In addition to bringing us together to test what we’ve done and reward the best ideas, the technology we’ve created in the past decade or two might also allow us to validate the claim that conferences do real work.

Some time in the future, perhaps not that long from now, conferences will be the only social organization that produces useful work. Everything else will be relegated to the dustbin of history. Corporate structures? Flattened to extinction. Work teams? Worked to their death. Partnerships? Long gone.

Academics, of course, have long believed that conferences are the only useful form of work and that the only true work product is the scholarly paper. Two factors determine its value: the distance to the presenter traveled to present a summary of the work, and the fraction of people who were denied the opportunity to do the same.

Once I was certain that conferences had little use in industry or service. Sure, they were a way to share best practices and reward productive employees, but they would never be especially productive.

However, I gained a different appreciation for conferences when I addressed a group of young programmers, offering dubious career advice and my personal opinions about the technology industry. In a moment of generosity, I asked them to identify the one activity that had best prepared them for their jobs. They all gave the same answer: hackathons.

I always considered hackathons to be a social event rather than a form of work. The host gathers a group of programmers to solve a difficult technical problem within a given deadline while consuming an unlimited amount of junk food. Then the host steps back, watches the group work, and hopes they’ll arrive at a good solution by the end of the day.

Having observed a couple of hackathons, I concluded that instead of promoting good work or solid engineering principles, they rewarded quick decisions and fast work. My circle of young colleagues seemed willing to accept my opinion, but one questioned my judgment. “What about plugfests?” he asked in a rather pointed tone.

His suggestion caught me short. Plugfests are events designed to test different devices’ interoperability. Superficially, the devices are similar. Representatives for each device gather in a large conference room, where they’re given a deadline and an unlimited supply of junk food, and the doors are shut. At the end, the participants will have tested each device with all the other devices.

“It’s an $n$-squared problem,” explained a colleague who runs a file system plugfest for the System Network Industry Association. If you have 40 vendors, you have them choose

$$\binom{40}{n} = \frac{40 \times 39}{2} = 780$$

possible pairings. “It’s the best way to ensure that all the systems work with each other,” he added.

Plugfests might actually be an outgrowth of the hackathon and programming contest culture. Certainly, they’re a relatively new phenomenon. IEEE’s electronic library contains just a single advertisement for a 2005 plugfest. Beyond that one notice, the technical literature has little to suggest that plugfests have a long history—no discussion about how they should be run, how long they’re expected to last, or how effective they might be.

At the end of the day, I had to concede to my young colleagues that perhaps we were starting to see production modes grow out of hackathons. Although a hackathon isn’t quite the same as a plugfest, I could concede that they were the product of the same forces.

The technology we’ve created in the past decade or two allows us to work in small groups, helps us start companies with little capital, and encourages independent speculation. It can also bring us together so that we can test what we’ve done and reward the best ideas. It might even allow us to confer and claim that conferences do real work.

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