

What are we looking for at a conference?

Contributed by Alan Whitford

10 days to go before I get on the big bird to Chicago and then a bus to Madison to join the TruCrew and a great line-up of track leaders and participants to share knowledge at TruUsa . I am leading some tracks (Job Board 2020, Culture Clash, JIT Sourcing) and hope to pile into many others while there.

I have been thinking a lot lately about the future of traditional conferences, the Unconference movement and the more ad hoc 'conferences' that we have on social media gatherings on Twitter with #hashtags like #TNL. Check out the radio show that Tru co-founder Bill Boorman and I conducted on Tuesday this week on hashtags and a range of Twitter tips from #mrbill

I was one of 3 speakers at a 'traditional' event today, hosted by Recruitment Consultant Magazine , in Manchester (that is England, not New Hampshire). We ran the same event a couple of weeks ago in London (England, not Ontario) Recruitment Conference IT and Technology 2010 #reconfit2010 You might have seen my exciting effort at breaking the ice with audience in London.

Target audience for both events was professional recruitment consultants (agencies), along with a smattering of technology suppliers and media types.

I had the pleasure of leading off with a presentation on Social Media (a recurring theme, as I had the same slot at this conference a year ago). Raymond Pennie (@rpennie) of Kamanchi followed talking about creating effective strategies (with some focus on the impact of technology) and Felix Wetzel (@FelixWetzel) of Jobsite (a major #TruLondon sponsor) discussed candidate and advertiser behaviours (now and future) along with sharing some interesting research

Why do I bring this up when I am supposed to be writing about #TruUsa? In one word: Engagement

I have spoken at, chaired or led more than 200 conferences, workshops or events over the last 10 years or so. Which ones have given me the most buzz, the most satisfaction? Other than Global Recruitment Conference 2008 , which I organised and chaired in Amsterdam, with an outstanding group of global thought leaders and delegates, I have to say that it has been those events where I set up or ran workshops/breakout groups. Why? Because in that environment, you get the engagement of every delegate/attendee - either with you as a session leader or with the others in the room.

In a sense, today confirmed that. We had an excellent group of delegates, professional and committed to their industry and their business, eager to learn from the 3 Talking Heads and the hosts. All 3 of us tried to engage with the delegates (none of us are what might be considered wallflowers when it comes to speaking to an audience). We had a few in the audience who were willing to discuss their company, strategy, questions and experiences. Feedback from delegates at the breaks and the post event drinks was excellent, delegates were happy, had learned and gathered real value from the day. The organisers (Jim and Gary) had two successful events and the sponsors/exhibitors did well. But for Felix, Raymond and I, it felt a bit like an opportunity lost - for the delegates to engage in real debate and discussion with each other throughout the afternoon (although it did happen during the breaks).

That brings me full circle to Engagement - the real essence of an Unconference. Track leaders start a conversation, hoping to guide it a bit and sometimes act as a referee if required. The participants in the track drive the discussion/debate -its direction may go places other discussions just cannot reach. In any session, the engagement of individuals - with each other, with a track leader or two (if we are lucky) is exhilarating. Learning what challenges others have (Hey, look at me, I'm not so far behind) or successes someone is experiencing (Hey, if he/she can do that, we sure can!) - make it worthwhile flying 4,000 miles and taking a 3 hour bus ride to get to Madison. As it was worth it for the North Americans who flew over for #truLondon.

I can't wait. See you all there - or on video feeds on RCEURO, hashtag #TruUsa, twitter posts @rceuro, @alanwhitford or whatever means we come up with to share the experience.

As #mrbill says, it isn't just about the conference, it is about the conversations that happen for weeks leading up to an event and months afterwards. That is what I call: Engagement.