



# meeting of minds

A recent Short Circuit seminar, 'The Entrepreneurial Engineer', at Cambridge University, was the first IET event to use the innovative discussion technique called Open Space. **Nick Smith** went along to find out what Open Space is all about.

IT ALL STARTED off as a relatively conventional conference in a modern red brick college in Cambridge, one of the world's heartlands for technological innovation. 'The Entrepreneurial Engineer', third in the series of IET's Short Circuit seminars kicked off with IET president Sir Robin Saxby addressing an awestruck lecture room full of young pretenders. The theme of his talk was billed as 'creating wealth from technology and what is required

beyond engineering skill alone', which is management-speak for 'how the boy done good'. Given the phenomenal success he achieved with ARM, of which he is now chairman emeritus, this moment of keynote autobiography set the inspirational tone for the day. In an open-neck shirt and black jacket he looked every inch the successful entrepreneur that he is, and there was a buzz of excitement from the packed auditorium, eager to learn from

Sir Robin how we too could make enough geld to get a ski chalet just like his.

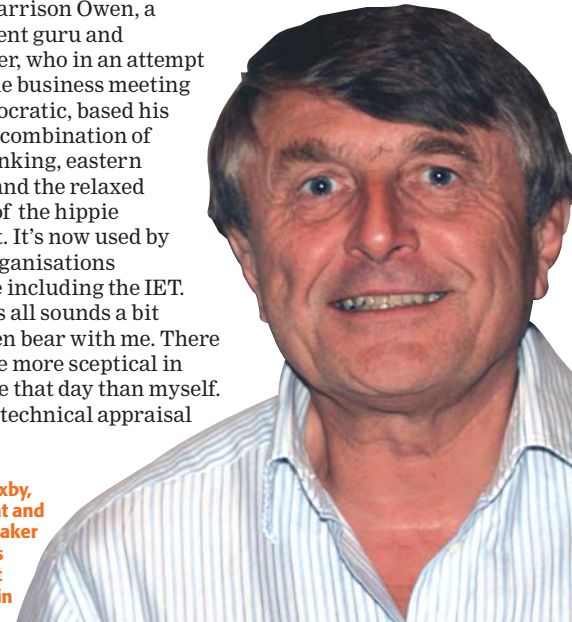
This was always going to be an upbeat feel-good day where the agenda was dominated not so much by technology, but the 'can-do' themes of networking, ideas building, striving toward financial goals. Successive speakers, including the dynamically effervescent and popular Mike Southorn – best known for his 'Beermat Entrepreneur' – spoke from the lectern. Rob Valli from the Centre for Technology Management at the University of Cambridge spoke on the vital importance of networking as a business development tool, comparing old-fashioned person-

to-person networking techniques using as his example the development of technology companies in Cambridge, with online personal networking systems. Last up before lunch was Gareth Rhys-Williams, chief executive of the Vitec Group who lectured on how failure is often as important as success in getting to grips with your product development and entrepreneurial strategies. Rhys-Williams rather gallantly cited some of his own company's misunderstood products in a presentation that demonstrated how better long-term results can be achieved by realistically appraising the statistical likelihood of a successful product launch, and managing your expectations of the market's take up.

## MOVING INTO SPACE

If the morning was the conventional side of communicating entrepreneurial skills then the afternoon was most emphatically the unconventional. The idea was to use a different kind of approach to brainstorming big ideas, called 'Open Space'. Open Space Technology (its correct title, though something of a misnomer as there is no actual technology involved) originated in the US in the 1980s, the brain child of Harrison Owen, a management guru and philosopher, who in an attempt to make the business meeting more democratic, based his ideas on a combination of lateral thinking, eastern religions and the relaxed attitudes of the hippie movement. It's now used by leading organisations worldwide including the IET. And if this all sounds a bit barmy, then bear with me. There was no-one more sceptical in Cambridge that day than myself. A more technical appraisal

**Sir Robin Saxby, IET president and keynote speaker at this year's Short Circuit conference in Cambridge**



'Open Space looks and behaves more like a massive drinks party than a business meeting'

For information on Open Space, visit [www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org)

## case in point

### DEFINING OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

In searching for a definition of Open Space I came across these words from Harrison Owen, creator of Open Space and author of 'Open Space Technology: A User's Guide'.

"At the very least, Open Space is a fast, cheap, and simple way to better, more productive meetings. At a deeper level, it enables people to experience a very different quality of organisation in which self-managed work groups are the norm, leadership a constantly shared phenomenon, diversity becomes a resource to be used instead of a problem to be overcome, and personal empowerment a shared experience. It is also fun. In a word, the conditions are set for fundamental organisational change, indeed that change may already have occurred. By the end, groups face an interesting choice.



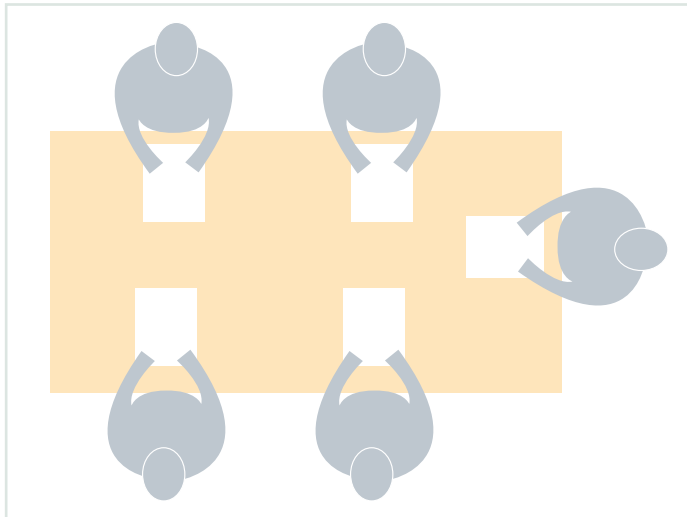
They can do it again, they can do it better, or they can go back to their prior mode of behavior.

"Open Space is appropriate in situations where a major issue must be resolved, characterised by high levels of complexity, high levels of diversity (in terms of the people involved), the presence of potential or actual conflict, and with a decision time of yesterday.

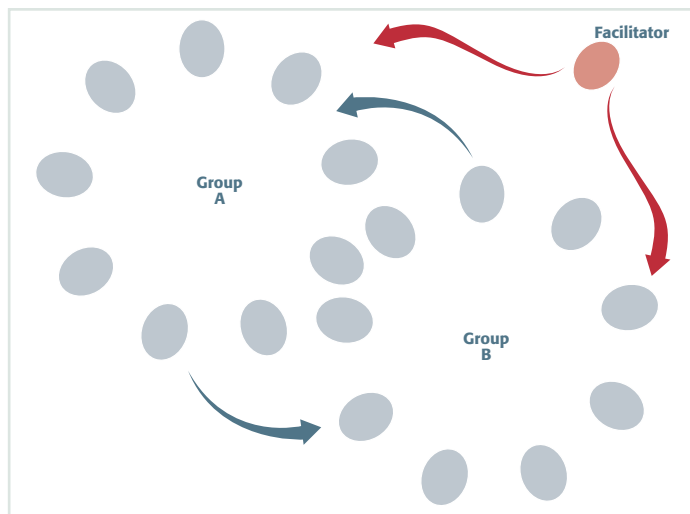
"Open Space runs on two fundamentals: passion and responsibility. Passion engages the people in the room. Responsibility ensures things get done. A focusing theme or question provides the framework for the event. The art of the question lies in saying just enough to evoke attention, while leaving sufficient open space for the imagination to run wild."

'Traditional managers may find it hard to see the point of a meeting where there may not necessarily be a conclusion'

■ The Clarity Partnership is a consultancy that uses Open Space. Visit [www.claritypartnership.co.uk](http://www.claritypartnership.co.uk)



The conventional hierarchical meeting with a clearly defined head – rigidly structured formal 'business' environment suits outcome-driven meetings



Open space meetings are less formal allowing movement between groups; no chairs, but a facilitator can keep things going; works like a drinks party



◀ when it first came into being three years ago. As a member of the IET he was keen to see Open Space integrated into an IET event, but is aware that for the technique to work you have to take into account different personality types, "Some people will come forward very easily for the right reasons, and some for the wrong reasons, but it doesn't really matter because the whole thing is self-organising and self-regulating in any case," he said. "So if somebody's got a dud subject, then no-one will turn up to talk about it."

Another pressure point is where there are expectations of potential outcomes to be managed. Open Space is not outcome-centric and some more traditional managers may find it hard to see the point of a meeting where there may not necessarily be a conclusion. This can, according to Pearse, create a "deep urge" within the organiser to step in and add elements of structure that are in conflict with the Open Space philosophy.

The main obstacle to Open Space working in the free-flowing spontaneous mode that it was designed to is the objections raised in the mind of the participants. It seems counter intuitive to have a meeting without an agenda, where anyone can attend, and anyone can talk about anything they like, where there is no such thing as wrong input. This is where managers have to know where and when Open Space can be used. Pearse is certain that there are several criteria that need to be met before it can work properly, and these relate mostly to the size, nature and theme of the meeting. There's no point he says, in everyone in the entire organisation turning up for a stock control inventory meeting, where there are finite measurable values to be communicated in an unambiguous way to a limited number of people on a need-to-know basis. But say you have 300 staff and you want to know where you're going to be in five years time, "you will get points raised about quality, product

### key points

#### THE PROS AND CONS OF OPENSACE

##### CONS:

1. Doesn't work in small groups – needs upwards of about 20
2. Makes some clients nervous – outcomes not guaranteed
3. Will not always stick to the theme – no subject off-limits
4. More space required than a conventional meeting
5. Counter-intuitive: works in practice but not in theory

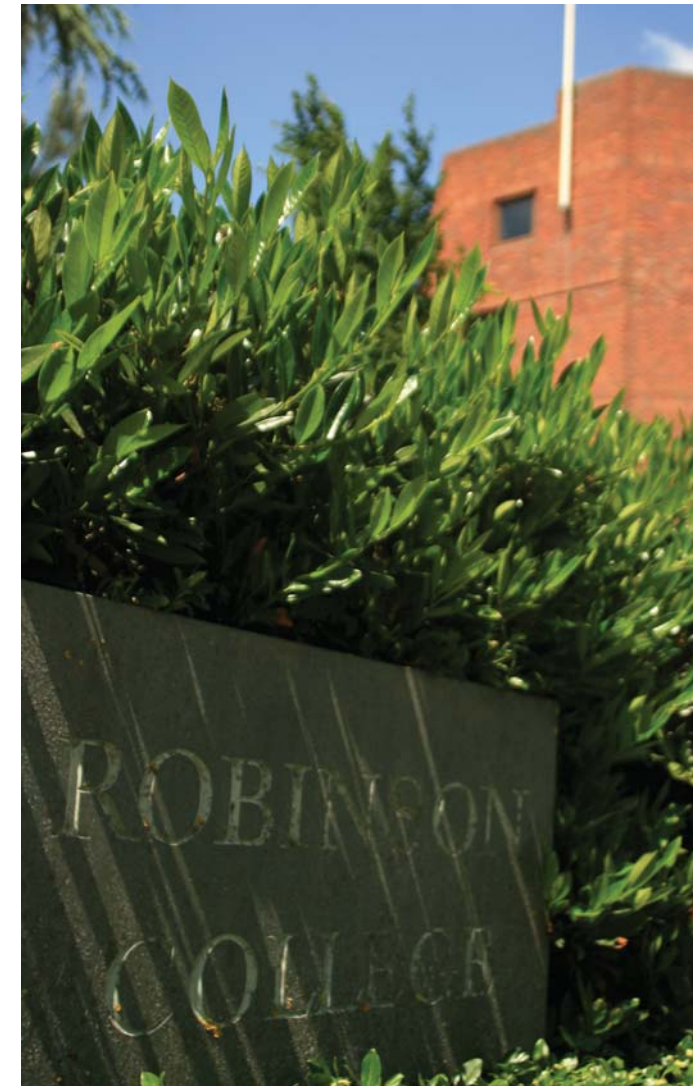
##### PROS:

1. Works with groups from 20 up to several hundred
2. Everyone gets a chance to engage with what's important to them
3. Efficient networking – meet people with common interests
4. Good at dealing with complex issues quickly
5. Taps into group intelligence and creativity

design and marketing issues, which are all predictable. But the guy who asks about increased car parking or whether there'll be a canteen in the new facility won't get laughed down". And this is important, says Pearse, because the person raising what appears to be trivial issues might just be the design engineer about to come up with a breakthrough technology... or leave in high dudgeon transferring his skills to a competitor.

#### ABSTRACT ART OF MANAGEMENT

Back in Cambridge and Johnnie Moore is about to moderate the afternoon session. We're not going back to the lecture hall with its tiers of seating facing speakers queuing up for their go at the lectern. We're staying where we had our lunch, the big dining hall of Robinson College where the oil paintings of former masters smile down benevolently on a few hundred engineers trying to get to grips with something as radical as



Open Space. As we get our chairs to form a semi-circle for the moderator there are definite rumblings of dissent. "It's like being back at school" said one, while another who clearly felt threatened by the whole experience was openly calling the whole experience "an exercise in mind control". The process starts with the moderator asking for subjects proposed. As this is the outfall of a morning session of talks on how to be an entrepreneurial engineer the subject heads will follow on from that. Well, not necessarily because this isn't the Q&A session at the end of a lecture where the chair has planted a few questions in the

audience in case it all goes quiet on him. No-one wants to start because no-one wants to make a mistake, but eventually the first takers come up with some tightly focussed discussion threads. What's the best way to expand my personal and professional network? How can I be an 'intrapreneur' in an organisation where roles are clearly defined and inflexible? How do I deal with big egos within a team?

All these threads are duly written up on the notice board and the proposer of the thread becomes the host of the conversation. But by now things are warming up and one of the original threads is

reposed in a different and more real way. How, asked one aerospace engineer, can I get my work done when middle management block everything I do? He had a lot of takers, because he had touched a nerve, and by the end of the afternoon was hosting a series of one-to-ones with sympathetic people, who helped him understand his options more clearly, even if they couldn't help him to take a decision.

Things really took a turn for the informal when one engineer stood up and said: "I've developed an electric bike. Does anyone know how I go about selling the idea?" In a formal meeting environment this might have been seen as "off agenda" but in Open Space this was taken seriously, and to judge by the number of people that flocked to his hosted conversation there were many people in that session that thought this was where some of the nitty-gritty entrepreneurial conversations were really going to happen.

All too soon after that we were wrapping up, and the cynics (including me) were chatting away with our new contacts, swapping business cards and email addresses, completely unaware that this 'exercise in mind control' had actually freed our minds and opened up an afternoon of creative thinking – a mindset that we could all hopefully take back to our offices.

Open Space is perhaps one of the more abstract conference techniques but it is worth a try especially for meetings where you don't know what you want to achieve, but you know you must move a step nearer to something. There is nothing to see or touch. All you need is some space, a couple of pencils and a pad of paper and, I nearly forgot, an open mind. ■

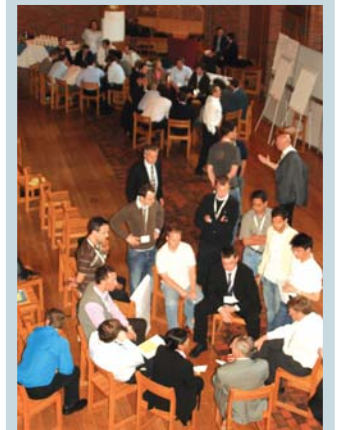
■ Nick Smith is an award winning journalist and in 2004 was PPA Independent Magazine Editor of the Year. In the 1990s he worked on many engineering magazines including *Design Engineering*, and is a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society

### feedback

#### WHAT THE DELEGATES THOUGHT

Feedback on the Open Space session was by no means unanimously in favour, but the trend in comments seemed to indicate an overall acceptance of the value of trying different communication techniques, while some found it positively inspiring. Here are some actual delegate comments from the 'Entrepreneurial Engineer' afternoon session:

- "Overall, it's quite a fruitful day for learning and networking."
- "This event was very good and well organised. Provided good opportunity to meet more people and discuss topics. I found it very motivational."
- "The acoustics in the Open Space session were terrible, I could hardly hear the



conversations I was in, let alone ones I was eavesdropping on with a view to joining."

- "Could have done with more time to carry on informal conversations kicked off by the Open Space format."
- "The time spent on Open Space was too long; I felt all talked out towards the end of it."
- "I agree that Open Space session would have been best with one at the beginning of the day (to act as an ice-breaker) and one at the end."
- "The discussion ideas should have been distributed between the two open space sessions better. There were lots of good discussion ideas in the first session – and few in the second session."