

A Guide to the Organisation of Regional Network Meetings

Introduction

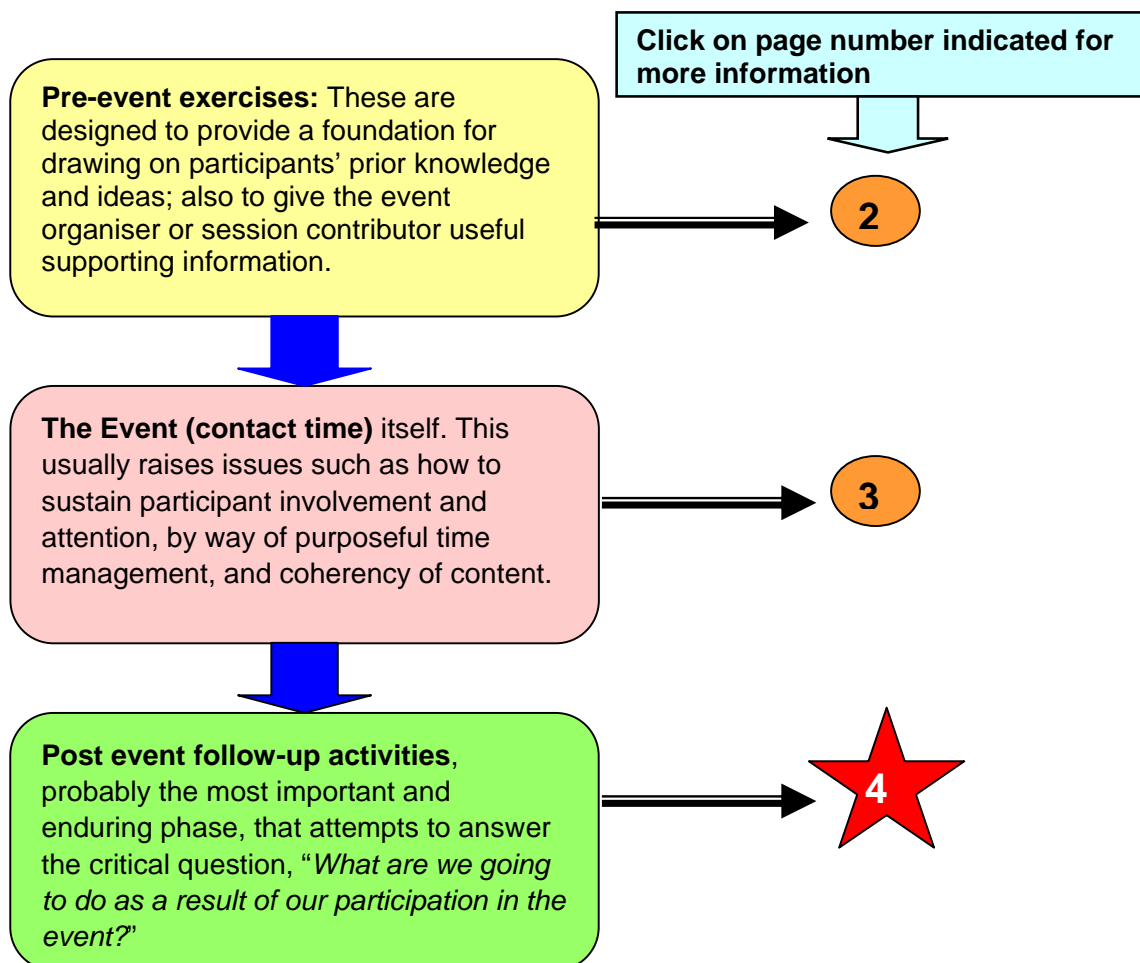
Regional Network meetings are well underway in different parts of the UK. They maintain a high level of cooperation and discourse between participants from regional clusters.

A pattern of organisation is emerging. This guide is based on this experience. Its purpose is to:-

- encourage the effective use of the available time at the meeting.
- provide an opportunity for participants to prepare themselves for the meeting.
- ensure that the meetings' key decisions and ideas are followed through to colleagues and teams where they work.

The three phase organisation

One of the key considerations concerning events like regional networking meetings, conferences and seminars, is to make sure that, during the meeting, participants maintain a sense of purpose, and that the content and outcome are relevant to participants in the longer term. To this end, a tried and tested strategy is to divide the business into three phases:-



Pre-event considerations

An email or note sent to all the known participants, usually two weeks before the meeting or seminar is a useful device for getting the ball rolling. This can be initiated or coordinated by the organiser, possibly in cooperation with the leaders of key topics on the agenda. The underlying purpose is to get everyone tuned in to the main issues or theme of the event. This also provides a useful source for finding out what people know about agenda items; also their expectations for the event. It enables presenters to pitch the content relevant to the cohort of participants. There are no hard and fast rules as to this approach. The following are suggestions that may be transcribed as questions emailed to participants:-

- How or whether the agenda issues are relevant to them and their colleagues.
- How, and possibly why, these are applicable them, professionally.
- Examples of how particular agenda topics are, or may be, applied in their field of work, with some indication as to whether successfully or not.
- What do they know about the topic already?
- What do they need to know?
- How they might be able to use their local and personal expertise to advise (or train) people in the agenda topic, for example as part of the regional network.
- Open up the agenda by inviting questions on some of the key topics.
- Express the value of their contribution arising from their experience and expertise.

Notes:

- It is particularly important for participants to have supporting information as to what is on the agenda, not just a bland title. Web based reading references may serve as a very useful resource for preparation.
- It is usually helpful to provide participants with a coherent statement as to the purpose (aim) of the event as a whole, or objectives for individual items therein.
- Raising expectations and interest in the agenda is an important feature of pre-event correspondence' for example:-
 - The potential short and long term benefits arising from the outcome of the meeting.
 - The contextual issues that might influence *careers or job security*, of them and their colleagues.
 - The importance (and pleasure) of interacting with people from different institutions and professional disciplines
 - Comparing technique and procedures with fellow professionals, possibly aimed at achieving best practice.
 - The significance of a topic in terms of change management and working practice, in say, labs or workshops.
 - How they, as participants, can influence the outcome of discussions and how the latter will be reported locally, regionally and nationally.
 - How they may seek ideas (contributions) from non-attending colleagues within their team. In effect, this would serve to promote a wider involvement in the regional network.

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The event itself

Whatever the scope or duration of the conference, meeting or seminar, three important considerations should be built into the schedule.

1. Time management.

There is almost always a tendency for contributors to overrun their allotted time. This can be the source of frustration for other contributors as well as the audience. The organiser can caution contributors that they will be given an 'signal' just before their end of their session. Time for questions may be built into this.

Breakout sessions, where groups have to report their ideas to a plenary session, run a strong risk of overrunning, usually because the size of the task is too extensive, or what is required from the groups is too vague. A prepared proforma on an OHT or on a flipchart, indicating simple headings under which the feedback can be displayed is helpful. Guidelines and examples (eg things think about as you tackle the set task) may be prepared for each group. These can also help to focus the discussions and help groups to arrive at lucid conclusions.

Refreshment breaks can disrupt the best laid time plans. One useful avoidance strategy is to organise tea and coffee breaks to coincide with breakout sessions. Refreshments can be served, or one group at a time can obtain them. (thus preventing long queues). This allows for a 'working' refreshment break as an option if time is tight.

2. Maintaining interest throughout the event.

An agenda consisting of a series of people talking about specified topics usually wears thin very quickly. By the time the third and subsequent 'speakers' have taken their cue, even the most informed and accomplished presenter will have to battle against flagging attention span. That is why it is vital to build in interactive sessions, so that the whole cohort is involved in the proceedings. The organiser can press this point to all contributors well before the date.

Group work, practical sessions, Q&A, working in pairs; these can all be used to break-up the otherwise monotony of talking heads.

3. A theme that links the whole agenda.

Networked organisations will inevitably tend to produce meetings or conferences containing topics of disparate or incoherent content. This undermines participant focus and all important follow up.

The network itself can agree broad themes and for specific meeting dates. It can also present an alternative so that discussions of topics can take place on-line, and the conclusions be brought to the appropriate meetings as an agenda item.

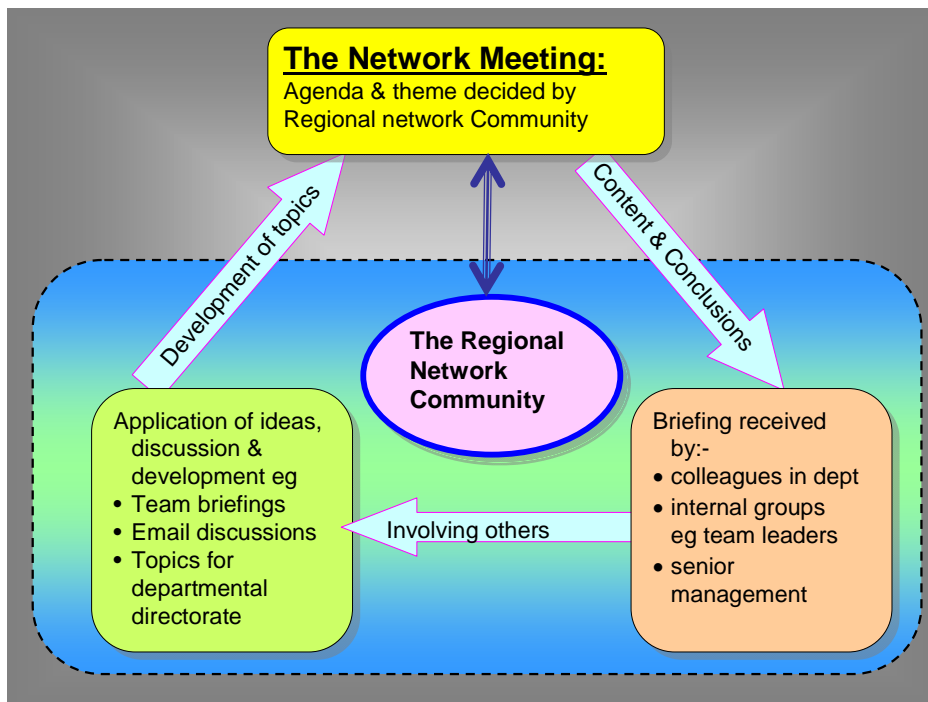
So how does a theme assist the impact of a meeting? Clearly set meeting aims and objectives are the foundation for theme enabling structured activity and discussion. In turn, this facilitates a coherent account of the proceedings, for the participants subsequently to refer to with workplace colleagues.

Post event follow-up

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One of the primary purposes behind HEaTED's Regional Networks is to provide the wherewithal to enable technical, allied specialists and resource managers (TSMs) to work together, thereby to learn from each other. The meetings provide a convenient vehicle for this. *They should not be an end in themselves*, rather the means towards useful outcomes, possibly based on the objectives set for the meeting. So the meeting should be seen as a stage in a process of communication that reaches out in a manner summarised in this diagram.

The Communication Process



Networks are intended to reach well beyond the participants who attend the meetings. So action plans should be directed towards this. A constant theme raised by TSMs is *the vital role of communication*. It follows that the issues, proposals and conclusions that arise from the meetings should, wherever possible, be brought to the attention of the relevant people back in the workplace. The above three stage process would serve to:

- Add value and purpose to network meetings
- Provide a sound basis for reviewing what transpired
- Spread the ideas generated in the networks to the wider TSM community
- Encourage the setting up of specialist networks
- Provide opportunities for managers to meet and discuss key outcomes with their teams. This would help to promote a culture of leading and taking part in briefings as a natural part of the professional team building process.
- Be an important evaluation indicator as to the success (or otherwise) of the meetings and their conclusions. The cyclical nature of the process provides valuable feedback to subsequent network meetings.