

# Designing a User-Centered Conference for User-Centered Information Professionals: The Story of InfoCamp Seattle

by Aaron Louie

In 2007 the ASIS&T Pacific Northwest Chapter and the ASIS&T University of Washington Student Chapter set out to revolutionize our regional annual meeting. Our vision was to create a highly collaborative, vibrant atmosphere where practitioners and students could share ideas and strengthen the local community of practice. The result was InfoCamp Seattle – an unconference that encouraged all to participate and invigorated both professional and student chapters.

## What's Wrong with Normal Conferences?

Serial conference attendees know the drill. We identify the one must-attend annual conference, beg our bosses to let us go, then drop a couple thousand dollars on airfare, hotel room and registration, hoping to be partially reimbursed someday. Once we get to the conference, we desperately hope that they're offering something of professional value, because this event is our one chance a year to meet people in our field and gain crucial training. Pity

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those poor souls who work for local government, non-profit organizations, small companies or themselves – they may never get support from their employers to attend the big conferences.

In the library and information science community, there are limited – and often cost-prohibitive – venues for social interaction and professional development. Our field is constantly evolving, and those without a substantial travel budget or professional education program are left behind.

But it's not just the lack of money or networking opportunities. Most conferences focus on presenting major findings and hosting panels of leading thinkers in the field. This conference format, while useful and important, usually lends itself to a one-way mode of information sharing. Most attendees are only allowed the five-minute question and answer period following a presentation in which to share their thoughts. Since topics and presenters are determined three to six months in advance (mostly to allow time to print the programs and reserve venue space), much of the content of a traditional conference runs the risk of being out-of-date by the time it is presented. In addition, big names and popular topics are often given priority, as the conference must appeal to as many

people as possible. This configuration results in a conference that is of general practical value and provides discipline-defining vision but may fail to meet any single attendee's particular needs.

## Finding a Solution

In the Pacific Northwest Chapter we began asking our colleagues: How can we fill this gap? Can we do something at a smaller scale, on the cheap, that can provide specific, practical, up-to-date value to all participants?

As a first step, we started up a regular informal social event for the Pacific Northwest Chapter to discover what user-centered information professionals in Seattle and Portland wanted in a conference. Starting in April 2007, we organized a monthly meet-up at the Elysian Pub, where we sat down to drink and converse with our fellow librarians, information architects, professionals and students.

What we discovered is that there's a constant need for informal information sharing and development of best practices within specific industries. Conversation at our meet-ups often included tips, tricks and comparing notes about common context-specific challenges. Participants traded business cards and contact information, forming new friendships and

making important professional connections. We observed that the greatest value to attendees of these informal gatherings was in establishing local ties and brainstorming immediate, practical solutions to everyday problems.

The mix of people who came to our meet-ups was surprising. In any given month, we encountered professionals and students from a wide range of industries. Many of them had never attended a major conference or held a membership in a professional organization. The reasons they gave for this lack of participation? They were too busy working or had no travel budget. What would they rather have? A local, open, no-pressure venue where they could collaborate with other people who were facing the same kinds of challenges they were.

At this point, we decided to design a conference that was affordable and timely, encouraged social interaction and allowed all to participate. We wanted a format where any attendee could present work in progress with little preparation. This informality would encourage all to share nascent ideas, emerging technologies and practical suggestions without fear of rejection by a committee or advance scrutiny by peers. We would also allow groups to evolve organically without preparation or approval. All we would do is provide space, time and attention for group members to form and collaborate.

Fortunately, we didn't need to look far for alternative conference models. In recent years, collaborative, open conferences have become increasingly

popular. The common element is that the attendees create the content, usually day-by-day, at the conference. This species of conference is generally known as an "unconference," of which there are several common variants. One of these is known as a "BarCamp," created in response to FooCamp, an invite-only unconference for Friends of O'Reilly (the publisher of many books for computer and information professionals). Since then, hundreds of unconferences have been created in a myriad of industries and disciplines. In fact, Seattle was host to MindCamp, an unconference on technology issues, which Corprew Reed, the secretary and treasurer of our chapter, had helped organize.

Our counterparts at the University of Washington student chapter were also excited to hold an unconference. Rachel Elkington, then vice-chair of the student chapter, tells the following story:

At one of the social mixers [at the 2007 IA Summit], I talked to Nick Finck (from Seattle) and John Allsop (from Australia). They told me about the whole BarCamp phenomenon, which is basically ad-hoc conferences where everyone participates in doing everything so that there is no admission charge and all ideas are allowed to be expressed and exchanged.

Andy, the chair of the student chapter, added this:

From the student perspective, we want to provide our peers a chance to engage the professional community ... This was really a chance for the students to plug

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into the professional community and especially to get to know some of the more dynamic and engaged personalities in that community. This was a chance to engage in discussion without having to be obviously identified as a student. I really feel this format levels the playing field in that regard, because it is so egalitarian.

We decided on a two-day conference over a weekend in the autumn before the ASIS&T Annual Meeting. Following the example of other BarCamps, we decided to call our unconference "InfoCamp," in reference to the central concern of ASIS&T members and its allied practices: information. We modified the format slightly, adding an opening keynote for each day.

Following the BarCamp format, our schedule would not be decided beforehand. No speakers or topics would be pre-selected. We would create a theme, invite the right people and let the attendees decide what they wanted to talk about. By design, it would be participatory and user-centered, encouraging input, discussion and debate from everyone who attended. Another common practice in BarCamps, which we adopted, is to solicit sponsorship to cover costs in order to minimize the registration fees for attendees.

Because no sessions would be set before the conference, the participants could talk about the latest developments in their field and the most pressing current issues. And we could focus on providing the right atmosphere to make it all happen.

**Making It Happen**

Most of our challenges involved selecting and solidifying the date and venue. The sponsors, vendors, publicity and so on were all dependent on those two variables. However, selecting a date is not as easy as one might think. We needed to ensure that school would be in session in order to reach the students. We also needed to consider the other conferences and events happening within our professional community that might conflict. Given these constraints, the date was narrowed down to two weekends in October.

Finding an appropriate venue that was open on either of those two dates was a difficult undertaking. We finally found our venue, though – the Youngstown Cultural Arts Center. It was the perfect size and had parking. However, we were only able to reserve certain rooms in the building during certain times of the day, which turned out to be problematic for scheduling sessions.

Once the date and location were settled, everything else seemed to fall into place. Essential to this success were the committee members and volunteers we added to the team. Kristen Shuyler, a librarian at Seattle University, took on most of the publicity tasks, sending emails to newsgroups and posting on event websites. I created the posters, t-shirts and name badges. Corprew Reed handled venue relations. Andy Szydlowski scheduled the caterer and handled all the equipment. And Rachel Elkington organized a cadre of volunteers who took care of buying food

and office supplies, setting up on the day of the event and helping us run the event.

On the day of InfoCamp 2007, over 100 participants arrived, and all our planning and preparation was put to the test. Thankfully, we had plenty of help. Jack Baur, one of our volunteers, recalls this scene:

During the event, I primarily helped get the kitchen ready and the food and coffee into the hands of people who needed it. The set-up was very ramshackle and hurried, but I think that aspect contributed to the high-energy feeling among the staff. We were all so committed to InfoCamp’s success...

The attendees ranged from students to librarians to usability professionals, and several of our sponsors sent representatives. The open BarCamp format proved to be the right approach as the conference unfolded. People enthusiastically signed up for sessions, and all the sessions I attended were alive with discussion and active participation. Our keynote speakers for the two days, Nick Finck and Bob Boiko, gave inspirational and rousing talks in the morning to get people thinking and talking.

ZAAZ, one of the corporate sponsors, held a user interface design mini-event – “Interface-off” – that featured dueling laptops, a series of information architecture and usability challenges and a DJ. A group of librarians spontaneously created a track on library issues, including sessions on technology challenges in rural

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public libraries and practical uses of social software in libraries. Several disparate sessions were consolidated at the last minute with other sessions with similar topics, such as a combined session on user experience consulting techniques and library reference interviewing. Jack Baur describes the community that emerged:

The atmosphere was open, excited and convivial. The focus was on how much we all had in common as information people no matter where we were working and recognizing the intersections of our work. I got lots of great ideas and met lots of great people. The transparency and openness of the organization really added to that community as well. Everyone’s ideas were valid and everyone’s help, no matter how small, was appreciated. We were all in it together: it really was our conference.

During the closing session of the conference, one participant said that the unconference format was far more valuable than other high-cost training seminars she had previously attended. This comment was met with enthusiastic applause by all in attendance, and we knew we had taken the right approach.

It was such a success, we’re doing it again this year! InfoCamp Seattle 2008 is scheduled for September 27-28 at the Youngstown Cultural Arts Center. For more information, visit <http://infocamp.info>. For photos of InfoCamp 2007, visit [www.flickr.com/photos/tags/infocamp/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/infocamp/).

## Tips for Planning Your Own Local InfoCamp

**Decide on the date & venue first.** All other logistical considerations flow from having the days and location set in stone. This will be, by far, the greatest expenditure. Find a space that is large enough to accommodate up to 200 people, with plenty of individual spaces to use as break-out rooms. Look for community centers, schools and libraries if budget is tight.

**Don't choose a theme.** It's not totally necessary to set a slogan or tagline for your InfoCamp. A distinct graphical motif will suffice. The real value of the unconference format is in allowing the themes to emerge organically.

**Pursue sponsors early,** often. Find local businesses and organizations who are recruiting information architects, librarians, taxonomists, usability specialists and other in-demand information professionals. Give them a proposal describing the perks and benefits to them of sponsoring your conference. We offered sponsors links on our website, an exhibit table at the conference and free attendance.

**Make registration cheap.** If you've gained enough sponsors, you can afford to charge very little for registration. This low cost allows students and practitioners in not-for-profit organizations to afford to attend your conference. You can streamline the registration process by working with BrownPaperTickets.com, a nearly-free online registration and payment processing website that caters to nonprofits.

**Publicize using social media.** First, set up a website with details about the date and location of your InfoCamp. Then leverage every kind of Web 2.0 social media site you can find to publicize the conference. Create an event and profile for the conference on Facebook and invite everyone in your professional network. Post your event on Yahoo! Upcoming, Meetup.com and other event announcement sites. Post to the local and regional chapter email lists of professional organizations, such as ASIST SIGIA-L, IA Institute, ACM SIG-CHI, ACRL and so on.

**Delegate, delegate, delegate.** Don't try to plan a conference alone. Find colleagues who are willing to own some part of the process. Also contact your local university's library school, communications department or human-computer interaction program to recruit volunteers to help you on the day of the event. Offer free (or nearly free) registration as an incentive for students to get involved. Once you've delegated, step back and give your team room to be creative!

**Provide free Wi-Fi access.** An essential element of the success of an unconference is the ability for any participant to access the Internet at any time. Such access allows people to blog while at the conference, upload photos in real time, share new sites, look up a reference, download files they'd like to share and so on. Make sure you have a fast connection and multiple access points.

**Supply plenty of coffee and food.** Make sure to provide coffee first thing in the morning and food for lunch, so participants don't have to leave the site. If you've chosen the right venue, they'll let you bring in your own food and/or caterer, further keeping costs low. Many BarCamps also offer a bar and evening social events to motivate participants to stick around and socialize throughout the conference.

**Provide the framework, but not the content.** Structure the schedule with plenty of slots for multiple sessions throughout the day. However, leave all but the first welcome session blank. Don't worry – it will fill up.

**Prime the participants.** Find a dynamic and provocative speaker to give a pep talk at the beginning of each day of the conference. Also be prepared with a few topics to give participants an idea of the possibilities for sessions. Have each person on your planning committee ready with a recent (less than one week old) development or inflammatory debate topic in the unlikely event that no one signs up to host a session. You'll have everyone clamoring to sign up for a slot in no time! ■