

# Let's (un)Conference

By Jay Cross, Internet Time Group

“An unconference is a conference where the content of the sessions is driven and created by the participants, generally day-by-day during the course of the event, rather than by organizers.” Wikipedia

Admission and travel to conferences claim a significant amount of many a corporation's investment in learning. That's why managers need to be aware of a fresh alternative that costs less and often works better.

Professionals attend conferences to learn things. Yet conference participants often say they learn more in the hallway than in formal sessions. *Unconferences* bring the hallway conversations back into the main tent by handing control to participants instead of experts on stage.

*All of us are smarter than any of us.*

Software guru Dave Winer began promoting the unconference format after “sitting in the audience of a panel discussion at a conference, waiting for someone to say something intelligent, or not self-serving, or not mind-numbingly boring. The idea came while listening to someone drone endlessly through PowerPoint slides, nodding off, or (in later years) checking email, or posting something to my blog.”

An unconference begins with participants suggesting topics they want to present or hear about. The hosts post an attendance list for all to see. All this is generally coordinated on a wiki.

Unconferences have a general theme but no set agenda and scant organization. Instead, the group collaboratively determines the direction of the gathering, creating an *ad hoc* agenda. There's an organic, self-organizing, "bottom-up" feel to unconferences, which is why they appeal to software developers, many of whom are do-it-yourselfers.

*Everyone is a participant.*

Unconferences don't have attendees and presenters; everyone is a participant. The assumption is that the people in the room know more than the people on the stage.

In lieu of a speaker or master of ceremonies talking to an audience, a Discussion Leader or reporter weaves together a story told by the participants. Helpers hold roving microphones to the mouths of participants with something to say. The result resembles Oprah or Donohue more than a lecture.

The Discussion Leader cuts short speakers who are repetitious, confusing, or self-promotional. PowerPoint presentations are not allowed. ("PowerPoint is tyranny," says a friend.) Everyone is encouraged to IM, chat, blog, and email to assist the flow of useful ideas. Participants document what's going on with blogs, podcasts, video streams, and photos posted to Flickr to capture ideas and seed future gatherings.

A good unconference is punctuated with multiple opportunities to schmooze and reflect. Free beer and wine are great social lubricants.

Dave Winer (did I mention that Dave thinks he invented the genre?) says that people who have participated in a real unconference "can never [again] sit in a dark room, with their hands folded, waiting for the Q&A period, listening to a PowerPoint presenter drone on and on, while the heads bob up and down and a dull roar of enthusiastic discussion can be heard in the distance, in the hallway."

Last fall several people were talking about the exclusivity of a private unconference in the Bay Area, so they decided to start their own. That evening a notice on the web announced "an open, welcoming, once-a-year event for geeks to camp out for a couple days with wifi and smash their brains together. It's about ... having a focal point for great ideas."

### *Concept to conference in six days.*

Six days later several hundred of us rallied in Palo Alto for a free, full-blown two-day event complete with great content, pizza, beer, wi-fi, sponsors, T-shirts, buttons, and press coverage. Imagine setting up a conference in six days instead of six months!

The co-leader of the Palo Alto unconference blogged, "When we embarked on this strange and fantastic journey, we knew that we had a week. We had no money, no sponsors, no venue and no idea if just the five of us or 50 random folks would show. But we knew that we had to stage the event and that, among other things, it would serve as a demonstration of the decentralized organizing potential of the *Web2.0 Generation*."

The concept caught fire, inspiring “camps” in Paris, Hyderabad, Toronto, Austin, Seattle, Vancouver, San Diego, Grand Rapids, and more. WineCamp, TagCamp, MashUp Camp, and other hot-topic events began popping up.

### *Why wait?*

Unconferences are ad-hoc gatherings born from people's desire to share and learn in an open environment. They are intense events, chock full of discussions, demos, and interaction. The wisdom of crowds supplants the wisdom of experts. They maximize value for participants, not for organizers. They are funded on shoe-string budgets. They replace slides with stories, information-sharing with collaborative learning, and instruction with discovery. You should try it some time.

Find Jay and a link to more opinion papers like this one at [jaycross.com](http://jaycross.com).

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