

How to run an internal unconference

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This version was published on 2013-07-25



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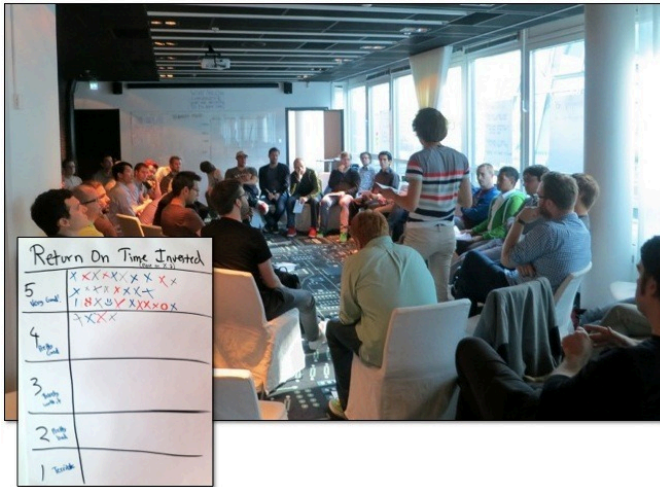
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Contents

Intro	1
What is an unconference & why would I want to run one?	2
When would I run an unconference?	3
Disclaimer	4
Structure of this book	5
Chapter 1: Executive Summary	6

Intro



There's lots of ways of running conferences. This article is about one specific format that I've been experimenting with over the past 5 years, mostly at companies like [Crisp](http://blog.crisp.se/2010/05/08/henrikkniberg/1273272420000)¹ and [Spotify](http://www.spotify.com)².

By now it is well tested and works especially well for 1-2 day internal conferences with 20-80 participants. In fact,

¹<http://blog.crisp.se/2010/05/08/henrikkniberg/1273272420000>

²<http://www.spotify.com>

participants often say things like “all conferences should be like this!” or “best conference I’ve ever been to!”. Even the most rabid meeting-haters seem to like (or at least not hate...) this meeting format :o)

The purpose of this small book is to share what I’ve learned about running company-internal unconferences, so you can try it yourself!

I’m assuming that you are organizing some kind of conference or meetup, and are evaluating options. Or you are going to facilitate, and want ideas about how to do that. Or perhaps you are an agile coach or manager, and want to expand your collaboration toolkit in general.

What is an unconference & why would I want to run one?

An unconference is like a normal conference but with no predefined agenda, no predefined list of speakers, no slides, and...er... actually it’s not very much like a normal conference at all!

It’s more like an *alternative* to a conference. If the purpose of a conference is to collaborate and communicate, then an unconference will often fulfill the same purpose in a more simple, fun, and effective way!

Wikipedia describes it as a [participate-driven conference](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconference)³, which sums it up nicely.

³<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconference>

When would I run an unconference?

Pretty much any time you want to get a bunch of people together to collaborate & discuss stuff. You know the purpose of the meetup, but you don't know what the agenda should look like. You want people to be active & engaged & inspired. You want to find a balance between small, focused breakout discussions vs everyone together in a large group. You want a simple way to capture key outcomes and decisions and actions without getting bogged down in documents and meeting minutes. And you *don't* want to spend days and weeks preparing.

Here are some examples:

- At Crisp we have about 30 consultants + a few office staff. We get together twice per year for an unconference. We usually have a theme - such as the future of our company, knowledge sharing, scaling, how we run the company, or something like that. We usually spend 3 days at an offsite location, with about 1.5 - 2 days for the unconference itself. During these events we sometimes make major decisions that significantly affect the operation of our company. For example recently we decided to eliminate the CEO role :o)
- At Spotify we have “guilds”, which equates roughly to communities of interest. For example “web tech

guild”, “backend guild”, and “quality assistance guild”, etc. Most guilds are around 40-80 people, people who are normally spread across different cities & countries. A guild is a form of glue that promotes knowledge sharing between people working within similar areas. Most guilds have a biannual guild unconference, a full day event focusing on how to improve our knowledge and practices within that technology area.

- With some clients I’ve helped one part of the company transition to an agile way of working, and then run a full day unconference with a larger part of the organization, usually about 100-160 people. During this event we spread knowledge about what we did and what we learned, and discuss the next step and how this may be applied in other parts of the organization.

Disclaimer

There are lots of ways to run an unconference, this format is by no means the only way.

Think of this article as a detailed recipe in a cookbook. An inexperienced cook will do best to follow the recipe in exact detail the first few times. An experienced cook, however, will be better off skimming the recipe, stealing the best parts, and adapting it to their own way of cooking. So think about how experienced you are with unconferences, and do as appropriate.

Structure of this book

- **Chapter 1: Executive summary.** Very quick read, to help you decide if you want to run this type of unconference at all.
- **Chapter 2: Detailed walk-through.** Shows you exactly how to do it.
- **Chapter 3: Pitfalls.** Shows you what can go wrong.
- **Chapter 4: Variants and techniques.** Goes deeper and broader.
- **Chapter 5: FAQ.** Random questions that you probably have by now.
- **Chapter 6: Checklists.** Use this when you already know how to run the unconference, and you just need help remembering the details.

Chapter 1: Executive Summary

1. Get a **big, empty, well-lit room** with plenty of wall space. No furniture except for a bunch of chairs.



2. First do a few 10-minute **lightning talks**, to get everyone warm & inspired



3. Then gather everyone in a **ring**. Present the open space format & today's theme. Show the empty schedule grid, and ask people to **suggest topics**.



4. Next, ask the people who suggested topics to **organize them into the schedule grid**.



5. Now everyone knows approximately what's happening when & where! **Let people self-organize** for the next few hours, using the “law of 2 feet”. Make sure there is plenty of snacks & drink around.



6. One hour before the end, gather everyone back into the ring. For each topic, ask someone to do a 2

minute **summary of what came out**. Collect key **decisions/actions** on the wall. Ask if anyone else has anything to say. Wrap up by asking people to share their key take-away from the event, and what they will do with this.



7. Place a **feedback chart** near the exit, so people can mark how valuable the event was as they leave.



Key benefits of this format:

- **Higher energy level.** People focus on issues that matter to them.
- **Less up-front planning.** No need for someone to set up a detailed agenda ahead of time.
- **More flexibility.** Once we have everyone together, we may discover unexpected topics that are of great interest and importance. With a dynamic agenda, we can capture the moment and maximize the value of the conference.

- **Spontaneous conversations.** Often the most valuable parts of a conference are the informal conversations that happen between people in different teams or roles, who don't normally work together. The open space format encourages this.

See this [sample invitation](#)⁴ for a real-life example.

⁴https://docs.google.com/document/d/18HlFFoxn1KspwxIGA_9BMdrjOigJ44LnT_8bUzvywcc/edit