



Café Society

How a brand-new conference in Germany ensured that attendees talked to each other – for their own engagement, education, and networking.



The Association of German Engineers (VDI) holds more than 150 conferences, congresses, and conventions every year, including the International Engine Congress, Plastics in Automotive Engineering, and Automated Driving. At any moment year-round, there's a major VDI event that just happened or one that's about to take place.

This past December, VDI introduced yet another conference – this one focused on the Internet of Things (IoT) and the Industrial Internet of Things. Held Dec. 13–14 at andel's by Vienna House hotel in Berlin, the Congress for Exchange of Strategies, Innovations, and Solutions (CESIS) drew nearly 300 people, according to Katharina Neumann, product manager of international business development at VDI. It also introduced to the group an approach to small, lively discussion groups: World Cafés.

The idea came from one of Neumann's colleagues who had run something similar at another VDI event.

Here's how it worked at CESIS: On the second day of the conference, from 11 a.m. until a 12:30 p.m. lunch break, attendees broke into small groups across the conference and exhibition areas. They chose from one of seven general topics – including data analytics, artificial intelligence, and IoT and the automotive industry – and sat down at a corresponding table. It worked out to about 10 or 15 people per table, plus a moderator. For the next half hour, each group had a spirited conversation about the topic at hand, with the moderator kicking things off and throwing out questions or prods if discussion started to lag.

When the 30 minutes were up, everyone switched to another table and topic of their choice. The moderator summed up the previous group's discussion, which let the newcomers build and expand on that conversation rather than rereading points that were already made. It meant the second- and third-round groups could go increasingly deep into the subjects – not

Engineered for Interaction The formats at VDI's Internet of Things conference – including World Cafés and a Design Thinking Workshop – were designed to bring participants together to 'achieve some cooperations between different industries.'