Unconferences Catch On with Developers

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Zoomii.com is one of those small applications that could wind up having a major impact on future Web interfaces. Deeply tied to Amazon.com’s e-commerce platform, the site duplicates what a customer at a brick-and-mortar bookstore would see—shelves of books arranged by subject. So, visitors can view not only the title they’re looking for but also others in the same subject area.

To Greg Wilson, assistant professor of computer science at the University of Toronto, the site “combines the best of a physical bookstore where you can bump into something interesting that you weren’t looking for” with the ease of ordering online. And, in fact, Zoomii’s developer, Chris Thiessen, says he’s been contacted by companies wanting to apply the interface to other retail categories.

But what also sets the Web site apart, Wilson says, is that Zoomii, like many other fledgling software projects, made its debut at a type of informal and deliberately unstructured gathering of local developers that’s become increasingly popular.

Going by various names such as BarCamp, DemoCamp, unconferences, Web2Open, and openspace meetings, the events, as BusinessWeek described them (“Take Your PowerPoint and …,” 14 May 2007, www.businessweek.com/print/magazine/content/07_20/b4034080.htm?chan=gl), are mashups of teach-ins and jam sessions, “with a little show-and-tell mixed in.” The common theme is disdain for the traditional conference where experts deliver canned presentations followed by polite questions from the audience.

Increased Participation

“Go to a typical conference, and how many folks do you see at the back of the room pounding away at their keyboards, tuned out?” says David Crow, who’s credited with organizing the first BarCamps in Toronto and whose day job is User Experience Evangelist with Microsoft Canada. By contrast, at BarCamps and similar events, participants themselves set the agenda. A growing number of software developers, worldwide, have thoroughly embraced that democratic ideal. The BarCamp wiki (www.barcamp.org) lists upcoming participatory events on six continents.

At some events, attendees actually vote on which developers get to present their latest projects. Other events are even more participative and can last for two days or more. In such cases, a general topic or goal for the event might get posted on the Web a week or two in advance. A general topic might be creating new Facebook applications or organizing a new open source platform.

The rules for such gatherings vary depending on the framework under which they’re organized. However, typically, at the start of the proceedings, attendees identify the issues that must be addressed to reach the meeting’s overriding goal. The nominations get listed on a wall. When the agenda is set, the attendees choose the breakout meetings they’ll go to.

A Short History

Besides their ability to debut promising applications or address complex developer issues, Wilson says, BarCamps and their kin fulfill another vital function, particularly in the rapidly evolving software domain. “You need to have places where people just bump into one another,” he says.

Recently, those advantages were recognized by the Eclipse open source community (www.eclipse.org), which in June spearheaded the launch of DemoCamps in dozens of cities worldwide. As with the original Toronto-area DemoCamps, the Eclipse community gatherings gave participants a chance to show off applications and network with each other.
Wilson likens such events to musicians gathering for an open-mike night or after-hours jam. At such events, new talent often gets discovered and new music can emerge. But equally important are the contacts players make that can result in new bands forming—or in BarCamps’ case, new start-ups.

“One of the most important things about DemoCamp for me,” says Wilson, “is that it’s a level playing field: just like open-mike night, you have up-and-coming newcomers right beside old pros. It’s great to see undergrad students giving demos to millionaire entrepreneurs and being taken seriously; that democratization may be ‘Camp’s biggest long-term impact.”

Indeed, those reasons prompted some of the first participative gatherings to take place. Tim O’Reilly, founder of O’Reilly Media, is said to have launched the first BarCamp-like events earlier this decade, when he put together his Friends of O’Reilly conferences or FOO camps. The events helped the publisher pinpoint new software development trends. By 2005, similar gatherings sprang up throughout Silicon Valley and beyond. However, the open-source-styled events actually date back more than two decades. In 1983, Harrison Owen recalls that he’d just spent an entire year organizing a conference for a nonprofit group. When the event concluded, his colleagues told him that although they’d enjoyed the speakers and other activities, they really liked the coffee breaks. At the breaks, they could meet informally and share ideas. This got Owen thinking: Could you design a conference consisting of just the coffee breaks or, more precisely, a conference that let a group of folks get together, yack a bunch, get excited, and things happen.

The result was something he labeled Open Space Technology, which has since grown into a large-scale movement. Owen says that 200,000 meetings in 134 countries have taken place using the open-space format. The bulk of these have been organized for corporations, including Boeing, Novartis, Microsoft, and Rockport.

Participants have claimed they can accomplish more in two days using an open-space-like model than they might after months of attacking an issue through other means.

Owen himself cites a two-day open-space meeting he helped organize for Boeing that led to the redesign of how the company manufactures aircraft doors. In the mid ’90s, Owen put together a similar two-day event for AT&T before the Summer Olympics in Atlanta. The meeting took place after Olympic Committee officials made a last-minute request that the company relocate its pavilion closer to the sporting events. Those attending included architects, systems people, and builders. Within 48 hours, the group was able to completely redesign the pavilion.

These events have proven so productive, observes Owen, because they’re self-organizing. In the final analysis, that’s the way work actually gets done in the world, he claims. “You can talk all you want about linear planning and so forth,” he says. “But at the end of the day what happens is that a group of folks get together, yack a bunch, get excited, and things happen.”

Organizing a Self-organizing Event
Notwithstanding, facilitators such as Owen play an important role in the success of open-space-like gatherings. Utilizing an organizing formula similar to that of BarCamps, companies wanting to hold such events typically approach a facilitator with a general topic in mind—a strategic planning session, for example, or a major software patch that must be developed quickly.

Owen cites a list of conditions that he says determine when open space works best. First, he says, “There must be a real business interest, characterized by enormous complexity in terms of the issue itself and diversity in terms of the professions and opinions of whoever’s involved.” The participants also must be passionate about the topic, and decisions must be made rapidly.

The next order of business is deciding who should attend the event. The rule of thumb, according to Lisa Heft, a facilitator from the San Francisco Bay Area who specializes in open space, is to “invite everyone who is connected to the possibilities and opportunities [of the topic], even if they disagree with others there.”

Heft once facilitated an open-space meeting for Novartis Vaccines and Diagnostics that was charged with creating a strategic plan for the year ahead. The participants included the company’s entire technology division, from the ITO to the data-entry workers. Strategic-planning meetings are intended to generate as much data as possible, Heft explains. Ergo, the all-inclusive invitation list was meant to capture the opinions and information from as broad a group as possible.

Invitation lists also can include customers and investors from outside the company, along with the company’s technical, financial, and marketing people. However, the overarching objective with the invitation list, Heft says, is to let everyone have their say and—hopefully at the proceeding’s conclusion—achieve a sense of community among all participants.

Depending on the meeting’s overall topic, discussions in the breakout sessions can be as technical as any at traditional preplanned conferences.

Heft, for example, once conducted an open-space meeting for the National Forum for Geoscience Information Technology, a group that creates applications using satellite imagery and other data. The meeting’s breakout-session subjects included such topics as visualizing large data sets, the potential for real-time data-streaming applications, and software interfaces for nonscientists.

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Documentation and Time Frames
The work that takes place during the breakout sessions is carefully documented so that it can be reviewed and perhaps acted on. Typically, “each participant group documents its own conversation,”
says Heft. “Not just outcomes, but the running stream of conversation, including unanswered questions.” That way, she notes, those not attending a particular session can see what problems the group encountered and offer solutions.

Often the participants catalog the meeting’s proceedings via a wiki, which can be amended and commented on over time. Other attendees might attempt to continue the breakout group’s conversation via blogs and correspondence.

The amount of time for a breakout sessions depends, of course, on the topic. A half-day meeting is suitable for identifying issues, resources, and best practices. But generally, half-day events don’t provide enough time to work through solutions, Heft warns.

Likewise, meetings that last two or two-and-a-half days can be ideal for designing a product, tackling especially complex or contentious issues, or shifting to solution thinking after identifying opportunities and issues. People typically spend day one sharing their visions of an issue and articulating their feelings toward it, Heft says. Overnight, people’s perceptions tend to change, she says. So on day two, they possess a more holistic vision of the topic that helps them collaborate better.

The Coming Together
Throughout the event, the facilitator stays out of the way and lets participants work through the tasks on their own. At the end of the breakout sessions, normally everyone reconvenes in a circle. At this point, says Kaliya Hamlin, a professional unconference facilitator for technical-community meetings, she asks participants to post on a wall summaries of what took place during their sessions. That tactic avoids the lengthy end-of-session presentations that can sap a group’s energies. It also lets people gather and share observations about what has taken place.

Similarly, at the end of Novartis’s strategic-planning meeting, which Heft facilitated, spokespersons at each breakout group summarized the work they’d completed. Later, Heft recalls, the company’s CTO said he’d instructed a key subordinate to help participants find the resources they required to follow through with the tasks they had identified at the meeting.

The Novartis case illustrates that not all participant-run meetings are intended to completely resolve the tasks they address. In some cases, individual groups continue to meet during the weeks and months following the initial gathering, says Hamlin. They can form action groups self-organized around completing specific projects. Sometimes later, all the groups from the breakout sessions can reconvene in a follow-up open-space meeting to discuss everyone’s progress.

Likewise, meetings can serve as powerful marketing tools that build lasting relationships with customers. Owen once convened a meeting for financial software firm AMS (now CGI Group). Attendees included the company’s tech and management officials and, notably, its clients. Those clients posted wish lists on the wall about new features they wanted in AMS’s products.

During the following breakout sessions, clients and AMS technical staffers addressed the wish list items together. “You had almost instantaneously what is called joint design,” says Owen. “They literally had clients writing software code for products they were going to buy.”

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