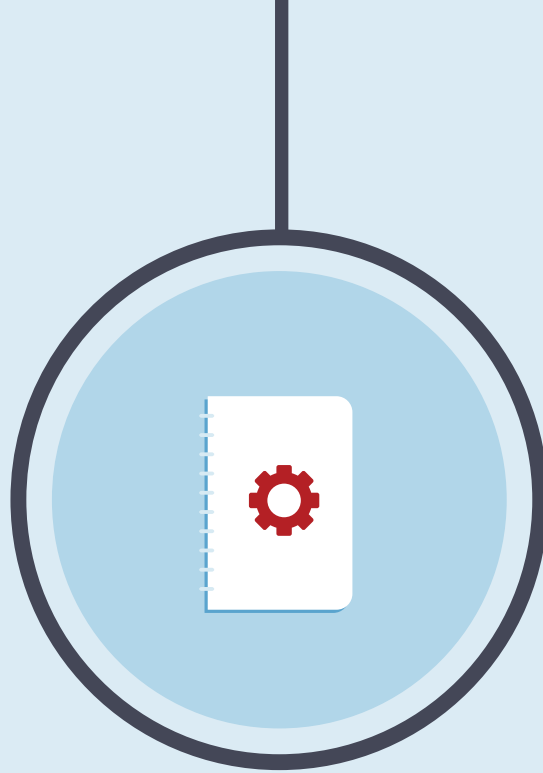


So You've Decided to
Build a Community

Engine Yard's Guide to Building User Groups
and Community Organizations



Introduction

One of the positive facets of being a developer is the feeling that we are never alone. Regardless of what language you program in, regardless of whether you work on hardware or software or webware or mobile, you are not alone. Even in the bowels of a basement office or in the lonliest coffee shop in town, there are online resources that are there to interact with. But what about interacting with other developers in the “Real World”?

The purpose of this guide is to show the steps that can be taken in order to start a community group around a particular technology or how to improve a group that may have become stale or abandoned due to lack of interest.

“Regardless of what language you program in regardless of whether you work on hardware or software or webware or mobile, you are not alone.”



Getting Started

Taking the first steps to start a User Group are always the hardest. Not because it's never been done before, more because YOU have never done it before. Luckily, we have and we want to document the steps to get started.

The first key is to have a deliberate goal and agenda. Having a meetup about programming may be too general. Often meetups are started around specific technologies or techniques such as a language specific meetup or a meetup dedicated to mobile development.

The basic steps to getting started are simple. The first is to make sure you aren't going it alone. Chances are you know, have met, or at least suspect some

people who may be interested in this kind of meetup. Try to get a sense from these people if they would be willing to help and how much. This will allow you to delegate some of the duties once things start to get a little busier. The key here is to keep the the group small. Too many cooks in the kitchen means a committee will need to decide everything, and that can hinder progress, especially in the early stages.

Once everyone is established, set a date for the first meeting. This date should be far enough into the future that any other logistical needs (finding a venue, making people aware, getting people involved, etc.) can be met before the meeting takes place. This also sets a goal or deadline to have everything set up.

Getting Started continued...

Initially, this date should be kept private until the venue is secure. Only share it with the individuals who intend to help. Making sure your core team is kept up-to-speed is key, especially for the first meeting. Be sure to check around for the dates of other meetups: too much interference and there won't be a crowd for any meetup.

With this general date in mind, the next step is to find a venue. As the first meetup is best as a social meetup, a venue with wifi, drinks, and some sort of food (appetizers, pizza, etc.) is available. Bear in mind, a venue that allows for conversation and interaction is key. Try to avoid places like noisy sports bars or highly populated places. The idea is to have something informal to get people out so they can get to know other members of the tech community. To find the best venue, we recommend a place that is centrally located, downtown if you are in a metropolitan area or at a local office or incubator if the core of the team is in a less urban setting.

The initial venue need not be the permanent home of the meetup. The idea is to keep things fresh and inviting. Having a social event to start things off with a brief description of the meetup group and its' goals is the best way to get folks out of the woodwork and into the community.

Make sure you know the venue. Long before the meetup, go there to see layout and get familiar with the staff there that are expected to be there during your event. This will help you feel comfortable and ensure everything is prepared long before you arrive for the first meetup.

With a venue secured and a date selected, it is necessary to promote the event as widely as possible. Twitter for the meetup group is probably the easiest thing to get started. In addition to being organic, it can be connected to other accounts to promote activities. Meetup.com, facebook, and instagram can be attached to bring more attention to events

Setting up a meetup.com account for this and future events is the main step to promoting everything your group plans to do, from regular meetings to ad hoc get togethers. Creating the account will incur a small cost, but this is negligible considering the value. Once the event is set in meetup, promotion will begin via their network, and it becomes time to start self-promoting.

Other media you can use to promote the event includes facebook groups, IRC channels, and actual fliers for college campuses and coffee shops in the area that are known developer hangouts. Direct emailing of people you think may be interested will help to start generate buzz and might return offers from folks willing to help out.

“...it is important to discuss your plans as often as possible. If you are attending other meetup groups, promote your group to folks who might be interested.”

This is also an excellent opportunity to start a blog or web page specifically for the group. This can be done quickly and easily using wordpress and a url (e.g. mytownruby.com or phpofmytown.org). Beyond being a promotional tool, this also serves as a message board and an identity for the group; a specific landing spot for all group activity.

On top of all the media, it is important to discuss your plans as often as possible. If you are attending other meetup groups, promote your group to folks who might be interested. Discuss the group with like-minded co-workers. Try to get actual conversations started about the idea of the meetup and how to take part. While doing this, it is important to keep the topic fresh and sounding exciting and not just sound like a catchphrase or a canned speech.

The key to promotion is to keep it going continuously. The best way to do this is by sending out periodic announcements leading up to the event. This ensures everyone interested is aware and is reminded. It can be difficult to get a reasonable head count for the first event, though the attendee list on meetup can be a good guideline. You may want to consider keeping a separate list for the first event to ensure things like food and beverages are covered.

As you keep promoting and keep tabs, the day of the first event will be continuously moving closer. Time is strangely linear that way. You may want to prepare a few words to open this social engagement and to lay the groundwork for the future of the group. Doing so sets a tone of organization and helps people to understand the goals. You may even want to include a brief slide presentation with the following slides:

- **Welcome**
- **Why This Group**
- **Group contact info**
 - **IRC**
 - **Twitter**
 - **Website**
 - **Leadership email**
- **Tech events occurring locally and nationally**

As an organizer, it's a good idea to get to the venue at least 30 minutes prior to the event to ensure everything is setup as expected and to iron out any issues that may pop up. Additionally, if anyone shows up early, you are there to greet and welcome them.

Finally the event can take place and you can do your best to interact with as many people as possible. Hopefully there will be others helping out with the meetup organizing so you can collect and compare notes after the fact.

“With the first event finished, it is good to take some time to evaluate how successful it was and take a look at what contacts were made.”

If the group is small enough, say 20 people or less, go around the room and do brief introductions. This is a good ice breaker and often sets folks up for conversation. It's a great way to kick off the event, making sure everyone knows at least names and what can be expected on that night.

As the first event comes to a close, it will be important to make sure everyone is aware of the next meeting, which will include a speaker, a formal presentation, and possibly some hacking and social time. This can be done in a few different ways. To ensure attendance at meeting number two we recommend the following:

- **A closing announcement about 15 minutes before the end of the event**
- **Flyers or small cards with all the info for the next meeting**
- **Collecting emails or having a sign-up list to distribute information for the next meeting**

With the first event finished, it is good to take some time to evaluate how successful it was and take a look at what contacts were made. If possible, use these new contacts to create a mailing list. While meetup.com may help with this, some people may be reluctant and it may be necessary to contact them outside of the usual media. Sending a personal email may be time consuming, but it shows interest and let's the recipient know you care about them being part of the meetup group.



Moving Forward

Some planning for the next meeting should be done before the first meeting takes place. Having a plan for a meeting or two in advance keeps the group moving, helps to keep everyone informed, and avoids a scramble as the next month approaches. This strategy also makes it possible to make announcements about the next meeting at the current month's meeting.

Considerations for a second meeting are similar to the first event. As the first event was social, there are some challenges. The venue is the first issue. If the venue for the first meeting was great for a social meetup but doesn't facilitate itself for having a

speaker present (e.g. it's in a loud bar, there is no AV setup, no wifi, etc.), it may be necessary to have a second venue setup for the second event.

It should be possible to organize space at a local office or incubator space. If necessary, use your organizers or new contacts to find a venue for the second meeting. Make sure once the venue is secured that everyone is informed and can make appropriate plans. If the meeting will be in a city setting, make sure people know what public transport stops are nearby or where the best parking can be found.

“Perseverance is the key. Stick to the goals of the group and subsequent meetups will be as successful as the initial meetup.”

The foremost things to consider with a venue are:

Space - make sure it can hold the entire group

Wifi - speakers may need it for their presentation

Power - being a tech meetup, people will likely bring their own machines

Food - Pizza, soda, and Beer!! (this can be covered by Sponsors, see section below)

Given that this is a technology related event, a speaker with a decent level of knowledge on the subject will need to present in order to ensure the integrity of the group is established at this second meeting. The best option would be to have someone from the inner-circle of organizers (or perhaps yourself) give the first presentation. At the very least, the presenter should be local and have presentation experience.

The first presenter sets the tone. Someone who has experience and is knowledgeable on a popular subject the group is interested in is always the optimal choice. If possible, a person with conference speaking experience is helpful. If the person has a presentation prepared it is also helpful in that the event can be promoted with the topic so people can be prepared.

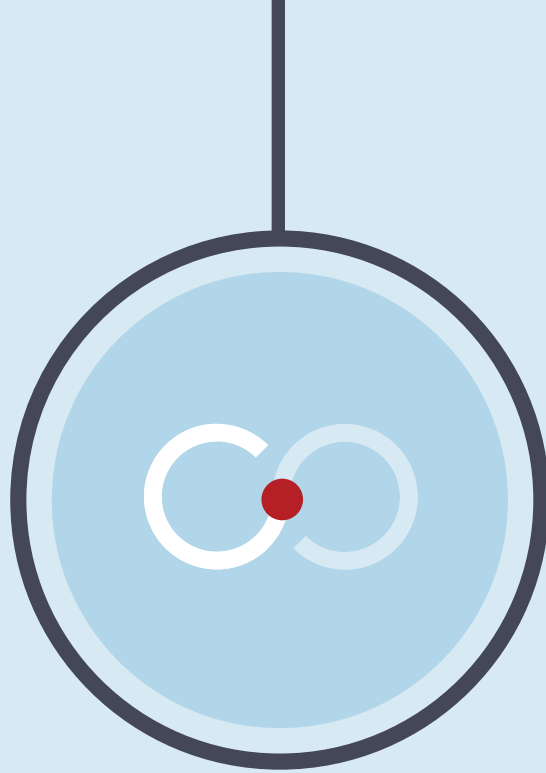
As with the first event, promotion is key. Using the tools you have already established (meetup.com, twitter, etc.), you can promote this event as you did the first. This can be more targeted, as you know some of the potential attendees. Also, including the twitter info of the speaker in communications means they are likely to see more interest in their participation and are likely to promote on behalf of the group.

Promoting the second meeting will keep the folks who came to the first event interested and will hopefully get more people interested as word spreads beyond the attendees of the first event. That said, there may be some people who were just curious or had different expectations at the first event.

There is often a dip or switch in attendance between the first few events as people decide if the group is right for them or have other obligations that need to be attended to while still others will have their first experience with the group after 5 or 6 months. Do not let fluctuations in attendance be a deterrent or a sign of failure. This is often seen as attendance drops during the summer months while people head to conferences, participate in more outdoor activities, go on vacation, or are just generally busy.

Your first real meeting may be your best attended for some time. That is when people show up and kick the tires, see if it's worth investing their time in. After that, you'll almost certainly see a drop. That's fine. Make sure and pass around a signup sheet and collect email addresses. Don't get discouraged, stay on the ones that didn't come back: be polite and don't nag but you may be able to drag them back to a meeting or two.

Perseverance is the key. Stick to the goals of the group and subsequent meetups will be as successful as the initial meetup. In the following section, we discuss some ways to keep the group from growing stagnant and keeping that momentum moving forward.



Keeping Momentum

A key to any successful meetup group or outside of work organization is to keep it going. Keeping things fresh and getting new perspectives is the most important part to keeping people in attendance and holding their attention so they are willing to bring others which will perpetuate the group moving forward.

The methods discussed thus far for the first two meetups are designed to establish momentum, to get the ball rolling. With that

out of the way, it will be necessary to find ways to keep it rolling.

Getting fresh perspectives is important. To do this, make sure local speakers do not dominate the meetups. Bring in a guest speaker from time to time to pump fresh thoughts into the group. This will bring a new perspective to the group, new information, and can revitalize and excite attendees.

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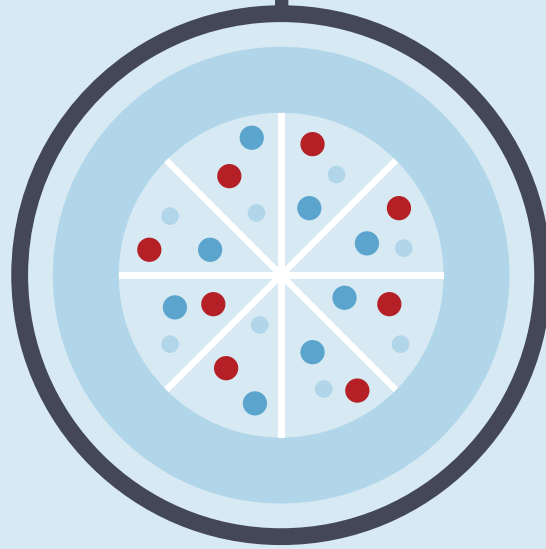


Be sure to mix and match what the group does on a regular basis. Start with a social night, then a different presenter for a couple of meetings, then have a hack-night perhaps. Or do an evening of lightning talks or a “Share my pet project” night. All of these things can be interspersed with speakers in order to keep it lively and to ensure the monotony stays far from the group.

Another great way to keep things exciting is to have folks do quick reports on conferences or other meetups they’ve

attended that are pertinent to the group. This can be a quick and informal at the beginning or end of the meeting and can give folks who were unable to attend certain things a chance to get information and decide if it’s something they may want to strive to attend in the future.

Gaining fresh perspectives is the point of shuffling the format. It is also good to occasionally change the venue for a change of pace. Don’t be afraid to shake things up in order to keep things moving forward.



Sponsorship

Sponsorship is a great method to ensure you can keep your meetup going and cover any costs that crop up along the way. Generally, it is possible to get a venue that is free (e.g. an office, an incubator, a co-working facility) from one of the group members. Sponsorship really comes in at the pizza level.

Part of every meetup is the snacks and drinks that either kick off or end the meetup. Without these beverage and food options, folks are unlikely to stick around as they will be hungry and may skip dinner in order to get to the meetup in time. Some meetups will get direct sponsorship of coffee and pastries or pizza to compliment the meetup. While it's easy, this type of sponsorship can bring about the need for tax forms or declaration as a formal organization. To avoid this, it may be better to get a sponsor who pays directly or reimburses from a receipt.

Most sponsorships require at least a little something in return. Sometimes this can be as minimal as a “Thanks to our sponsors” announcement. If they are just providing stickers or the like, then this is generally all that is necessary. Perhaps a tweet or email thanking them as well. If there is more the sponsors wants in return, the meetup group needs to make a decision.

Some sponsors will want to have a speaker appear at your meetup in exchange for money, pizza, or schwag. The important thing to remember here is that not all sponsors will have a “sponsor talk”, some are pertinent to the work of the group. It is up to the group to decide if the talk is the right fit. If they are just coming to pitch a product, it's recommended the talk be discouraged. There are other sources and your group members won't be happy to sit through their meeting listening to a sales presentation.

The question remains, how do you get sponsors? The answer is actually pretty simple. Just ask. While it may take time to get to the right person, an email looking something like the following makes your intentions clear and gets the door open for discussion:

It's simple and to the point. Once the ball is rolling you can discuss other options such as how they want you to reciprocate, if they'd be willing to promote the event, or whether it will be a long-term thing or one time. This process will be different and have varying levels of difficulty with each organization you reach out to, but success can be achieved through perseverance.



From: me@mymeetup.com
To: community@engineyard.com



Hello Community Folks,

I run a small meetup in my city. We were hoping to get your company to sponsor. We could use some help with buying pizza and beer and would appreciate any shirts or schwag you can send our way.

Please let me know if this is possible, if there is someone else I should contact, or if there is anything you might need from me.

**Thanks,
Me
My City's Tech Meetup**



Tips & Tricks

The following is a list of tips to help keep the tech group fresh and moving forward:

Lightning Talk Night

This is a night when everyone gets the chance to participate and give a quick talk. People will get to know each other better and it will encourage interaction.

Joint Meetup Night

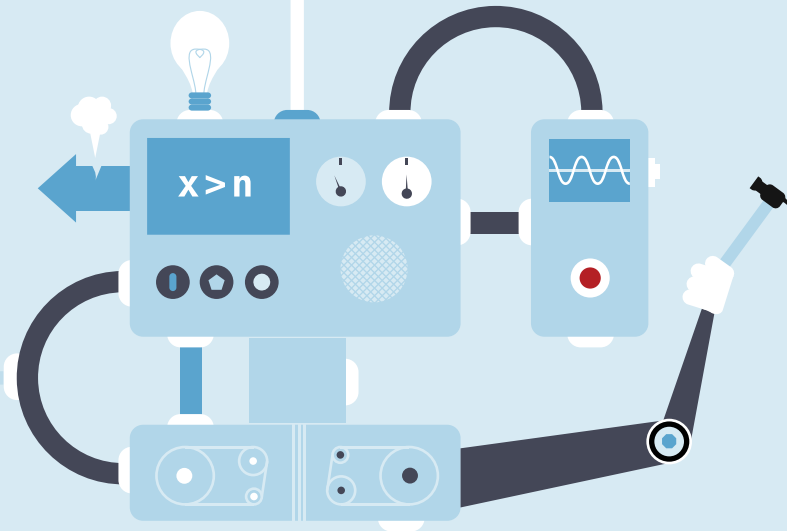
Invite a meetup group from another technology to come and do a little back and forth knowledge transfer. It's a good way to learn what's working for them and maybe offer a helping hand with any issues they have.

OpenHack

OpenHack is a language agnostic meetup group. Encourage your members to participate if there is one in your area. If not, start one up!

Think Outside The Box

Not every meetup needs to be on the subject that started it all. For example, if you run a Ruby meetup, it's cool to have a speaker well versed in JavaScript (we all use it at some point). Or it's good to have a MySQL expert at your PHP meetup. Many technologies are overlapping, try not to be too shortsighted when considering content.



Resources

Organizer references:

PJ Hagerty: pj@engineyard.com

Sponsorships:

Engine Yard: community@engineyard.com

Social media:

Meetup: <http://meetup.com>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com>

Wordpress: <http://wordpress.com>

If you are planning to hold events in the following cities, we can help:

Portland, OR:

1009 SW Yamhill St.
Portland, OR 97205
contact: Jim Lindley
jlindley@engineyard.com

San Francisco, CA (Bay Area):

500 3rd Street Suite 510
San Francisco, CA 94107
contact: Gary Jackson
gjackson@engineyard.com

Dublin, Ireland:

35 Barrow St., 2nd Floor
Dublin 4
contact: Eamon Leonard
eleonard@engineyard.com

Tokyo, Japan:

Hasegawa Bldg. 3F
1-9-4 Ebisu Minami
Shibuya, Tokyo 150-0022
contact: Yusuke Ando
yando@engineyard.com