

Unconference

by James Arthur Cattell, 2024.

Thanks

Chapter published at <https://www.cattell.com/unconference/thanks>

Basics

Chapter published at <https://www.cattell.com/unconference/basics>

Theme

Chapter published at <https://www.cattell.com/unconference/theme>

Research

Do research. Find past or potential attendees of your unconference. Ask them open questions. Listen intently to the answers. Make notes. Record the interviews if you can. Analyse the results. Look for common themes and edge cases. They'll inform the design of your unconference.

Plan

From my experience you need:

- an overarching research question you're trying to answer,
- several interview and/or survey questions to ask people,
- if interviewing, a selection of follow up questions to tease out answers.

You're collecting personal data, so will need to respect your country's data protection laws, and the laws of your attendee's home countries. {RIGHT???

If you can meet the European Union's (EU) General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) rules, then you'll probably be alright. But that's a topic for another book.

Interviewees

Choose a diverse range of interviewees. The more varied your answers, the more accessible your unconference will be.

Interviews

Consent

In the appendices you'll find an information sheet and consent form that conform to EU GDPR rules. Take those and fill in the blanks and you'll be fine.

If you're doing virtual interviews, then I recommend a digital consent form. Google Forms or Microsoft Forms will do the trick. If you want something with a better user experience, then Typeform is nice.

Whichever you choose, you're basically asking:

- Have you understood the information sheet?
- Do you agree with the information sheet?
- Do you consent to being interviewed?
- Do you consent to being recorded?

If your interviewees tick yes to all of these, then you're good to go.

Next you need to pick 5 interviewees. If they're people who you hope will attend, even better.

They need to be a diverse group of people. Don't just pick people who look, sound and feel like you. Start thinking about diversity, inclusion and accessibility now. It'll filter down into everything else you do. This will make your unconference better for everyone.

So where will you source them from? Thinking about the theme of your unconference, where do these people already coalesce? Where's the online community for these people? Are you a member and if not, how do you become one? If you're not a member, why have you picked this theme? What purpose are you trying to serve? Is it too self-centred and therefore not in other people's interests? Just asking.

Anyway, once you know where your possible attendees meet, pick 5 members of the community and approach them directly. Tell them you're planning an event (don't mention the word unconference yet) and want to interview them. Most people love being asked for help, and some of us love being interviewed.

At this point I recommend using an appointment booking service. Personally, I use [Calendly.com](https://calendly.com) as it looks at all my calendars, both personal and work.

If you're only using one Google Calendar, I recommend having a look at [appointment scheduling](#) feature. I'm sure Microsoft Outlook has something similar, I've just never used it.

Whatever you use, you're trying to make it easier for your potential interviewees to book a slot with you. Otherwise you end up doing the make

Further reading

I'm not an expert in research, so at this point I normally tell people to read the book, "[Just enough research](#)" by *Erica Hall*. But I've never actually finished that book. I normally just ask a professional user researcher for help.

OTHER STUFF

Ask people about their experiences. Ask what's worked before and what hasn't. Look for existing communities and events. See what can be repurposed, rather than reinvented.

Someone out there wants to run the same unconference as you, you just need to find them.

Most of my research experience has been around user research in government. This entails interviews with existing or potential users of digital services such as [GOV.UK](https://gov.uk). You normally stick to asking interviewees about their experiences, from which you might identify their needs. You normally avoid asking them what they want, because they might make things up.

The 2 research methods I've used are interviews and surveys.

Interviews work best where you have several interview questions, and a selection of followup questions. All of these questions work best if they're open ended, as opposed to closed questions which result in yes, no, maybe, etc.

An example of an interview question might be, "Tell me about the last unconference you went to?" and a followup question might be, "How did that make you feel?"

Sponsorship

The 3 main unconference sponsorship things are:

- different levels of sponsorship,
- what you're prepared to offer,
- how this will affect attendees.

Sponsorship could make your unconference free to attend. But most sponsors will want something in return. You need to make some decisions before you approach sponsors.

Clearly delineated levels of sponsorship will help. Platinum, gold, silver and bronze levels are popular. Here are the things you could include in your sponsorship levels:

- money required,
- expense covered,
- tickets included,
- chance to present to attendees,
- event stand,
- popup banner,
- prominence in promotional material,
- promotion on social media.

These are just examples. What you decide will depend on your expenses. The bigger the event, the bigger your expenses. You may need multiple

The lower your expenses, the less sponsorship you'll need and the less you'll charge attendees. Another way to think about it is the higher your sponsorship, the less you'll charge attendees. So it comes down to whether you'll accept sponsorship, right?

For established events that have always been free, then yes it comes down to sponsorship. But for new events it's a question of what sponsors will want if you have them.

There's a bigger question of do you want to be beholden to sponsors.

Money

The 3 money things to think about for your unconference are:

- expenses,
- sponsorship,
- charging attendees.

The main expenses for established unconferences are:

- venue hire,
- catering,
- childcare.

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Remember the unconference basics are people, space and the grid. Everything else is optional.

Free to attendee events have a lower barrier to entry. They also have high dropout rates. On the other hand, if there's a market for your unconference, people will pay to attend. Paid events have a much smaller dropout rate.

You'll have to pay for something, eventually. But who pays for it? You, the attendees or sponsors? Unless you have money to burn, I don't recommend you pay for it yourself. You'll be giving your time, right? (-: People will pay to attend unconferences. In November 2023 I co-organised The Facilitator's Unconference and charged £137.50 for a full price ticket. There was a 15% discount for the first 10 tickets sold. I also applied for a grant from UKGovCamp for £1,000. It went to subsidising tickets for people in the voluntary, charity and public sectors. To get 10 All of the original 40 tickets were sold, so we added an additional 10 tickets in the week before the event, half of which went.

The massive upside from charging for tickets is the reduced dropout rate. It was less than 10% for the 2023 Facilitator's Unconference.

Date

The research chapter will help you answer these.

The 3 main date things are: 1. weekday or weekend?

2. date of your 1st unconference,

3. frequency at which you'll repeat it. You may think, "Hang on, I'm only gonna do 1". But most attendees will want to do it again, even if you don't. The weekday or weekend comes down to childcare. If none of your attendees have children, then that makes it easier. The organisers generally pick a date that suits them, then see if there are conflicting events that will reduce attendance. The places I look for conflicting events include: * [gov.uk/bank-holidays](https://www.gov.uk/bank-holidays),

- school holidays (NB: may vary from place to place),
- major sporting or cultural events, both local and national.

Location

First decide whether your unconference will be:

- in-person,
- virtual,
- hybrid.

If virtual, skip to the next chapter.

In-person and hybrid both need a physical location. This chapter covers those needs.

The keys location things to think about are:

- will people come to your location,
- how many people will you host,
- does it contain suitable venues.

The research chapter will help you answer these.

It's easy to just pick your capital city. It'll have everything you need, right?

All the unconferences I've done have been in locations accessible by public transport. This means

planes, trains and automobiles.

Virtual

So this is the cheapest form of unconference, but maybe not the easiest. Key thing here is picking digital solutions that work for your attendees. This isn't just a choice of Microsoft, Google or Zoom. You'll also need a way to source and agree discussion topics. Making space for informal conversations is also important. Build in time away from the screen.

Hybrid

I've often said and heard it said that hybrid is hard. That's not true. It just needs decent kit and facilitation. If you have access to proper audio visual (A/V) equipment or have money to hire it, hybrid unconferences can work really well.

Venue

If you're doing:

* virtual only, then skip this chapter. * hybrid, then you'll need separate, physical rooms for each parallel discussion.

* in person only, you can get away with 1 big room if your budget is limited.

1 big room? Soft furnishings are your friend.

Tickets

Main things here are: * free or paid tickets,

- what attendee info needs collecting,
- which ticketing service to use.

Notes

It's nice to have something to look at after the event. This could be a picture of some sticky notes, or a printed booklet of the discussion points.

Facilitation

Ideal meetings have a flow to them. The right people are invited. They start on time and are well facilitated. People feel welcomed, included and able to make their point. There's a healthy discussion, actions agreed and assigned. They end on time, or preferably a few minutes early.

Right?

Source discussion topics

Unconference organisers create space. Attendees fill it with discussions. The space can be in-person, online or a hybrid of both. Discussion topics are sourced at the start, grouped and assigned a room. There can be many, parallel rooms. People leave with new ideas, which influence their lives.

First you need an empty grid. Time on 1 axis, space on the other. It can be on a wall, in a spreadsheet or whatever works for you. Each grid cell holds 1 discussion topic.

Then you need to fill the grid. People can just add their topics themselves. I call this open grid. Otherwise you facilitate grid filling with pitching, “lean coffee” or crowdsourcing. Let’s step through each one:

Pitching is where someone shares their topic, there’s a show of hands and a suitable space is chosen. More hands means more people, so a bigger physical or virtual space is needed.

Lean coffee is where you post your topics on a board. Similar topics get grouped. Each group gets a name. Everyone then gets 3 votes. Study the groups, then place dots by your favourite 3 groups. Total up the dots for each group. More dots means more people, so a bigger physical or virtual space is needed.

Crowdsourcing is where you put your topic on a card. The cards are then shuffled between the participants. People get into pairs and discuss each card. Once done, turn each card over and give it a score from 1 to 5, with 5 being the high score. Then repeat this process; shuffle the cards, get into pairs, discuss and score. Once you’ve done this 5 times, add the scores up and write it on each card. Each card will now have a score between 5 and 25. Add highest scoring cards to the grid first, until you run out of cells. Similar topics should be added to the same cells.

So there you go. 4 ways to

Topic sourcin

Unconferences are participant-led. The people who show up decide what to discuss. Not the organisers. Not a committee. Just the participants.

There are many ways to source discussion topics. All require facilitation, in varying amounts. Some are more accessible than others. I’ll give pros and cons for each.

I successfully use:

- pitching,
- open grid,
- lean coffee,
- crowdsourcing.

Which 1 you choose depends on:

- numbers of participants,
- participant’s accessibility needs,
- whether you’re virtual, hybrid or in person.

Pitching

Pros:

- Everyone listens when you pitch,
- You can gauge interest straight away.

Cons:

- Favours extroverts.

Facilitator will:

- introduce how it works,
- keep people to time,

- gauge interest.

If doing this in person, you'll need sticky notes and markers. People write down their topics, including their name and contact information. Then queue up ready to pitch their topic. Give each person a maximum of 20 seconds to say and optionally explain their topic. Though personally if I have to explain my topic, it's not a good topic.

Each person can only pitch 1 topic at a time. If they have a second topic in them, they'll need to go to the back of the queue and start again. This makes it fairer for everyone who's in the queue.

You'll need a good emcee who can manage the flow and timing of the pitchers. It also helps if they can simplify and repeat the pitch back to the audience, before asking who'd like to attend this session, by show of hands. This helps you gauge which topic goes in which space, assuming your spaces are different sizes.

The pitcher then heads over to whoever is organising the grid, who'll assign it an appropriate space.

You then repeat until everyone who wants to pitch a topic has done so.

Open grid

This is the simplest way to source topics. It also puts power in the people's hands. True to its name, you create an empty grid and open it up for people to populate. No need to queue up, just write out your topic and stick it in an empty grid slot. No empty slots? Find a topic that's the same or very similar to yours and put your sticky note next to it.

Crowdsourcing

This is the most involved but arguably most fun way to source topics. You'll need to do some prep, including a good slidedeck and/or some volunteers to demonstrate that happens. You'll also need record cards and markers for everyone. At UKGovCamp XL in 2024 we even printed our own cards:

[UKGovCamp XL 2024 intro slides =

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1dUWbzLPbe8i77g3_51KEUHqsS0dHkSquzSjclXIUONM/edit]

There are 3 stages to crowdsourcing:

1. network,
2. write,
3. score.

Network

Get everyone up and into an open space where they can all stand. Ask them to pair up for 4 minutes in total and take it in turns to answer the question, "If there was 1 thing you could discuss here today, what would it be?"

After 4 minutes, ask people to shuffle themselves around the space, find a new partner and repeat. Do this 3 times so everyone gets a chance to have 3 different conversations. This helps them refine their discussion topic and hopefully meet friends new or old.

Write

On 1 side of the record card, and 1 side only, ask people to write down their:

- topic (preferably as a short, relevant open question),
- name (first name only is fine),
- contact details (UKGovCamp normally uses X or BlueSky handles).

If they make a mistake, then make sure spare record cards are available and easily accessible.

Score

Ask people to shuffle the cards around the room, handing off and receiving cards several times, until they have a new card they've never seen before. Then get into new pairs and discuss the cards they see in front of them for 3 minutes in total.

Once done, turn over both cards to the blank side and write down a score between 1 and 5. Whole numbers only - no decimal places, please. 5 is great, 1 not so great.

MORE NEEDED HERE.

Good topics

The best topics are short, relevant, open questions. The most popular topic at UKGovCamp XL in 2024 was:

“What to do when your council goes bankrupt?” by [@Annie3H](#) (AKA Annie Heath).

It's short at only 8 words.

It's relevant because Annie's council recently went bust.

It's open because the answers are only limited by your imagination.

Closed questions on the other hand have set answers such as yes, no, maybe, I don't know or a combination of swear words. Avoid them, please.

Have a look through the [UKGovCamp sessions](#) and see which ones you like.

Grid

How to source, collate and share topics for discussion. The number of attendees you have may influence how you do this. The smaller the number, the more flexibility you have.

I've been fortunate to try several different methods of sourcing topics for discussion. Some can be done before the event and others at the start of the event. If done before the event, you save time at the start, but you miss out on some fun.

The simplest sourcing method comes from [open space technology](#) (OST). It involves creating a physical or virtual grid (sometimes both) and allowing people to populate it themselves. Physical grids can be created on a window, wall or any kind of flat, vertical surface that you can stick things to. In my experience windows are best as you can get some amazing shots of people filling the grid. You can do it on a more horizontal surface, but it's less accessible in my opinion.

Once you've chosen a flat surface you need to label the axes. I normally do time on the vertical axis, and space on the horizontal axis. 45 minute sessions with 15 minutes breaks afterwards work really well. This means you can start on the hour throughout the day. I recommend

The grid contains time on 1 axis and space on the other. Think of it as a spreadsheet. In fact the [UKGovCamp session grid](#) I started is just that. This spacetime grid

Facilitate

Skills and numbers of people needed. Good facilitation leads to better discussions.

You'll need someone to introduce the event, and possibly people to facilitate each discussion.

Again it comes down to the number of attendees.

Feedback

Ask people how it went. Listen to them intently. Given them space to write their feedback. Let them put it in a feedback box, or preferably share it on a dedicated wall. Doing the latter will inspire others to add their comments, or at very least +1 other people's.

I recommend you have a dedicated feedback wall. Make sure you tell people about it at the start of the day, and remind them whenever you get chance. When having 1 to 1 conversations with attendees, make sure you ask them for feedback and if you can put it up on the wall. The more you do this, the more people will feel connected to the event, and the more chance you can make things better. You can even do this in the middle of your event. I've run unconferences where we've had a middle way checkin, and made changes to the layout and use of space whilst the attendees were having lunch. The usual change is making it easier for people to hear each other, by increasing the space between session locations or putting things between them.

At the end of your event you should dedicate some time for people to reflect on the day. Fiona McBride and I ran the first Facilitator's Unconference in November 2023. Fiona ran a brilliant reflective practice session just before we finished the event. It lasted 30 minutes and consisted of the following steps:

- 4 minutes quiet, self reflection on what had stayed, surprised and shifted you.
- 8 minutes discussion in groups of 3,
- 12 minutes discussion as a whole (there were 40 of us).

After the session, people were invited to add comments to 1 of 6 feedback walls around the room, which garnered about 12 comments.

It's also valued to seek feedback after the event has finished. This is usually accomplished with an online survey. Make sure the questions are open and ambiguous. Don't ask, "Did you enjoy the day?". Instead ask questions such as, "What did you like? / What would you change?".

There will always be 1 or more attendees who couldn't make it on the day, so it's important to find out why. So it's best to start your survey with the question, "Were you able to attend?" then using branching if they didn't and ask, "Why". It's worth remembering that free to attend events usually have a high dropout rate. The simplest way to solve this is charge for your event.

Then send the survey out to everyone and ask them to complete it within a set timeframe. Don't be afraid to chase people who haven't completed it, all under the guise of making things better.

Collate the feedback and discuss it with your fellow organisers. Look for trends and edge cases. Remember; designing for edge cases usually makes it better for everyone.

Once analysed, do share your anonymous feedback via a blog post. Then send it to everyone who signed up for your event and ask them to comment on it. The more you involve people in the

feedback process, the more they'll feel inspired to come back next time.

You could also just have an open, blank, collaborative document and ask people to just go for it. A collaborative board where people can draw links and add pictures might be even more fun.

However you do it, make sure you act on the feedback, and if it doesn't make sense or you need more clarity, then ask follow up questions. Again, the more you ask, the more people feel involved.

Where this will be challenging is dealing with difficult feedback. The best way I've found to reply to thank the person for taking the time, apologising and asking more questions. Only when you fully understand the criticism should you share how you're going to make things better next time. And never make promises you can't keep. Preferable, never make promises.

I also like to invite people who've offered constructive criticism to join the organising group. They rarely accept, by the way. But it shows that you really do value their suggestions. If they do join you in organising the next unconference, remember to create a safe space for discussing and deciding things.

Done

Well, done, you! It's important to take a moment and realise what you've done. You've brought people together, and made things better. They've had conversations, made notes and met new people. Although the tangible outputs that many managers crave may not be there, you've certainly helped people make connections and learn new stuff. Now they'll go back to their places of work and share what they learnt. It's also possible, however unlikely, that your event was terrible (let's say "less than perfect"). This is where reflecting on the feedback you collected both at the event and afterwards will help.

But before all that, take a day or 2 off. I used to be really heavily involved in all aspects of the unconferences I organised, which would wear me out. So I used to take the following day or 2 off to relax and do something completely different. This is especially important if you're both organising and facilitating / note taking. These will sap your energy and leave you exhausted.

Retro

A retrospective (or retro for short) is a way to examine how you did. Pick a retro format, then bring everyone together who was involved in organising it. There's lots of ways you can run a retro. A simple 1 is Stop, Start, Continue. If you want to get creative then have a look at retromat.org

Before you start, I recommend you read aloud the Retrospective Prime Directive:

Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand

Then you can start the session. Spend a few minutes in silence writing down all the things related to your unconference that in retrospect you would Stop, Start or Continue. Here's some examples:

Stop

- Stop using Eventbrite - it's quite expensive
- Stop using a single room - noise travels

Start

- Start providing discounted tickets earlier
- Start using separate rooms for each discussion

Continue

- Continue offering discounted tickets for the voluntary and charity sectors
- Continue doing Impromptu Networking at the start of the day

Repeat

So you wanna do it again? Great. Here's some things to think about.

Firstly, what should the repeating frequency be? This'll largely be dictated by how much effort it was to arrange the last 1 and how many more organisers or volunteers you can attract. Also what you're offering will have an impact - do you need to provide catering? If you did an in person 1, could the next 1 be online? There's lots of things you can stop yet still enable good discussions.

I usually repeating every 6 or 12 months. If you're doing them at work or in a space that's free and takes little effort to organise, than more frequently is possible.

The biggest and longest running unconference I've been involved in is the UK Government Camp (or UK Gov Camp for short). The Camp bit comes from BarCamp (a famous unconference format) but I prefer to tell people it's Camp as in Campus, like bringing people together so they can share and learn new stuff.

UKGovCamp repeats every 12 months and is always the 3rd Saturday in January each year. The only time this changed is when a particularly bad storm got in the way of travel, and it was reschedule to March. We start organising it in June or July and have fortnightly hour long calls to get organised. Task assignment revolves around a Trello board, which follows the same format.

We usually loose 1 or more organisers and acquire the same amount. The newbies have usually attended the event before and wanna get involved. Buddying them up with an old hand is a good idea, so they don't have to reinvent the wheel and start from scratch.

The big ticket items (or cards as Trello calls them) are:

- Budget
- Venue
- Sponsors
- Registration / Tickets
- Comms
- Childcare
- Merchandise
- Accessibility
- Catering
- Volunteers

The merchandise (or merch for short) is an interesting 1. UKGovCamp used to have a lot of merch, before climate change and sustainability became a real thing. We regularly had t-shirts for attendees, hoodies for organisers, different stickers, mugs, water bottles, etc.

But after a famous blog post from Terrance Eden (long time UKGovCamp attendee) we stopped most of our merch. We still do stickers, but try to source them responsibly. Sponsors still bring branded merch with them, and I'm drinking from a lovely, branded, metal water bottle in-between typing this (even if the sponsor's logo has a bit of duct tape over it).

The main thing that's replaced merch is the childcard. This is a really useful addition for parents who can't arrange child card over the weekend. It's also quite expensive, into the thousands of pounds. UKGovCamp uses a supplier called NipperBout, who I first saw at an event called EMF Camp (which is like Glastonbury for geeks).

Nipperbout's main requirements are a secluded area away from the unconference, natural light, a set amount of floor space per child and a maximum age limit. They also need access to the venue the day before, usually starting around 3pm. Reason being is they bring so much amazing kit with them. There is something to keep every child occupied, and we only get positive feedback via the parents.

So that's all the upside. The downside is the cost. With that in mind I strongly recommend you get sponsors.

They'll need to align with the theme of your unconference and any values you've adopted. For UKGovCamp it's pretty easy because we have a fixed theme and don't allow sales pitches, especially in sessions. That's not to say sponsors can't mention their products, they just can't start pitching it in a session.

In 1 of the first UKGovCamps I got involved in, I remember spending an afternoon ringing former and potential sponsors to see if they'd be interested in helping out.

History

Unconference is a version on open space technology.

I think it was Local Gov Camp at the National Railway Museum in York where I first experienced an unconference. It was a few months after SW had introduced me to Twitter (now X) and I'd somehow stumbled across the event and signed up. Little did I know it would radically change the way I saw traditional conferences and how they limit the chance for structured discussion time. If you're not socially awkward, there's always corridor camp, but I find those challenging (read "punishing").

Next came UK Gov Camp in 2011, and within a year or 2 I was helping to run it. A byproduct of having a bunch of neurodiversity gifts, is that I like to know how I will interact with the world, and what the structure will be. Personally, it's far easier to be an organiser than an attendee. It's an ADHD thing.