Options Place

Idea In Short

When a meeting needs participant ownership and the topics are not yet known, use Options Place. Invite people to post the questions or themes they most want to explore, then let them host or join the sessions that matter to them. Prepare a visible board with enough slots, clear time rounds, and simple participation rules. The host's role is to protect the process, keep transitions orderly, and ensure the agenda remains connected to the event's purpose. Use this structure when people can make meaningful contributions or learn from one another. Do not use an open agenda to disguise a decision that leaders have already made.

A conference agenda can look complete and still leave participants as an audience. The organizers choose every topic, speaker, and sequence, while the people closest to the work wait for a chance to ask questions. Options Place offers another model: participants build the agenda around the questions and topics they want to explore, then host or join the conversations that interest them. The structure creates space for expertise and curiosity to shape the event. Its effectiveness depends on clear rules and a shared purpose. The host should make room for participant initiative while keeping the process understandable and accessible.

Let the agenda emerge

Options Place begins with an invitation such as: "What burning questions or key topics do you want to explore within our theme? Let's build an agenda together." Participants write proposed sessions on a visible Breakout Board. Each entry should state the topic and who will convene the discussion. The host prepares enough slots for one to three rounds of concurrent sessions and estimates how many proposals the group may generate. The source guidance suggests that about three in ten participants will post a session, a useful planning estimate rather than a quota.

Once the board is populated, participants choose where to go. The structure's simple rules

include: go where you are learning or contributing; use a liberating approach in the breakout; and take responsibility for the quality of your participation. These rules make the design work without a central planner assigning everyone to a room. Participants can leave a session that is not useful and find another where they can contribute or learn.

Prepare for flow

Space and timing are central. In person, the host needs an open wall for the board, enough breakout areas, chairs for small groups, and a way to make each session easy to find. Large gatherings may require microphones and visible signage. Online, the equivalent is a shared agenda, labeled breakout rooms, and clear movement instructions. Participants should know the duration of each round and how transitions will work before the first session begins.

The official format commonly uses 15-minute sessions with short transitions, and may run for 55 to 85 minutes. The host should choose the number of rounds based on the event's purpose and the energy available. Too few slots can suppress useful proposals; too many can make the agenda difficult to navigate. Leave room for participants to change sessions between rounds and for hosts to update locations if a group grows or shrinks.

Make participant ownership real

Options Place shifts responsibility to participants. Someone who proposes a topic should be prepared to welcome others and create a useful conversation, not deliver a miniature keynote. A host can use 1-2-4-All, a question round, a demonstration, or another participatory format. The organizer can offer a short orientation on inclusive facilitation, especially when the event brings together people unfamiliar with open agendas.

Leaders should be candid about boundaries. If a topic is genuinely open for exploration, say so. If a budget, policy, or strategic direction is already fixed, distinguish that constraint from the questions participants can still influence. Asking people to propose agenda items for a decision that has already been made can undermine trust. Options Place distributes control only where the organization is prepared to share it.

The host should also consider accessibility and power. A public board may make it easier for confident participants to post while others hesitate. Offer a quiet way to submit topics, let people join without hosting, and avoid treating the number of attendees as a measure of

topic value. A session led by a junior employee may be the one that surfaces an operational risk senior leaders have not seen. The format creates opportunities for that knowledge to enter the conversation, but the organization must remain willing to hear it.

Capture learning without over-controlling

After each round, participants can move freely or take a brief pause to record what they learned. A closing debrief can ask which conversations created energy, what question deserves further attention, or who should stay connected. The organizer need not produce a formal report from every breakout. A lightweight capture method—topic, key insight, and volunteered next step—can preserve useful information without turning an open exchange into administrative work.

Options Place is useful at unconferences, internal learning events, cross-functional forums, and community gatherings where participants hold knowledge that the organizer cannot fully anticipate. It is less useful when the event needs a tightly sequenced briefing or when all consequential decisions are closed. Research on open-space methods and employee voice points to the value of participant-led discussion when people have autonomy and a meaningful issue to address. MIT Sloan Management Review discusses how autonomy can support initiative, while Harvard Business Review has examined why people contribute ideas when leaders create conditions for voice. 1, 2, 3

End with choices and connections

A useful close does not force consensus about every session. Ask participants to name one idea they will use, one question that remains, or one person they want to stay in contact with. Make clear how the event will handle proposals that require follow-up. If a topic needs a decision, identify who owns that decision and when participants will hear back. This final step preserves the freedom of the event while connecting its conversations to future work.

Options Place works when participants can shape their own learning and the host provides a light but reliable frame. A board, a few rules, and clear transitions are enough to let people build an agenda together. The resulting conversations can make an event more relevant because people choose where they can contribute or learn. The organizer’s measure of success is whether participants found useful exchanges and whether those exchanges led to further insight or action.

- 1Building ambidexterity into an organization
- 2Why employees don’t speak up
- 3Design effective meetings

Summary

Options Place redistributes control over meeting content and process. Participants propose sessions, choose where to learn or contribute, and take responsibility for the conversations they initiate. Clear rules and a well-prepared board help this freedom produce useful exchange rather than confusion. Hosts should connect the event to a shared theme, provide enough space and time, and make participation choices visible. A short closing round can capture what people learned and which connections need follow-up. When participants shape the agenda, the event can surface expertise and questions that a planner could not have predicted in advance. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.