



Worth the Trip: Re-designing the Conference Experience for 2026 and Beyond

Thank you to **Tamsin Treasure-Jones**, Co-Founder of **Kubify**, MESA Member, for moderating. Thank you to our keynote speaker: **Nicole Fontein**, Owner of **BlueBox Events**. We enjoyed 3 Breakout Room sessions focusing on Nicole's three pillars: Clarity / Connection and Impact. Here are the outcomes below. **Nicole Fontein's Slides & White Paper Guide – [Download Here](#)**

Session One - Clarity - Background:

We need clarity to make good decisions (regarding attending conferences or sessions). Delegates report feeling overloaded with choices (sessions, conferences) and at conferences feel they may miss out important/relevant sessions. **Question:** What would you (or have you) changed in your conference structure or your messaging to help deal with the clarity issue?

KEY POINTS MADE IN THE BREAKOUT SESSION

- Consolidate multiple smaller events into one larger, multi-topic event to reduce decision fatigue and improve sponsor appeal
- Reduce onsite noise and competing features (e.g. overlapping loud theatres) that distract from content clarity
- Plan pre-event communications carefully (1-2 emails/week max) with clear summaries of key sessions and value
- Use registration data to personalise experiences (e.g. first-time attendee guidance, tailored recommendations)
- Provide guided onboarding for new attendees to help them navigate the event
- Shift emphasis from “who’s speaking” to “who you’ll meet” - prioritise networking opportunities
- Offer virtual options, but maintain focus on in-person connection as a core value
- Increase transparency: allow attendees to see who’s attending sessions/breakouts in advance
- Avoid scheduling similar topics at the same time to reduce choice overload
- Clearly communicate pre-event value: why attend, what you’ll learn, who you’ll meet
- Use AI tools to support personalisation, recommendations, and navigation
- Organise content into clear tracks, but ensure they’re intuitive and not overly rigid
- Enable advance session selection so attendees can self-curate their experience
- Keep sessions short, engaging, and limited in number to combat fatigue
- Prioritise high-quality, original content over generic or widely available material
- Use short preview content (e.g. 2–3-minute videos) to build interest and set expectations
- Leverage social media to help younger audiences discover relevant sessions
- Engage attendees with speakers before the event to build connection and relevance
- Continuously gather feedback to refine future event design
- Apply “keep it simple” principles- avoid overcomplicating content, structure, and messaging

Session Two - Connection - Background: Connecting with others is a key reason people give for attending conferences. However, making those connections at the conference often relies on chance encounters and/or having confident networking skills.

Question: What would you (or have you) changed in your conference to help address the connection issue?

KEY POINTS MADE IN THE BREAKOUT SESSION

- Reframe “registration” as a more welcoming first touchpoint (e.g. welcome desk) to set the tone for connection
- Identify and support first-time attendees with onboarding and guidance
- Implement buddy systems or “super connectors” to help people make introductions and navigate the event
- Be intentional with language (attendee vs delegate vs visitor) to create a more inclusive, welcoming feel
- Design events with a clear structure (“guided journey”) to reduce overwhelm and make interactions easier
- Use structured networking formats (assigned groups, breakouts, rotations) to actively facilitate connections
- Complement structure with organic opportunities - balance planned networking with space for chance encounters
- Keep facilitation simple and low-tech (e.g. table rotations, shared activities) to encourage natural interaction
- Make networking opt-in and flexible to respect different comfort levels and neurodiversity
- Use clear signals (badges, app indicators, colour coding) to show networking preferences and openness
- Collect attendee profiles and interests in advance to enable better matchmaking and personalisation
- Use event apps for discovery, matchmaking, and outreach - but ensure they are intuitive and reliable

- Offer curated introductions and pre-event matchmaking, while avoiding over-filtering that limits diversity of connections
- Provide clear, concise pre-event communication (who's attending, how to connect, how to opt in/out)
- Create a mix of interaction formats (small groups, 1:1 meetings, informal activities) to suit different personalities
- Prioritise smaller, interest-based groups to foster deeper, more meaningful conversations (be aware that they may be too like-minded and therefore nothing new for them too!)
- Extend connection opportunities beyond sessions (e.g. wellness activities, informal meetups, post-event follow-ups)
- Design more interactive, engaging sessions rather than passive formats to encourage participation
- Enable attendees to plan (who to meet, what to attend) while leaving room for spontaneity
- Focus on shared interests and personal rapport as the foundation for meaningful, lasting connections

Session Three – Impact - Background: To justify conference attendance delegates really need to see an impact beyond the conference itself.

Question: What is one thing that we could change in the current format of a conference to make a difference?

KEY POINTS MADE IN THE BREAKOUT SESSION

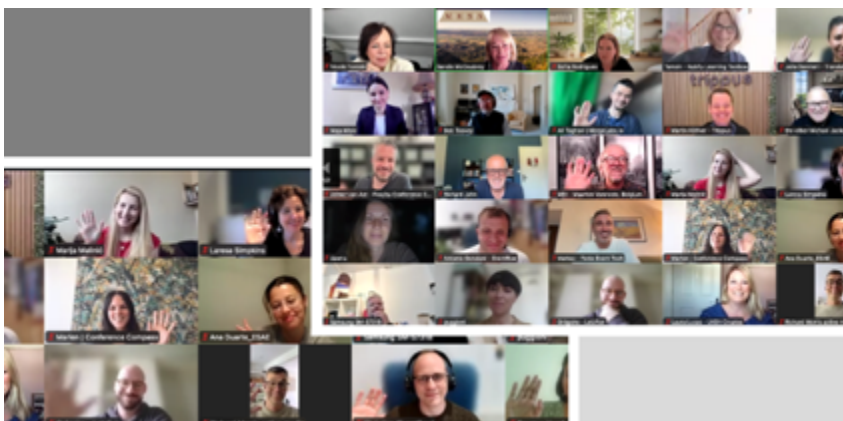
- Recognise that “impact” is subjective - attendees and organisers often define value differently (learning vs leads, networking vs sales)
- Shift passive content (e.g. keynotes) to pre-event delivery so in-person time can focus on discussion, Q&A, and interaction
- Prioritise interactive formats (workshops, breakouts, small groups) to deepen engagement and learning
- Aim for a balanced session design (e.g. 50/50 content and interaction)
- Enforce strict session timing to protect space for audience participation
- Design sessions to be flexible and responsive, allowing interaction to improve weaker talks
- Guarantee dedicated networking time in the agenda (e.g. 2 hours/day) and make it explicit
- Accept and enable informal/ “side” meetings as a key source of value and outcomes
- Create more engaging, participatory experiences - avoid passive, lecture-heavy formats
- Use live engagement tools (polls, sentiment tracking, apps) to capture real-time feedback and interaction
- Define clear objectives upfront for both organisers and attendees, and align event design to these goals
- Measure impact beyond the event- track outcomes and behaviour change 6-9 months later
- Combine pre-event, live, and post-event data to understand full attendee journeys and ROI
- Provide personalised outputs (e.g. summaries, contact lists, session insights) to extend value after the event
- Improve exhibitor ROI with better tools (e.g. lead scanning, prioritised follow-ups) and clearer success metrics
- Increase meaningful sponsor interaction - focus on engagement rather than sales pitches from the stage
- Create memorable experiences (not just content) to drive long-term impact, creativity, and connections
- Incorporate destination and social experiences into the event design to enhance learning and memorability
- Keep formats fresh (e.g. new structures, rotating locations, “Festivilisation” elements)
- Ensure attendees leave with something new - ideas, contacts, or perspectives, while allowing room for surprise and discovery

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Thank you