



## Open Space

### Brief Description

*“Open Space is an organised coffee break”*

Source: [www.bildung-zukunft-suedtirol.it/begriff\\_openspace.html](http://www.bildung-zukunft-suedtirol.it/begriff_openspace.html) (in German)

The term *Open Space* refers to “an open space, accessible to all”, created for a (large) group of more than ca. 10-15 people. It became known through Harrison Owen who in 1986 coined the term *Open Space Technology*, an internationally renowned process of participation and decision making. Owen wrote a manual for running interactive mass events.

Open Space as much in common with the village or town meeting, a form of collaboration found in many cultures.

The aim of Open Space meetings is to mobilise as many people as possible for the solution of complex individual or shared problems. Participants have the opportunity to determine the content of the meeting then and there. All participants have the same rights and are considered experts at an equal level.

The strength of the Open Space method is the creativity encouraged by its open and informal structure. A high level of participation is possible and the events are characterised by a relaxed and fun approach to the debate.

### Prerequisites

- A suitable venue where the event can take place undisturbed
- Experience in facilitation/support of group discussions
- High level of participant engagement
- A topic touching the lives of all participants
- A topic too complex to be solved by one person alone
- An urgent problem that encourages participation

### Applications

- Applicable at all stages of a project (needs assessment, project planning, implementation and evaluation).
- Where cooperation and participation are valued over passive service use in solving a problem and learning.
- Where a low-threshold method is needed to enable many people in one place and at one time to create innovative responses to their own concerns.
- For self-determined learning and problem solving in groups.
- To cultivate communication and collaboration among groups or participants.



## Process Overview

### Preparation Meeting

1. Answering the central question: why should the meeting take place?
2. Writing a schedule
3. Determining the resources required, including venue, materials and catering
4. Documenting the meeting (where appropriate)
5. Writing the invitation to potential participants

### Open Space Event

1. Welcoming participants
2. Announcing the topic
3. Explanation: how does Open Space work?
4. Invitation to share ideas/opening the proceedings
5. Collating concerns and forming break-out groups (divergent phase to encourage the broadest and most creative thinking possible)
6. Discussion within and among break-out groups (convergent phase to set priorities and identify areas for action)
7. Implementation phase (after the event itself). An outlook statement and action plan should however be developed during the meeting.

### Debriefing Meeting

1. Stock-take of the meeting
2. Assessing the results
3. Outlook and next steps

## Resources Required

### *Time:*

- The event takes up at least half a day and can last up to three days.
- Two and a half days are considered ideal for an Open Space meeting.

### *Personnel:*

- Depending on the size of the group, one or two facilitators are needed for implementation.
- The same people should take part in both planning and debriefing.
- Catering as well as setting up and cleaning up the venue should be assigned to particular people if the group is very large.

### *Materials:*

- Pinboards (bulletin board, documentation board, boards for break-out groups)
- Facilitator's toolkit



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- Pens and paper for taking notes
- Access to technology for copying and documenting results (photocopier, laptop computer, projector, printer, camera)

## *Other Costs:*

- If more facilitators are needed than the team can provide, contractors' fees must be budgeted for
- Professional support from people experienced in Open Space processes where appropriate
- Room hire fees where necessary
- Where appropriate, fees for personnel to participate in Open Space facilitation training
- Catering

## **Detailed Working Steps**

### *Preparation Meeting*

#### 1. Answering the Central Question: Why Should the Meeting Take Place?

- The need for an Open Space event may result from a service organisation-internal need for clarification or innovation. This leads to core questions such as, for example: "How can we move against violence towards and abuse of children in our community?"
- It may also be about discovering more about the needs and opinions of people external to the service organisation. Open Space lends itself to planning, conceptualising and evaluating services, e.g. when service users express their needs and goals, so that the service can be tailored to their particular requirements.

#### 2. Writing a Schedule

- Creating an overall timetable for the event
- Clarifying who needs to be involved: who are the possible facilitators?

#### 3. Venue, Material and Catering Requirements

- When the approximate group size is known, a suitable venue must be found and inspected
- Estimating catering needs and making arrangements with the caterer
- What technology will be required, how does it work and who will be responsible for it during the event?
- Are all materials (e.g. facilitator's toolkit) complete and available?

#### 4. Documenting the Meeting

- Recording the agenda for the event and taking notes during the meeting
- Taking photographs of the preparation meeting where relevant

#### 5. Writing the Invitation to Potential Participants

- The group to be invited must be defined and an appropriate text composed.



## *Open Space Event*

### 1. Welcoming Participants

Participants are asked to sit in a circle and are welcomed by the facilitators. Everyone has the opportunity to take their time noticing the other members of the group.

### 2. Announcing the Topic

The topic is sketched out. It would already have been mentioned in the invitation and is explained again at this point. This topic may also be worded as a core question and amended again if necessary.

### 3. Describing the Open Space Process

The participants are made aware that they are at the centre of this event and central to it. It is they who define their concerns and who can work out possible solutions. Depending on the occasion, Open Space may run over one half to three days. At this point the voluntary nature of participation is pointed out. Anyone may leave the event at any time. This is called the Law of Two Feet: everyone has the right and the responsibility to leave the group when they have ceased to either learn or contribute anything more.

The format of the event (plenary - break-out groups - plenary) is explained.

### 4. Invitation to Exchange Ideas / Opening the Proceedings

All participants are invited to exchange views and ideas with each other. It is made clear that there are no rules regarding topics and that time is organised freely. There are no scheduled breaks. Refreshments are available at any time. This has to be arranged with the caterer. Only the times for changing groups are determined and a plan for group meeting times and locations is developed together. All participants can refer to it to find out when and where the group on a topic of interest to them takes place.

The following applies to cooperation among participants:

*Whichever people turn up are the right people!*

*Whatever happens is the only thing that could have!*

*Whenever it starts is the right time!*

*Ideas turn into initiatives!*

*When it's over, it's over - initiatives are set in motion!*

Sources: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_Space\\_Technology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Space_Technology)

[www.michaelmpannwitz.de/index.php](http://www.michaelmpannwitz.de/index.php) (German)

These simple while somewhat grandiloquent statements illustrate the philosophy behind Open Space well: All are welcome and invited to actively shape the process. The same goes for the rules of cooperating within the small groups (see also point 5. below).

### 5. Collating Concerns and Forming Break-out Groups (divergent phase to encourage the broadest and most creative thinking possible)



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Participants are asked to write their ideas - whatever they are itching to talk about - on a piece of paper as briefly as possible, introduce them to their group and pin them to the so-called *Bulletin Board*.

Everyone has the opportunity to join groups on topics that interest him or her. In the so-called *Market Place* phase of the process, participants negotiate how many groups there should be, where they should meet and when they will start. Sometimes, topics can be combined by negotiation.

The rules for small group work are explained:

*Contribute!*

*Be honest!*

*Let it happen!*

### 6. Discussion within and among Break-Out Groups (convergent phase to set priorities and identify areas for action)

Discussions take place within Break-Out Groups and, during the break, among different groups. Participants can change groups. In this phase, the Break-Out Group discussions are about building consensus, setting priorities and identifying areas for action. Developing recommendations is also an option. Results are noted down within each Break-Out Group. A copy is then put up on the documentation board for all Open Space participants to read. A final plenary, where the discussion results are presented and discussed, is also an option.

### 7. Implementation Phase (after the event itself)

An outlook statement and action plan should, however, be developed during the meeting.

#### *Debriefing Meeting*

The form this meeting takes varies according to how much time has passed since the event. If it takes place directly following the event it sets the main strategies for implementation in motion. If some time has passed since the event it can be used for a stock-take, an assessment of outcomes to date and for making a list of points yet to be acted on.

#### 1. Stock-Take

What was decided at the Open Space event?

#### 2. Outcome Assessment

What has been put into practice?

#### 3. Outlook and Next Steps

What are the next steps?



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## Please Note:

- Many creative impulses and ideas emerge during the Open Space process. If there is a lack of opportunity to put them into practice afterwards, the use of the Open Space is not recommended. In this case it would be counterproductive and participants and personnel may lose trust in the process.
- Participation must be strictly voluntary; otherwise there is a danger the event will be used solely for voicing complaints.
- Not every topic can be raised in open groups (a more protected framework is recommended for delicate or intimate topics).
- Take care with planning and implementation: Open Space has neither a typical agenda nor defined tasks or predetermined speakers. Too much structure impedes the open process.
- An Open Space event is not an appropriate method for approaching all types of problems. It is unsuitable when the question is too simple (e.g. if the core question has a yes/no answer) or not urgent enough. One person alone or a small group could, in some cases, better solve the problem.
- Open Space is unsuitable if solutions have already been contemplated or are already "in the pipeline" and ready for implementation. Open Space workshops produce unique solutions that may differ from those that have already been decided. Conducting the event is a futile undertaking in these circumstances.

## Further Advice

- To advocate on a topic in front of groups takes courage and personal commitment. This means that very dedicated people will take the floor to raise topics.
- Complex topics and problems can actually be dealt with in large groups.
- People can be recruited to or sensitised for a cause through participating in an Open Space event.
- Well-suited for learning processes that aim to incorporate the collective knowledge of all participants (*think tank*).
- Ideal for target groups for whom conventional conferences are not appropriate.
- Well-suited for target groups that are not usually listened to. Open Space can, for example, be conducted with children in a playground, where joint discussion with the children will produce ideas that would not have had the space to emerge in individual interviews with children or their teachers, parents or carers.
- Useful when the target group is to be provided with a space for creativity and self-reliance.
- Useful when the scope of a topic is broad enough there will be space for innovation and creative solutions. However, the warning bells should go off if the opposite is the case, i.e. when the topic is too narrow.
- Ideally, an Open Space event can lead to Open Space organisations, where grassroots groups can work outside of hierarchical structures on topics that are



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important to them. Ongoing forms of target group participation (such as advisory committees) may emerge.

- Open Space provides a method, so that complex problems can be worked on by large groups of people.
- Open Space can promote the development of ideas for interventions and increase the motivation to make them happen.
- Open Space is particularly suitable for the development of new concepts, methods and processes.
- The application of the Open Space process can lead groups to the imaginative use of creative potential that had not been sufficiently challenged previously.
- Open Space can be useful to mark out paths toward renewal, especially in times of change.
- New kinds of relationships and contacts can be made among participants during the process.
- Open Space can promote self-reliance among participants as well as the ability to co-operate.
- Ideally, Open Space offers a safe space that is relatively authority-free, where participants can express desires, visions and creative ideas without fearing resentment.

*Authors: Block/Unger/Wright*





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### Further reading and Links

Baumann, F. & Detlefsen, M. (2005). Open Space - oder: Kaffeepausen in der Stadt- und Regionalentwicklung. In *RaumPlanung* 123/2005, S. 249-253.

*(Baumann, F. & Detlefsen, M. (2005). Open Space - Or: Coffee Breaks in Town and Regional Planning . In RaumPlanung 123/2005, pp. 249-253. (In German))*

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Drescher, U.M. (1998). Großformen der Moderation. In S. Bolender (Hrsg.) *Managementtrainer*. Frankfurt/M.: Campus-Verlag.

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Owen, H. (1997). *Open Space Technology. A User's Guide* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). San Francisco: Berett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Rauter, J. (1974). Siemens-Autoren-Team: Planung durch Kooperation, Kapitel Informationsmarkt, S. 261 ff.

*(Rauter, J. (1974). Siemens Authorship Team: Collaborative Planning, Information Market Place Chapter, p. 261 ff. (In German))*

Open Space on Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_Space\\_Technology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Space_Technology)

Materialien zu einer Übertragung des Handbuchs von Owen von Michael M. Pannwitz  
Was ist denn open space?

Hier sind auch anschauliche Praxisbeispiele zu finden

<http://www.michaelmpannwitz.de/index.php?id=6>

*(Materials for a German translation of Owen's Manual by Michael M. Pannwitz*

*What, then, is open space?*

*Includes illustrative examples*

*<http://www.michaelmpannwitz.de/index.php?id=6> (In German))*

Worldwide Open Space website:

<http://www.openspaceworld.org>

*(Pictures on Open Space (German site):*

*<http://www.zwnetz.de/galerie/schule>)*