, rather than waiting for it to be bestowed upon them - had a profound effect and encouraged lots of opinion-sharing over the drinks that followed that evening. Those opinions continued to be shared and debated over the next few weeks and months.

5.1.3 2016 - change is in the air

By the time the second conference came around in 2016, a lot had changed already, and 25 people volunteered to help organise it. More topics were put forward for discussion, more people volunteered to sit on the panels - people had found their voices! People who had sat on panels in the first year were now speaking at external conferences; other people who had been inspired to realise they could *make change happen* had begun lunchtime learning sessions and working groups.

Some of the attendees in 2016 felt that they’d been a bit shy the first time around, and wanted to get stuck into the *really hard*

topics this year. So DevOps got some real attention - *with one of the most brave, respectful, but deeply honest discussions that could be hoped for with a topic that impacted so many people across the technology department.*

It was obvious at this point that the FT's Tech and Product team no longer relied on their leadership team to talk about change - movements were beginning from the ground up and they were starting to see employee-led change.

5.1.4 2017 - getting into the groove

Fast-forward to 2017, and the topics that were being discussed had moved from technical challenges to cultural issues. Diversity and Inclusion featured highly and some very candid, sometimes painful stories were told to a room full of 150 colleagues - a moment that made FT Technology leadership proud. It legitimized the claim that the FT Product & Technology team has a great culture of respect, openness and honesty.

If it is not already clear - *internal tech conferences are about so much more than tech.*

5.1.5 2018 - change is Business As Usual

By 2018, conversations about the type of organisation the FT wants to be were a part of the fabric. There were year-round employee-led working groups on diversity and inclusion, leadership skills, collaboration styles, accessibility, standards, data and success metrics. People were now familiar with the idea that if they wanted something to change, they could start the conversation.

In terms of public speaking experiences, there were regular Lightning Talk sessions to give people a small non-threatening window to speak at, social events organised by a “Culture Club” and lots of “pop-up” (*ad hoc*) learning activities.

5.1.5.1 Pushing the boundaries

A major change in the preceding 12 months was the opportunity for further collaboration across the FT and with external organisations. The company had been bought by Nikkei in 2016 [24], and so the FT team had been involved in collaborations with the Nikkei technology department; they also worked on an innovative external project with Google. Partner companies were also now working with the FT to build capabilities for their “FT Specialist” publications.

5.1.5.2 A new type of conference

The focus of 2018’s Engine Room conference was on helping people within the department to lift their head up and realise that whilst cross-team collaboration is amazing, *cross-organisation* collaboration is even more so! The main organiser said he wanted to “*help people understand that we’re a bigger organisation than they think*” [25].

With a different purpose comes a different format. This was more of a top-down piece of education for the department, and partners were brought in to share their knowledge, creating an opportunity for awareness and cross-fertilisation of ideas at a broader level. A fixed agenda of well-attended talks with Q&A time replaced the panel sessions of previous years.

So many of the important conversations about how people work together - working styles, technology choices and com-

ing together to solve bigger issues - now just happen because the channels for discourse are open and well used.

5.1.6 What's next for Engine Room Live?

The FT will bring back panel sessions in 2019, where the original values and vision of Engine Room Live will be revisited.

The values of the first conference - “by the people for the people”, building up social capital by opening up debates and letting the audience dictate the conversation - have become deeply embedded in the organisation. They didn't *need* a big event to bring this to life in 2018, but they're not ready to take them for granted just yet either!

5.1.7 3 Takeaways

Across FT's four years of Engine Room conferences, some high level lessons are:

There is so much more to a tech conference than tech

This could be your chance to engage your department in some powerful conversations so that they can help define and shape the way forward.

It doesn't stop at the event itself

If you are clear on your objectives, they should continue to be pursued outside of the event. Follow up to ensure that there is an immediate impact, but also be ready to nudge and nurture other complementary activities in pursuit of your goals.

Always focus on what you are trying to achieve when deciding on your format

As your department changes, so will your needs from an event such as this. Don't be afraid to change a tried and tested formula if your needs have evolved.



5.2 Case study: Metaswitch

Metaswitch is a “software for telecommunications” company with 800-900 people worldwide. Whilst most of the technology teams work in the UK, some are across Europe, the US, New Zealand and Malaysia.

For Metaswitch, the motivation for running an annual internal tech conference is pretty simple; it's to keep engineers energised, engaged and innovative. Other departments within the organisation started the trend of annual events by running global training days, flying teams in from around the world to offer a consistent and shared educational experience. Being less globally distributed than the other parts of their organisation, the technology department did not have the same motivations, but it inspired them to consider what they could achieve themselves if they got everyone together in engineering for a couple of days.

This led to them holding their first technical conference to see if people liked it – which they did. Calum Loudon (Lead Architect and conference organiser) tells us that whilst the benefit for the sales team of a day together was formal and consistent training, for the technology department it was all about cohesion and the chance to educate, learn from and inspire their peers.

The developers at Metaswitch say that ***the reason they work there is the calibre of their fellow developers*** - so this is what they want to highlight with their conference.

They've been running events for five years, and have a consistent format and method that "feels really grooved now", says Loudon. (See the [Toolkit](#) in this book for some helpful tools for getting your own conference to run smoothly.)

Several weeks before the event they start to drum-up interest and launch a Call for Papers (with an incredible 80 submissions, interest in the 2018 event was clear long before they even got to the day.). The final list of talks is selected by the votes of the attendees, with some minor tweaks to avoid giving individuals multiple appearances and to fit the schedule into the various rooms that have been co-opted for the event (including the neighbouring church hall!).

Metaswitch have identified that people can need "strong encouragement" to lift themselves out of the day-to-day engineering and development routine, so they explicitly ask everyone to attend. Limited capacity for many talks means that places must be booked in advance, which in itself can set the office abuzz. Within minutes of the announcement inviting people to register their interest, tools are collectively downed as people race to get a seat in their favourite sessions.

Whether it is the strong encouragement to attend, the limited seats in talks, the parties and games held afterwards, or the wide variety of talks (anything from "How I built a grandfather clock out of LEGO" to "Diversity in the workplace", with lots of engineering and science-related talks in between), their annual event now has a strong reputation within the organisation.

5.2.1 Making people feel valued

Metaswitch have found that investing in their people in this way sustains a high level of morale and engagement in the organisation. Post-conference surveys record consistently high satisfaction, with over 95% of participants reporting positive views on the conference, and with many comments singling out the quality of co-workers as the key highlight [3]. The enthusiasm with which the Call for Papers is met means the reputation of the events is clearly sustained from year to year.

The Metaswitch goal of sustaining a high level of engagement is not only pursued within the conference - they hold twice-yearly hackathons [26] and other social events too. Many staff tell them this event is a highlight of their year.

5.2.2 Side-effects

Whilst keeping people engaged and fresh is the goal of the event, when asked if Metaswitch had seen anything else change, Loudon identified two things:

At the last Eng Conference we had a session on “I am an X”, where various people stood up and related their experience of working at Metaswitch as a woman/trans/non-binary/carer, etc. That I think helped advance a discussion we had been having and led (albeit indirectly) to various initiatives on team cultures and psychological safety.

More generally: a significant part of my day job as head of our architecture team is spotting when different teams are addressing similar problems and getting them to talk to each other. I have

noticed that since we started running Engineering Conferences teams are better at doing that for themselves, i.e. they are less insular and more prone to asking themselves “Hang on, has anyone else solved this problem already?” rather than doing the traditional heads-down engineer thing of rushing off and building it themselves.

5.2.3 3 Takeaways

There are 3 core threads running through all of the Metaswitch Engineering Conferences which are key to their success:

Let the people choose

Don't equate internal conferences with education - this is about celebrating your people. This means that (just like Hackathons) the most successful conferences can come out of being completely open to any type of content - resist the urge to push a particular agenda if you want high engagement. Hopefully you should get some wonderful surprises and uncover creativity in places you would never think to look.

Encourage contribution from all

Your attendees are not just looking for those people who already talk actively at conferences and who will give a polished performance - they are looking for a good story. They're also looking for a reason to stand up and talk next year, so make sure that when shortlisting you select a variety of speakers to encourage less confident speakers to join in.

Don't forget the fun

All the best conferences “out there” include a party or dinner of some kind - this informal part of the event is every bit as important as the conference content. In order to really feel like a

treat and a genuine break from work into something different, you need to raise those spirits, encourage those connections and give people something to remember. Some games, prizes, food and drink will give your event a significant boost and maximise the returns you will get from it.

Calum Loudon, Lead Architect and conference organiser at Metaswitch



5.3 Case study: Klarna

Founded in 2005 as an e-commerce startup, Klarna is now one of Europe's largest banks and provides payment solutions for 60 million consumers across 100,000 merchants in fourteen countries.

In 2014, Klarna began to run a yearly internal tech conference called *KonferenSE* (a play on the words “Klarna” and Sweden (“SE”), where Klarna is based). A small group of engineers at Klarna realised that an internal tech conference could be a good way to help inspire and educate technology people whilst also providing an occasion for people to network and get to know each other:

At Klarna I've found the relationships formed at the KonferenSE valuable throughout the year. Chatting to people between sessions and listening to speakers helps me discover 'local experts' who I can approach for help or advice in their areas of expertise long after the event is over. When I go into a meeting

about collaboration or integration with a new team the atmosphere is much more friendly (and effective) if I've already had a friendly chat with them at the KonferenSE. - Ben Maraney, organiser

The first few conferences had over 350 participants, with attendance growing in size each year as Klarna expanded. Klarna now employs over 2000 staff; at the 2018 conference nearly 700 staff attended, meaning that nearly all the invited attendees were present.

At a rapidly-growing technology company - especially one with a banking license and with offices in several countries like Klarna - coordinating technical approaches across the organisation becomes increasingly difficult as the company adds more staff. The *KonferenSE* events have evolved over several years to meet this challenge.

5.3.1 Developing speaker skills

One of the most important ingredients of the Klarna conferences has been the focus on developing speaker skills. For the 2018 conference, there were 15 or 16 speaker “mentors” or coaches who worked with people whose talks had been chosen for the conference. Giving a talk at a conference requires skill and practice, and the mentors help the speakers to prepare their material, write the slides, and practice the talk itself. The mentors set deadlines for various draft versions of the talk so that no speaker leaves things until the last minute to prepare.

To help make talks engaging to watch, Klarna pays for professional training for their speakers. The training helps speakers

both to prepare the material and to actually give a presentation. In this way, many basic errors of conference talks are avoided: small text on slides, speakers turning away from the audience, speakers mumbling, too much material, and similar problems are caught and avoided early on.

The speakers selected for the upcoming conference act as a little community that help each other to prepare. Speakers are also encouraged to try out their talks with small groups so that problems with the flow of ideas can be found and fixed.

Slides are important. The Klarna mentors help speakers to design slides that look great and are memorable, avoiding bullet points, standard fonts and templates. Good slides actually help the audience to focus on what the speaker is saying, and help (or force) the speaker to memorise their talk rather than read from text on the screen.

The Klarna team found it useful to have a few backup speakers ready to give a talk if one of the scheduled speakers was ill. The backup speaker got all the care and attention that a scheduled speaker got (training, food, swag, and so on) and even if they could not speak on the day, they were selected to give an internal talk soon after the conference.

5.3.2 3 Takeaways

5.3.2.1 Separate the “core organisers” and the “speaker mentors”

“One of the best improvements we made was to have separate people for the core organising (including on-the-day operations) and the speaker mentoring”, says Kim Öberg, one of the organising team. The activities and focus for a speaker

mentor is quite different from the things that need to happen on the conference day, and keeping these two groups of people separate (to focus on their role) proved to be very valuable.

5.3.2.2 Allow time to prepare for each event

Preparations for a *KonferenSE* event begin 9 months beforehand. Nine months may seem like a long time but it provides plenty of opportunity to mentor and train speakers, prepare talks and slides, and ensure that the conference has a friendly but professional feel. With over 700 attendees, it can be a challenge to find a venue large enough, so early preparation helps. With a growing organisation, the extra time helps the organisers and mentors to consider multiple viewpoints within Engineering, helping to broaden the reach of the event and increase awareness of additional aspects of running a major European banking operation. A good preparation window also enables the organising team to make changes to the event; for example, for the 2019 event, the organising team is considering running dedicated talk tracks with specific themes due to the volume and high quality of the talk submissions.

5.3.2.3 Continuing success

The internal tech conferences at Klarna have been very successful, producing all kinds of advantages that were not initially expected. The Chief Product Officer (CPO) at Klarna, David Fock, is a huge fan of the conference, and gives a 30 minute product vision talk immediately after the morning keynote. The conference is attended by many people outside the technology department, helping to provide cohesion between different parts of Klarna.

Read more about engineering at Klarna: engineering.klarna.com

***Ben Maraney, Case Taintor, Kim Öberg, Matthias Feist -
current and former organisers of the KonferenSE internal
tech conferences at Klarna.***

Toolkit for internal tech conferences



(This chapter is not available in the sample)

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Terminology

- AV - Audio Visual
- Active Voice - specifically referencing an action eg “John said that”, rather than the more passive “it has been said”
- Bootcamp - a short duration working with a software team to gain experience
- CfP - Call for Papers
- Death march - a software project that stretches on at an unsustainable pace and feels destined to fail
- DevOps - an approach to building and running software systems that emphasises close collaboration, flow, long-term team ownership, automation, and metrics
- Diversity and Inclusion - a movement to acknowledge that having a diverse group is insufficient, so inclusion means making it a welcome space for all, not merely a tolerant one
- Echo chamber - a space where a person only encounters views and beliefs similar to their own - likened to a physical echo chamber which is an enclosed space where sound reverberates
- Emergent leadership - leadership being demonstrated by people taking the initiative, rather than being given a leadership title
- Emergent learning - new knowledge being acquired through experience rather than from formal training courses
- Guild - a cross-team group who meet to share knowledge and experience within a given discipline / competency

- Hack Day - a short, intense period (often a day) for engineers and other disciplines to work together to create a functioning product by the end of the event
- IoT - Internet of Things
- Lightning talk - a short talk of 5 - 10 minutes
- Live captioning - a service that will capture words spoken on a plain text screen as they are said
- NPS - Net Promoter Score
- Open Spaces - self-organised and lightly facilitated discussions
- PechaKucha 20x20 - a lightning talk consisting of 20 slides which autoplay for 20 seconds each
- Psychological Safety - the ability to be oneself with one's team without fear of negative consequence
- Q&A - Questions and Answers
- Rhetorical questions - a figure of speech in the form of a question that is asked to make a point rather than to elicit an answer
- Social capital - a form of currency that is built up through positive social interaction, and which then gets spent in more challenging times. Like any other budget, it needs topped up from time to time.
- Straw Man Proposal - a draft proposal designed to stimulate debate - may be deliberately provocative
- Team stand-ups - a short, usually daily, team meeting to set the focus for the day

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