

No breakfasts, only solutions



Senior facilitator at Meeting Magic, **Helen Chapman**, explains the concept of World Café-style meetings.

Recently co-hosted a disability meeting event alongside My+ Consulting. Big names, including Transport for London and international law firm Allen and Overy, were among the participants. The purpose of the meeting was to help employers with the inclusion of disabled employees.

Origins of World Café

The World Café is a process for engaging large groups in-depth on specific topics, encouraging a platform for intense conversation.

The origin of World Café comes from the west coast of America. The process evolved in 1995 by co-founders Juanita Brown and David Isaacs.

On the second day of a meeting taking place, pouring rain meant that breaks could no longer be taken

outside. Participants had particularly valued these breaks and the facilitators had noticed how valuable these less formal conversations were to the meeting.

The challenge was to recreate that informal atmosphere indoors. For their next arranged meeting, Brown and Isaacs pulled chairs around tables and dressed them with large sheets of paper. As participants arrived, they sat at a table and began talking to whoever sat with them. As they chatted, they made notes on the sheets of paper.

The room was soon buzzing with vibrant conversation, as participants swapped ideas and stories with each other. To ensure everyone's ideas were viewed and discussed, after a set time limit expired, people were encouraged to look at what was being discussed elsewhere in the room.

Hence the process evolved; one person stayed at each table while everyone else moved places. Each new table group picked up the conversation thread and continued to build.

When to use the World Café approach

Despite the many advances in technology, I still feel strongly about the value of personal interaction. The World Café approach seems suited to 20 participants or more. Traditional meeting formats, in my opinion, now feel restrictive and formulaic by comparison.



The Café-style layout meant participants built up a network of new contacts throughout the day

The World Café approach can be broken down as below:

- to support a group in opening up its thinking by asking provocative questions
- to test a new idea and ensure all possible angles have been considered
- to consult a group before work is started on a project

Why we chose The World Café experience

For the meeting about disability in the workplace, we knew that many of the participants had not met before and they would be meeting in a new environment. We also knew that working in small groups would enable good quality conversations and encourage even the most introvert person to contribute.

A broad range of disabilities were represented at the event, each requiring different support. In comparison to traditional theatre style layout, The Café layout gave us greater flexibility in the room in terms of access and moving around

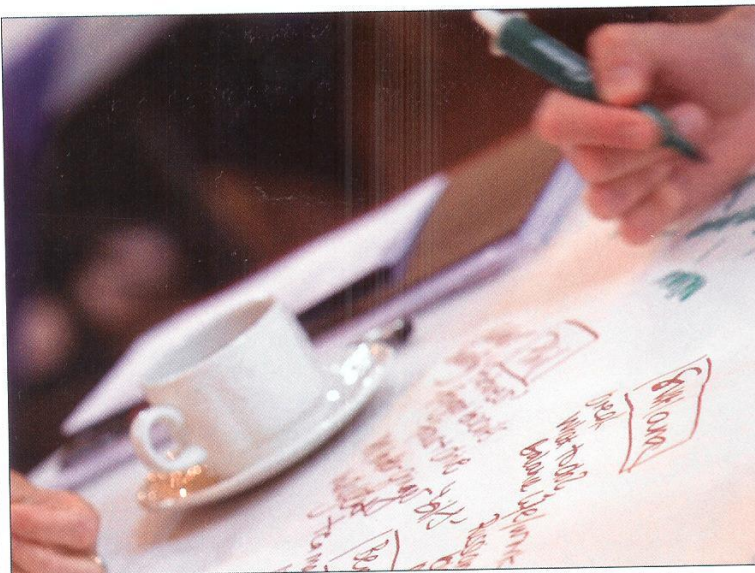
The Disability Café agenda

We welcomed the group to the session and gave them a brief explanation of the World Café format, along with the proposed outcomes, the day's agenda and the roles everyone was to play.

The group was encouraged to agree their own rules for the event; establish trust, promote sharing of knowledge and experience and ensure meaningfulness.

Question 1

(posed to the group for discussion) 'What would success look, sound and feel like in an organisation doing well with the inclusion of disabled employees?' International advisory company, Ernst and



Discussions saw notes furiously taken down for all to collate into cohesive answers to questions

Young, then presented its journey with disability.

Question 2

'What are the hurdles we need to overcome to totally transform the way we engage people in the disability agenda?' There were drinks available after the day's discussions to continue the networking.

I found the World Café process works, and it can be applied to any kind of strategic meeting, in any sector of business or marketing. The disability café successfully raised awareness about disability in the workplace.

The intimate discussion, in small groups teamed with the powerful questions, encouraged the generation of new ideas. As each table shared knowledge and practical advice, the group began to break down the topic into more approachable chunks. The event also created a new network of contacts for participants.

Five top tips for a successful World Café event

1. Powerful questions are essential. They should be carefully worded and posed well to stimulate depth and quality of discussion
2. Don't be put off by the limitations of your meeting space: if you are presented with rectangular tables, as we were at this event, set them at different angles around the room to create a welcoming environment
3. Punctuate the table conversation rounds with whole group feedback and plenary sessions. This allows everyone to get a sense of what is emerging in the room
4. Plenary sessions work well if one person facilitates the group, while another graphically records the emerging themes
5. Table hosts benefit from having some guidelines about how to be a good table host. Visit The World Café website for more information - www.theworldcafe.com

Helen Chapman can be contacted via Exhibiting.