



Linking people for conclusive discussions

## **Realizing conferences with tangible results and lasting impact**

Results of online expert groups discussions  
in preparation of the MSI meeting Frankfurt

**April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

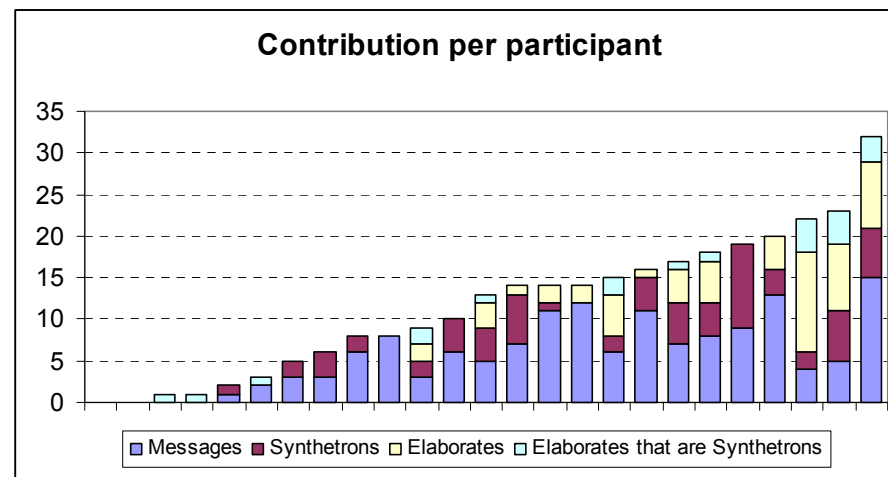
## 0 Introduction

Thursday April 12th 2007, a 60 minutes online synthetron discussion took place with the MSI expert group to identify the main drivers of great conferences, in preparation of the MSI conference in Frankfurt on April 20<sup>th</sup>. Synthetron online focus group discussions are real time, large scale (up to 200) and conclusive : the participants filter out themselves the important arguments of the discussion. Synthetrons is often applied to increase the effectiveness of conferences by online preparation or follow-up. See page 7

In total 25 experts - all meeting planners, speakers or frequent attendees connected to MSI - contributed to the discussion, of which 14 entered at least 10 messages. In total, participants entered 290 messages, of which a high number of 88 (30%) received sufficient support to become a “synthetrons”.

The discussion was structured around the questions:

- Think about the most successful conference you attended or organised, what specifically makes you define it most successful ?
- What is your main method to determine the success of a conference? Start your sentence with : “Method:...”
- Describe any tools and processes you have employed or experienced successfully to motivate participants for the content of a conference.
- From your experience, what are the most effective ways to ensure conference messages have long term impact ? Impact means that the attitude, behaviour and decision making of participants change after the conference.
- From your experience, what are the key ingredients/activities to create a good networking environment during a conference?
- Do you think that the impact of conferences can be increased by creating communities of participants before and after the conference itself?
- Last question. Please take some reflection time and then share your final takeaway from this discussion. Start your sentence with “My take away is:...”



## 1.1 MSI expert group identified 4 key success factors for great conferences

Below table summarizes the main characteristics of great conferences in the eyes of the expert group. The first 4 drivers focus on what drives successful content during the conference. The next column shows ways to increase the impact of a conference after closure of the event itself.

7 KSF to create great conferences	
KSF during conference	KSF pre/post conference
0. Prepare and invite the right participants	
1. Networking possibilities	1. Build communities
2. Hot topics	2. Action planning at the end of the conference
3. Great speakers	3. Maintaining contact after the conference
4. Audience interaction	

### 1.1.1 Great Networking possibilities

Networking is considered by most participants as important as the content of the conference itself *“...Motivation came, for many, from their interaction with their peers...networking means almost as much as the actual presentations...”* (high synthetron).

Measures to **create an environment** that facilitates effective networking include the following.

- The **right physical circumstances** should be created to facilitate networking.  
This includes amount of space, low background noise level and appropriate table dimensions *“...Make sure noise levels and acoustics (often overlooked) are good, how can you network if you can't talk, for example at a dinner dance, this should be elementary, but it generally does not happen.”* (high synthetron).
- **Easy identification of delegates**, for instance by legible badges, as a way to facilitate networking  
*“...We need to get some basics down -- name badges with legible type and not on single-point lanyards that face the badge inward.”* (medium synthetron)
- Conference organisers could stimulate networking by **actively introducing delegates to each other**

*“...helping delegates to network is really important - it is not something that most people find that easy and they tend to talk to the people they know.”(medium synthetron)*

- Some experts support the use of **special activities** to stimulate networking  
*“...The informal activities, such as a dinner on a boat (they can't get off!) are the best networking moments.”  
(low synthetron).*

### **1.1.2 Current and relevant topics** that provide delegates with new insights

This appears from the following synthetron, which describes a positive experience *“...The topic of the conference was important and relevant to all delegates. This meant that they had a reason to fully engage with the content and share their views.” (medium synthetron).* Interest in the topics can be helped by the following.

- A comprehensive **programme beforehand** can motivate delegates to follow the content attentively and more important organisers/ speakers to tailor the conference to needs.
- Systematically **summarizing** key messages in the last 5 min of presentations

### **1.1.3 Great speakers**

Speakers should be interesting, easy to understand and should not be giving sales pitches about their own services *“...Good speakers, interactive questions in the beginning to start the audience thinking” (medium synthetron)*  
Speakers should make an effort to tailor their presentations to the **needs of the conference audience** *“...Method: Using professional speakers who understand the audience/group well and are well prepared.” (medium-low synthetron).*

### **1.1.4 Great audience interaction**

Speakers should seek **active interaction** with the audience and provoke discussion *“...interactive questions at the beginning” and “...High interaction” (medium synthetron).* Some experts believe that audience peer interaction on very specific topics can be a good recipe.

## **.. and 3 key success factors at closure and after conference**

### **1.2.1 Conference impact can be increased by 30 min action planning at end of conference**

*“...To start give people time to reflect at the end of the .event and prompt them to define their own "best ideas" and plans / actions that they can take. This should be built into the agenda -- not just talked about. I have seen one event*

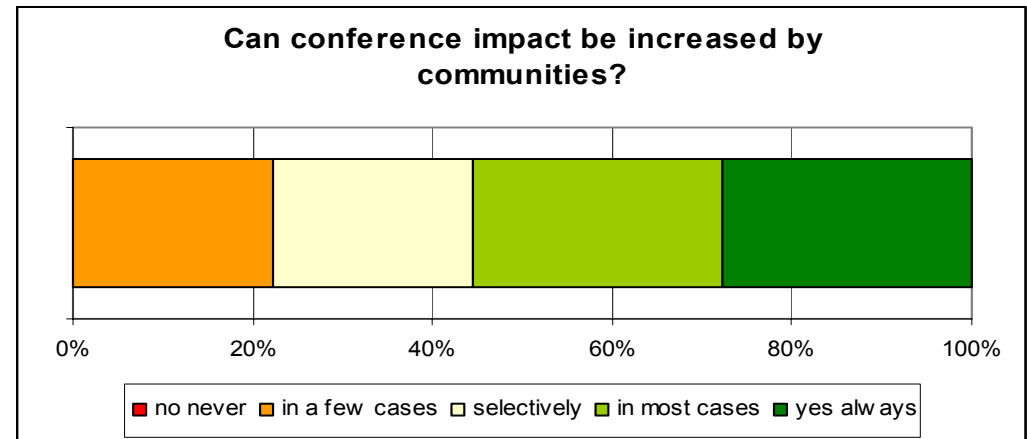
that prompt people to invest 30 minutes to review the conference and then focused them on the ideas they could act on afterward. It seems to work well.” (medium synthetron).

### 1.2.2 Prepare a comprehensive **communication plan** and **create communities**

Repeat the same message with other communication vehicles before and after the conference “... use the time in between the events to keep the delegates connected. Send newsletters with the latest news on the content, give update on the organisation of next conference, invite them to blog,... (medium synthetron)..

Participants clearly think that the creation of communities can increase the impact of conferences. More than 50% of the expert panel thinks that communities could contribute to the impact of most or even all conferences. This could be realized for instance by sending delegates reports and news items, can help ensure a longer lasting impact of a conference

- “...make sure that the conference doesn't end with the conference. Create reports, create a community with the delegates that were present.” (medium synthetron).
- “...I take away that networking building communities and really ensuring the conference does not stop the last day is very important (medium-low synthetron)



### 1.3 The evaluation of conferences is focused on tangible business results

The most important criteria used by the expert group to evaluate the success of a conference is by simply judging the **amount of new ideas and business contacts** it has generated “...Method: as a participant I determine success based on residual outcome: new business, new ideas that can be executed” (medium-low synthetron). **Informal conversations with speakers and delegates** represent another criterium used by some experts...Method: informal discussion with key contacts and customers” (low synthetron). Finally, few experts support the use of **formal questionnaires** to evaluate conferences.

## 1.4 The expert group values ongoing knowledge exchange

The participating expert group likes **sharing experiences with other meeting planners**. They express interest in joining possible future exchanges of experiences “...As a speaker I noticed how differently many conferences were designed. I think there are many ideas already out there. We need better ways for people to talk about these ideas, brain storm new ways to engage people, and share these ideas. My take away is to find more ways for conference planners to share ideas on designing conferences.” (high synthetron). Some participants would like to focus on true step-change improvements rather than incremental ones.

In addition to learning from highly effective meeting planners, a significant group of conference experts would like to **pass on insights** to meeting planners who are not yet applying current thinking in organizing conferences “...My take away is: although I don't know who the participants are we are probably preaching to the converted! it would be good to discuss with people who are in the conference ice age!” (medium synthetron).

## 1.5 Experts are enthusiast about using Synthetron as an effective tool to prepare conferences

Participants enjoy the synthetron experience and are interested in the results “...Many thanks for giving me my first Synthetron experience. I am sure it has done me the world of good” (medium synthetron). Formulating the right questions is identified as a key condition for the Synthetron approach. Some participants would have liked more time to elaborate on particular topics.

## 2. Synthetrons grouped per theme cluster

In this section you can find all synthetrons that were created during the discussion. The synthetrons are ranked in the same order as the analysis of results in the previous section. Grouped synthetrons are introduced by a brief summary prepared by a Synthetron consultant. In order to recognize quickly how much support each synthetron obtained, we have applied a colour coding as explained in below legend.

TYPE	LEVEL	Introductory comment written by Synthetron consultant
agree	top	Top synthetron supported by > 85% of participants
agree	high	High synthetron supported by 60-85% of participants
agree	medium	Medium synthetron supported by 40-60% of participants
agree	medium-low	Medium-low synthetron supported by 30-40% of participants
agree	low	Low synthetron supported by < 30% of participants

### 2.1.1 Great Networking possibilities

TYPE	LEVEL	Networking possibilities are considered by most participants as important as the conference itself
agree	high	Motivation came, for many, from their interaction with their peers... <b>networking means almost as much as the actual presentations....</b>
agree	medium	Great content (speakers, topics) and <b>good networking opportunities.</b>

agree	low	Yes I agree - delegates often say that <b>meeting and sharing ideas with others</b> was <b>as good as</b> the best keynote presentation Elaborates on: Motivation came, for many, from their interaction with their peers...networking means almost as much as the actual presentations....
agree	low	Opportunity to <b>network with peers from other organisations</b>
<b>TYPE</b>	<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>The right physical circumstances should be created to facilitate networking. This includes amount of space, low background noise level and appropriate table dimensions</b>
agree	high	<b>Make sure noise levels and acoustics (often overlooked) are good</b> , how can you network if you can't talk, for example at a dinner dance, this should be elementary, but it generally does not happen.
agree	medium	<b>Enough space</b> to interact, low key entertainment ( <b>noise level low</b> enough to permit talking w/o yelling), both large and small group "meeting:" places, good food/drink (acceptable to all cultures)
agree	medium	Another key element is the <b>space where people can network</b> . It is hard to have a meaningful conversation in a crowded bar like space. We need to give them places to go around Elaborates on: To me we need to help participants answer these questions: Who else is here? and Where are they? If we can help them do that, then we have succeeded.
agree	medium	<b>Enough room on standing tables</b> (big tables). I hate it if there are no tables left to put my plate on during lunch. Or if you feel uncomfortable squeezing in at a packed little table
agree	medium-low	<b>general atmosphere</b> . stimulate and inspire delegates not only in the sessions but also during breaks, lunches...
agree	low	Seat people at <b>SMALL round tables, max 5 ft (150 cm)</b> dia, and it is actually physically possible to talk to every person at the table (max 8). Who invented the 2m + dia tables where it is really only possible to talk to the 2 people sitting next to you?
<b>TYPE</b>	<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>Easy identification of delegates, for instance by legible badges, will facilitate networking</b>
agree	high	<b>Better participant identification</b>

agree	medium	We need to get some basics down -- <b>name badges with legible type</b> and not on single-point lanyards that face the badge inward.
agree	medium-low	<b>To circulate the list of participants beforehand</b> to all delegates, so that they can already see who will be present.
agree	medium-low	<b>list of participants with company names</b> but no contact details Elaborates on: This is helpful as long as it is not marketed to vendors. no one wants more spam Elaborates on: To circulate the list of participants beforehand to all delegates, so that they can already see who will be present.
agree	low	<b>Colour coding on badges can help as well.</b> Special codes for speakers, participants to specific parallel sessions, organisers, ...
<b>TYPE</b>	<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>Conference organisers are expected stimulate networking by actively introducing delegates to each other</b>
agree	medium	<b>helping delegates to network</b> is really important - it is not something that most people find that easy and they tend to talk to the people they know. Elaborates on: facilities to make introductions between participants that can be interesting
agree	medium	facilities to <b>make introductions between participants</b> that can be interesting
agree	medium	Some events use " <b>meet to eat</b> " so people have someone to have dinner w/ if travelling alone Elaborates on: Add some structure - try to organize people to meet who have a common interest. I once used 6 flip charts with 6 conference themes on them and suggested people meet people who have a common interest in one of the themes
agree	medium-low	To me we need to <b>help participants</b> answer these questions: Who else is here? and Where are they? If we can help them do that, then we have succeeded.
agree	medium-low	let people fill in a profile with aspects they are interested in and contacts they are looking for and <b>connect these people together at the conference based on the profiles</b>
agree	low	Make sure that <b>national groups don't start forming</b>

agree	low	Intermediators, <b>helping and introducing delegates</b> to each other Elaborates on: wine and dine
<b>TYPE</b>	<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>Some participants support the use of special activities to stimulate networking</b>
agree	low	<b>The informal activities</b> , such as a dinner on a boat (they can't get off!) are the best networking moments.
agree	low	<b>look at <a href="http://www.sossoon.com">www.sossoon.com</a></b> Elaborates on: let people fill in a profile with aspects they are interested in and contacts they are looking for and connect these people together at the conference based on the profiles
agree	low	<b>Enough time in the programme</b> for breaks and lunch to allow networking

### 2.1.2 Current and relevant topics that provide delegates with new insights

<b>TYPE</b>	<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>Important and relevant topics that provide delegates with new insights form another key element of successful conferences. A comprehensive programme beforehand can motivate delegates to follow the content attentively</b>
agree	medium	<b>Great content</b> (speakers, topics) and good networking opportunities.
agree	medium	The topic of the conference was <b>important and relevant to all delegates</b> . This meant that they had a reason to fully engage with the content and share their views.
agree	medium	interesting subjects, that are really giving me <b>new insights</b>
agree	medium-low	<b>Full detailed programme</b> , providing the whole picture on keynote speakers, sessions, ...
agree	medium-low	My main method in defining the success of a conference is whether it has <b>taught me anything new</b> . Unfortunately, that seems to be happening rarely these days.

agree	low	<b>Attractive theme of the conference</b> , in line with current business trends, attractive event <b>venues</b> and location, "waow speaker", guru or known expert on the subject
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### 2.1.3 Great speakers

TYPE	LEVEL	Speakers should be interesting, easy to understand and should not be giving sales pitches about their own services
agree	medium	<b>Good speakers</b> , interactive questions in the beginning to start the audience thinking
agree	medium	<b>Great content (speakers, topics)</b> and good networking opportunities.
agree	medium-low	<b>Great Speakers</b> and Audience interaction
agree	medium-low	We often have <b>non native English speakers</b> . One big complaint from attendees is they <b>can't be understood</b> , so no matter how valuable their information, no one learns. Elaborates on: Usually a single persn delivering personal knowledge on a topic with dramatic effect in clear, slow English.
agree	low	<b>a waow speaker really helps!</b> a hot topic is always more interesting than a classic over threated subject Elaborates on: Attractive theme of the conference, in line with current business trends, attractive event venues and location, "waow speaker", guru or known expert on the subject
agree	low	Pitfalls: speakers who present the <b>same package of information</b> without regard to the audience.
agree	low	As an attendee - I <b>hate speakers who are selling something</b> or those who appear to have been given an inadequate brief by the organiser
TYPE	LEVEL	Speakers should tailor their presentations to the needs of the conference audience

agree	medium-low	Method: Using professional speakers who <b>understand the audience/group well</b> and are well prepared.
agree	low	<b>Knowing your audience</b> is ALWAYS first , or should be, for a speaker
agree	low	<b>Personalised invitation to specific group of individuals</b> , based on their level in the organisation (CEO, Top management, operational management, ...)
agree	low	Marketing brochures featuring head speakers with content - quotes - appealing pictures. Important is to put a <b>speaker on the agenda that the targeted audience knows.</b>

## 2.1.4 Great audience interaction

TYPE	LEVEL	A large part of the participants regard audience interaction as a key element of successful conferences
agree	medium	Good speakers, <b>interactive questions in the beginning</b> to start the audience thinking
agree	medium	<b>High interaction</b>
agree	medium-low	Great Speakers and <b>Audience interaction</b>
agree	low	and <b>no discussion or time for questions</b> Elaborates on: Pitfalls: PowerPoint bombardement, just one presentation after the other, like most conferences
agree	low	conferences with <b>interactive workshops</b> dedicated to <b>specialised items.</b>
agree	low	<b>Engagement in meaningful ways</b> -- not silly conversations that lead to nothing.
agree	low	<b>People discussion topics</b> and getting deep insights Elaborates on: High interaction

agree	low	keynotes are only a small part of our event...the <b>bulk is practitioners speaking to other practitioners</b> Elaborates on: Full detailed programme, providing the whole picture on keynote speakers, sessions, ...
agree	low	Delegates are more used to going to events and having plenty of different messages to listen to. They are increasingly busy, so they can be choosy about what events they attend, where they travel to and even how they get there.□ So the days when you would invite someone to be talked to for seven hours are long gone. Delegates are demanding <b>more interactive events</b> with more <b>engaging speakers</b> delivering key messages that can be implemented when they are back at their desk. This is reinforced by the cli

### 2.2.1 Action planning at end of conference

TYPE	LEVEL	A significant group participants suggest that impact can be increased by 30 min action planning at end of conference and repeating the same message with other communication vehicles before and after the conference. Some think that the last 5 min of a presentation are key for later recollection.
agree	medium	To start give people time to reflect at the end of the event and prompt them to define their own "best ideas" and plans / actions that they can take. This should be built into the agenda -- not just talked about. I have seen one event that prompt people to <b>invest 30 minutes to review the conference and then focused them on the ideas they could act on</b> afterward. It seems to work well.
agree	medium-low	The <b>conference must be anchored in strategy and other communication efforts</b> , a one night stand never (I think) leaves a good long term effect
agree	low	Whatever impact a session is likely to have it must have made it within <b>five minutes of the end of the session</b> , otherwise it is forgotten

## 2.2.2 Prepare communication plan and build communities

TYPE	LEVEL	Maintaining contact with delegates after the conference, for instance by sending reports and newsitems, can help to ensure lasting impact of a conference
agree	medium	make sure that the conference doesn't end with the conference. <b>create reports, create a community with the delegates that were present.</b>
agree	medium	If you work on a yearly event. use the <b>time inbetween the events to keep the delegates connected.</b> Send newsletters with the latest news on the content, give update on the organisation of next conference, invite them to blog,....
agree	medium-low	I take away that networking <b>building communities</b> and really ensuring the conference does not stop the last day is very important Elaborates on: my final take away is that ingredients are well selected participants and good preparation and follow up
agree	low	I do some follow up with <b>our member/chapters to help direct future events.</b> I also can gauge long term effect by the on line blogs related to our industry. We use some <b>focus groups as well</b>
agree	low	Check during the conference if the messages are going to have impact and do good follow up; <b>send all notes, share experience after the event of success and changed behaviour</b>
agree	low	One of the challenges of creating community is helping people <b>maintain those relationships afterward</b>
agree	low	if there is some <b>news about the topics</b> that was discussed in the conference, send this information to the participants
agree	low	<b>Websites offer the ideal vehicle to provide added value</b> to an event and a way for delegates to give feedback to organisers. Content online provides a second chance for delegates to assess information
agree	low	You can indeed make a conference not a stand alone event but part of a cycle that includes <b>onsite and offsite work and interaction</b> Elaborates on: If you work on a yearly event. use the time inbetween the events to keep the delegates connected. Send newsletters with the latest news on the content, give update on the organisation of next conference, invite them to blog,....

agree	low	Follow-up session by phone/internet?
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### 2.3 The evaluation of conferences is focused on tangible business results

TYPE	LEVEL	Participants judge the succes of conferences based on the amount of new ideas or business contacts it has generated
agree	medium-low	Method: as a participant I determine success based on <b>residual outcome: new business, new ideas that can be executed</b>
agree	medium-low	My main method in defining the success of a conference is whether it has <b>taught me anything new</b> . Unfortunately, that seems to be happening rarely these days.
TYPE	LEVEL	Informal conversations with speakers and delegates is used by some to evaluate the core message/ learning of the conference
agree	medium-low	involving <b>both speakers and participants</b> in the discussion Elaborates on: Method: informal discussion with key contacts and customers
agree	low	So what about a <b>corner at the back of the room</b> , with a table and chairs a bottle of wine and a huge sign saying: so what was THAT all about?
agree	low	Method: <b>informal discussion</b> with key contacts and customers
TYPE	LEVEL	A limited number of participants refer to the use of formal questionnaires to evaluate conferences
agree	low	method: <b>questionnaire</b> on the end of the conference

agree	low	<b>Evaluation forms can be very good or very bad</b> Elaborates on: Method: evaluation form
agree	low	Method: <b>evaluation form</b> with specific questions about how participants will use new knowledge in their jobs
agree	low	Method: how many <b>sign up for the next one....</b> those who feel positive enough to send positive feedback on <b>online evals</b>
agree	low	Method: looking at <b>feedback from Customer</b> - Meeting their expectations, loyalty, overall satisfaction on the event itself

## 2.4 The expert group values ongoing knowledge exchange

TYPE	LEVEL	A large majority of participants are interested in further exchange of experiences with other meeting planners, speakers
agree	high	As a speaker I noticed how differently many conferences were designed. I think there are many ideas already out there. We need better ways for people to talk about these ideas, brain storm new ways to engage people, and share these ideas. My take away is to <b>find more ways for conference planners to share ideas</b> on designing conferences.
agree	high	My take away is that in many ways we are all dealing with the same problem. How we solve them is largely dependent upon how large our meetings are, our client base, our potential speaker pool, etc. I am interested in <b>learning more of how others solve the same problem.</b>
agree	medium-low	Please follow the moderator's suggestion about the contacts. It would be interesting to <b>continue the discussion with you.</b>
agree	low	My take away is: that we still think and act in <b>small circles around proven themes</b> on how to organise a meeting. Large steps should be able to make there still. Also, this synthetron is a very useful tool!

TYPE	LEVEL	Participants see benefits in convincing meeting planners who are not yet applying the latest insights to organise conferences
agree	medium	My take away is: although I don't know who the participants are we are probably preaching to the converted! it would be good to <b>discuss with people who are in the conference ice age!</b>
agree	low	Hmmm. I certainly spotted <b>some non-converted comments</b> which made me think... Elaborates on: My take away is: although I don't know who the participants are we are probably preaching to the converted! it would be good to discuss with people who are in the conference ice age!

## 2.5 Experts are enthusiast about using Synthetron as an effective tool to prepare conferences

TYPE	LEVEL	Participants enjoy the synthetron experience and are inetrested in the results. Formulating the questions is identified as a key condition . Some would liked to spend more time elaborating on some topics
agree	medium	My take away is that you must have <b>very precise questions</b> to have a valuable feedback Elaborates on: My take away is the opposite! Elaborates on: My take away is: this tool is too time consuming & not the right one to bring up new idea's (one of the objectives) or were the questions not the right ones?
agree	medium	<b>Right</b> Elaborates on: thank you <b>I enjoyed this</b>
agree	medium	Many thanks for giving me <b>my first Synthetron experience</b> . I am sure it has done me the world of good
agree	medium-low	<b>thank you I enjoyed this</b>

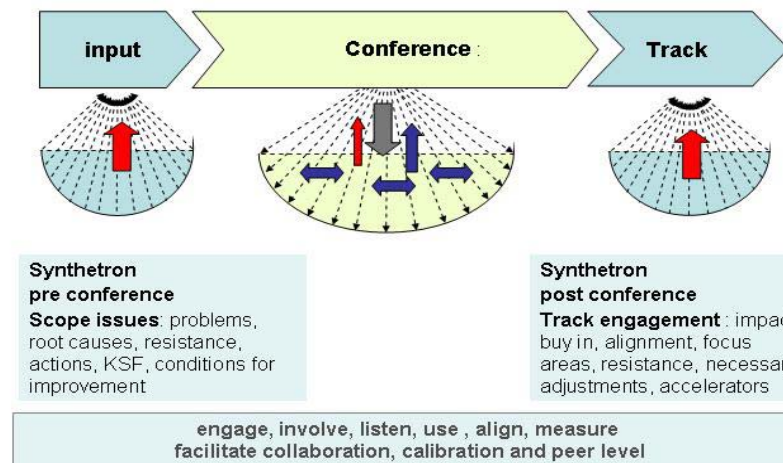
agree	medium-low	I wish that we had <b>more time to elaborate</b> on some of these topics.
agree	medium-low	Will <b>summary be available</b> after the session, does anything happen with this afterwards
agree	low	It will be interesting to see next friday whether this discussion made any <b>difference to anything at the conference...</b>
agree	low	yes indeed it is an <b>easy and fun process of dicussing online</b> Elaborates on: My take away is that this is an easy process to prepare a conference.. force people to start thinking before they go or even better facilitate follow up with a specific group
agree	low	I would like to know how many participants we <b>are now in the session</b>
agree	low	<b>Many thanks, I enjoyed it!</b>
agree	low	<b>DITTO!!!</b> Elaborates on: thank you <b>I enjoyed this</b>
agree	low	thank you all.. I'll log off and look forward to <b>see what we together filtered out</b> as most relevant ideas.. I saw some of it in the summary tab
agree	low	Perhaps <b>have this type of experience before</b> a conference goes ahead

## EXHIBIT 1: enhancing impact of conferences through collaboration - pre and post

Synthetron helps conference organizers **involve** selected participants via virtual collaborative discussions to prepare or to follow up on the conference results.

**Synthetron** is an **on-line discussion** and collaboration platform where participants can **anonymously** interactively write, comment, **exchange and validate** ideas via a structured process on a real time basis, using their own pc's. The immediate outcome is a structured list of the most supported ideas of the group.

### Collaboration as input into conference process



### Enhanced conference impact in 2 ways:

- **Pre conference**  
Participants can share their view on specific situations, scope and prioritize issues in an one-hour web-enabled peer discussion.  
The results provide crucial input for the content of the conference and help to **focus** to related the conference to participants input or to shift during the conference from “what is the issue” to “how can we progress”.
- **Post conference**  
Track feedback and “buy-in” of participants in order to measure impact, to formulate focused follow-up actions or to close out some topics.

See [www.synthetron.com](http://www.synthetron.com) for more info.