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Two Years of PHPAmersfoort: Running a Local Usergroup

Stefan Koopmanschap

Two years ago as of this writing, we organized the first meeting of PHPAmersfoort, the local PHP usergroup for the city of Amersfoort in The Netherlands. It has been a very interesting time filled with lessons on how to run a local usergroup and discovering what works and what doesn't, with a great number of speakers presenting and many intriguing discussions. In this article, I want to share with you some of the things we've learned along the way and give you some tips and tricks for running your own local usergroup.

Photo by Katerina Dmitrijewa (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/pennyjey/>)

Our Start

The Dutch are lazy—hold on, I'll explain. I was talking to Michelangelo van Dam of PHPBenelux while at the php[tek] conference, and he told us the difference that PHPBenelux sees between its meetings in Belgium and its meetings in The Netherlands in terms of attendance is huge. The Belgian meetings regularly have 50+ people attending, while only about 20 people attend the Dutch meetings. One of the reasons for this is that the Dutch are not willing to travel: If they need to travel for more than 20-30 minutes to a usergroup meeting, they'd rather stay home.

It wasn't a huge surprise that when Rafael Dohms started the first local usergroup in Amsterdam, it

became an instant success. After AmsterdamPHP took off, slowly more and more local usergroups began popping up. Rotterdam, Zoetermeer, Groningen, Twente, an ever-increasing number arose.

While this was happening, Jelrik van Hal, Richard Tuin, and I worked together on a project at Enrise. At some point, the three of us started saying (in jest) that it would be nice if Amersfoort also had a usergroup. I'd love to say we started working on it and that the next month there was a meeting, but I'd be lying. It took a couple of similar lunch meetings before we decided to publish our plans. We called for people from Amersfoort to come together to brainstorm, and we



DisplayInfo()

Requirements:

- People skills: a bit
- Community feeling: a lot
- Spare Time: 0 to infinity

Related URLs:

- PHPAmersfoort—<http://phpamersfoort.nl>
- Meetup.com—<http://meetup.com>
- Joind.in—<http://joind.in>
- Slack—<http://slack.com>
- Trello—<http://trello.com>
- PHP.UG—<http://php.ug>



set our goals, picked a specific day of the month (the second Tuesday of the month) for our meet ups, and off we went: August 13, 2013, saw the inaugural meet up at Seats2Meet in Amersfoort, with Harrie

Verveer speaking about PHPUnit.

Preparing a Plan

We created a plan on what we wanted to do and achieve with PHPAmersfoort. In an informal group like this, that was a great idea. Every idea we have and every speaker we might be able to get—we can easily test whether this is according to

plan. Such a plan ensures we can stay focused on what we need to do: organize meet ups. It ensures things don't immediately become chaotic.

First of all, we had two goals:

- Be a meeting place outside the workplace for PHP developers and people interested in PHP in the Amersfoort area
- Facilitate the sharing of knowledge by providing a technical talk with attendees

Not every meet up needed to adhere to both of the above goals. For instance, we've organized meet ups without a speaker, where we'd go and play lasertag. And last year, as our birthday celebration, we organized a bowling night as part of our regular meet up. However, everything we organize should meet at least one of our goals.

Stick to the Plan?

A plan is nice but, obviously, you need to be flexible and realistic. We found out quickly that not many people liked the lasertag meet ups. Therefore, we stopped planning those. Organizing a meet up, even if it's just to play lasertag, takes effort. If the meet up ends up bringing together the same small group of five or six people, it's a bit useless to keep doing what you're doing. We still play lasertag every once in a while, but it's no longer part of PHPAmersfoort.

Tools We Use

Once you've got a plan, you need to actually start doing work. We've found a set of tools with PHPAmersfoort that really work for us.

Meetup.com

Meetup.com is a great tool for organizing meetings. It offers an event management and registration system, but it also offers a huge userbase. When you start your Meetup group, Meetup.com automatically e-mails people in your area who are interested in your group's topic. This is great help for finding an initial group of people.

Meetup.com has a monthly fee to use its service, but it's not a lot of money. This fee can either be paid by the organizers or be covered by a sponsor. In our case, we found a sponsor willing to pay.

I must be honest though: Lately meetup.com has been removing some really useful features. First it removed the check-in option in which attendees could "check in" to a meetup when they were there. More recently, it removed the "sponsor perks" feature, which was a great way for sponsors to promote themselves in the Meetup group: they could give a discount code to members for instance. While we never really used the check-in feature (I know AmsterdamPHP did though for its raffler software), the

PHPAmersfoort

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Amersfoort, Netherlands
Founded Jul 2, 2013

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| PHPeople | 186 |
| Group reviews | 16 |
| Upcoming Meetups | 6 |
| Past Meetups | 29 |

Every **second Tuesday of the month**: meetups for PHP developers from the Amersfoort and Eemland region. Talks, interaction, fun. Come hang with us on IRC: Freenode network, #phpamersfoort

We're 186 PHPeople

[Join us!](#)

Welcome to PHPAmersfoort!

[Upcoming 6](#) [Suggested 0](#) [Past](#) [Calendar](#)

Monthly Meetup

Needs a location
Coming soon

Tue Nov 10
7:00 PM

What's new



sponsor perks are our way of communicating some cool discounts to our members. We need to find a new way to do this. It is important to keep looking at the tools you use to see whether they're still effective for what you use them for. If a better alternative to Meetup.com becomes available, we'll likely switch.

Google Drive

We have quite a few documents that we might need to work on together. We've got documents listing potential speakers and potential venues and, of course, we have our schedule for the upcoming meet ups. To easily share these documents and also work on them collaboratively, we've found Google Drive/Google Docs to be a great tool. That way, we'll never lose data when someone saves a document should someone else also be working on it.

Joind.in

In the PHP community, this is an obvious tool used to gather feedback on the speaker and meet up. Every meet up gets created on joind.in, and attendees are asked to leave feedback on the speaker and the event on the joind.in site. This is also good for (starting) speakers, because many conference organizers check feedback on joind.in when selecting talks for their conference.

Slack

We have our own private Slack-network where we talk to each other, discuss potential speakers and locations, and generally get things sorted. When we started, we were all in the same office, but this is not always the case now depending on the projects we work on and the clients we work for.

We used to use Skype for this, with a dedicated PHPAmersfoort chat, but we've migrated to Slack. The option of having different channels is useful, and because we all use Slack for some other projects and communities as well, it seemed like a good replacement for Skype.

Trello

Because discussing and assigning tasks in a chat sometimes resulted in those tasks not getting done, we needed a simple tool to keep track of tasks, who is working on a task, and what the task's status is. For this, Trello got introduced. Trello is a very easy-to-use tool that serves as something of a Kanban-board to keep track of tasks.

WhatsApp

We don't use WhatsApp a great deal, but we do have a group chat for the occasional item that arises when we're not at a computer.

Funding the Group

In an informal group like this, money is an obvious problem. While all founding members were very happy to invest in the starting of the group, consistently paying for venues, coffee and tea, snacks, soda, and beer is a bit much. There are a lot of ways to avoid the need to spend money on organizing a usergroup (I'll get back to that later), but there are some things that cost money regardless. It's good to have some sponsors who can help you out. For PHPAmersfoort, we've got ServerGrove sponsoring our website, but there are several hosting websites out there willing to donate hosting for usergroups. Ingewikkeld, my company, is paying for the Meetup.com account and pays for some things that pop up every now and then. We even had a member who stepped up to pay for the cost of one of the meet ups at some point, which is really incredible.

One thing we wanted to prevent was needing to ask our members to pay for attending the meet up. One of the charms of local usergroups is that people are free to come by whenever they want to, regardless of their financial position or whether a boss wanted to pay for them to attend. So far, in our two years of running the usergroup, we have never had to charge for the meet up.

How do you run a usergroup without spending money? By getting yourself sponsors.



The screenshot shows the Joind.in website interface. At the top is the Joind.in logo and navigation tabs for Events, Talks, About, and Help. Below the navigation is a section titled "New to Joind.in?" with a link to learn more. The main content area features a meetup event titled "PHPAmersfoort October 2015 Meetup" scheduled for 13 Oct. 2015 at Enrise. It shows that the user has attended and that 2 other people said they attended. Below the event title is a detailed description of the event, including a schedule of activities like drinks, opening, a presentation by Damien Seguy, closing, and social time.

PHPAmersfoort October 2015 Meetup
13 Oct. 2015
Enrise

1 attended 2 people said they attended. [Show »](#)

October is the tenth month, which means we're heading towards the end of this year already! The highlight of this year for PHP is definitely PHP 7, so now would be a good time to learn more about it. Thankfully we have Damien Seguy to teach us more about the new error messages in PHP 7. This month we've found shelter at the Enrise office, parking is available at the Eemplein parking garage.

Damien also offered to bring some ElePHPants (original blue and pink), if you would like to buy one (€ 25,-) bring cash and send us a message, we'll ask Damien to bring one for you.

Schedule
19:00 Drinks
19:30 Opening
~19:45 Damien Seguy - Error messages in PHP 7
~20:30 Closing and raffle
~20:40 Social & Drinks

What are the Costs of a Usergroup

The list of things that cost money for a usergroup is not that long. Our list of costs is as follows:

- Website hosting
- Meetup.com
- Venues
- Coffee and tea
- Drinks and snacks

As mentioned before, ServerGrove graciously offered to host our website (as it does with many usergroups), and we have a sponsor for the Meetup.com fees, so the only costs we need to cover are related to the meet ups we organize.

Our Sponsor Proposition

We try to have all the costs related to a meet up be covered by the same sponsor. This is for a very simple reason: it saves us work. We prefer to have a meet up hosted by our sponsor. This basically means that the sponsor provides us with a room where the meet up can take place in addition to coffee/tea before the speaker presents and drinks and snacks afterward. Usually, this means that our meet ups occur in the sponsor's office. This is an excellent situation for both parties: We get to have a good venue, usually with wifi as well, where we can meet, and the sponsor is able to show attendees his or her company.

The main reason for companies to sponsor a meet up is recruiting. I know very few companies doing PHP right now that are not looking for more developers. This is great because that means there are enough companies willing to sponsor meet ups, but we do have some rules. Sponsors can, if they want, introduce themselves quickly at the start of the meet up. We give them 5–10 minutes to do so if they want. We will also put their logo on our opening and closing slides. And of course, they can put flyers or other promotional materials in their office. We discourage actively recruiting attendees however. This is both to prevent our attendees from annoying recruitment attempts but also to protect our sponsor from getting a bad reputation. If someone is looking for a job, he or she will approach the sponsor if interested in a position. In a world where most developers get approached by recruiters nearly daily, having that happen at a meet up is a pretty quick way to never see that attendee at a meet up ever again.

Sometimes we get sponsors who have no office in the Amersfoort region. They usually just pay for us to rent a room and get some drinks. If possible, we ask them to arrange the room for us or at least give an OK on being invoiced directly by the venue where we rent the room

so that we don't have to pay for it and then try to get our money reimbursed by the sponsor. We want to minimize our financial risk and our involvement. It takes enough time to organize everything already.

Finding Venues

As mentioned before, the venues are usually simply the sponsor's office building. There are not many requirements for the venue. The most important item we need is a projector and of course enough room to accommodate the attendees. We average about 20–25 people, so we usually aim for a venue that has room for 25–30. We always do ask for the capacity upfront so we can put a maximum capacity on Meetup.com. This prevents a greater number of people coming to the event than the venue can hold.

Aside from needing the projector and enough chairs for attendees, we prefer our venue to be easily accessible by both car and public transportation. This doesn't always work out well, but most of the venues we use these days are pretty easy to reach. Of course because we're a local usergroup, attendees are mostly local anyway, so a simple bikeride is not a big problem for most.

Getting Speakers

Getting speakers for a usergroup can be a challenge, especially when you're not in an area where many regular speakers reside. As such, when we first began the usergroup, we decided to host some speakers from other parts of the country. Thanks to the fact that all of the crew are active in the Dutch and international PHP community, we have many speakers we can e-mail.

From the start, however, we have been promoting the usergroup as a place for new speakers to get some experience. Over the past two years, we've had several new or relatively new speakers giving their talks at PHPAmersfoort to get some more experience. All of these talks have been terrific, and the feedback the speakers received on joind.in was also very positive. The speakers have also received some constructive comments on how to improve their talks. This is exactly why usergroups are a good place for beginning speakers.

As a usergroup organizer, you should also be aware of bigger events going on in your country or region. If there are conferences in your own region or in your country, chances are you could get a speaker to come over to your usergroup to deliver a talk. We have not really been able to get international speakers to

PHPAmersfoort because the timing has not worked, but several other Dutch usergroups have had international speakers present at their meet ups. These were usually much better attended than regular meet ups are, and they are excellent advertisements for your usergroup!

Another reason to keep an eye on conferences is that you can spot local, regional, or national speaking talent. PHPAmersfoort recently had Jakub Gadowski, who did a talk at the Dutch PHP Conference Uncon, and was so good that he immediately was invited to PHPAmersfoort, where he repeated his talk and received fantastic feedback.

One thing to make very clear is that we do not offer speakers any compensation for their presenting at our usergroup. Because we don't have any income, we can't really give anything in return for a presentation. So far though, we haven't had any speakers expecting any compensation; it is part of the usergroup ecosystem that people don't get (or even expect) compensation for speaking. If you're starting a local usergroup, don't worry about compensation; it really isn't necessary.

Meet-up Logistics

All the previous is mostly about preparations and organization, but how does an actual meet up work? We always publish the schedule upfront so people know what to expect, and the schedule is much the same every month:

- 7:00 p.m. - Welcome with coffee/tea
- 7:30 p.m. - Opening by PHPAmersfoort crew
- 7:35 p.m. - Speaker
- 8:30 p.m. - Closing by PHPAmersfoort, possible raffle
- 8:40 p.m. - Drinks and snacks

After experiencing different schedules at different usergroups, we decided with PHPAmersfoort to only have one speaker per meet up. This gives attendees a good reason to come to the meet up to learn something, but also gives enough time for socializing and getting to know each other. An important part of the meet up is not just the learning but also the social interaction among attendees. Whether it is for business purposes (developers might just find their next job at the meet up) or simply for pleasure (chances are, there are people with similar hobbies or interests at the meet up), this interaction is valuable. Some usergroups choose to host two speakers and have mingling time afterward, but we've found that



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most people also want to try to be home relatively early. Most meet ups end around 10 p.m., although we've had nights when people had such a good time that it was quite late before the last people said their good-byes.

We usually try to be at the venue 15–30 minutes in advance. The first attendees generally arrive 5-10 minutes before the meet up officially starts, and you want to have some time to set everything up (or help the sponsor set everything up). We also stay a bit after the last person leaves to help clean things up a bit. This is a courtesy for your sponsors, and we hope this ensures they will want to invite you back for another meet up at their offices.

Special Activities

As mentioned before, we've had some special activities. These were either combined with a normal meet up or just organized as a separate event. The venue that we usually rent when the sponsor doesn't have an office in Amersfoort has several options for this. As such, we've rented some bowling alleys a couple of times and we've gone to play laser tag.

Early in the usergroup's history, we combined these activities with a regular meet up, but we found that if we'd go bowling or play lasertag after the speaker was done, we'd lose several of our regular visitors. They'd just go home because they weren't interested in participating.

An exception to that rule was our first anniversary, when we announced upfront that there would be bowling after the regular meet up was done. We had found a sponsor for this activity so that people wouldn't have to spend their own hard-earned money on it. The number of people staying after the regular meet up was much higher, and we celebrated our first anniversary with an excited group of developers playing bowling. Much fun was had.

The Crew

As the crew members, you're the steady part of the group. Every meet up, there's (usually) a different group of people (with a bunch of regulars coming to most meet ups). But even changes can happen within the crew. We expanded the crew with Rick Kuipers after a while. Rick was one of our hardcore regulars and was very willing to help, so we invited him to join the team. This worked out really well.

People sometimes also change. Life changes, and situations change. A couple of months ago, I stepped back from the PHPAmersfoort crew. I just had too much going on, both personally and with business, so I couldn't commit to the work needed for PHPAmersfoort. I still visit most of the meet ups though.

Your organizing crew will change over time. You should be proactive in managing it. Keep an eye on regulars who could be encouraged to step up and help when others decide they no longer can.

Starting Your Own Usergroup

All of what is mentioned above is the story of PHPAmersfoort, the first local usergroup I've been involved with. But how do you go about beginning your own story? As the great Cal Evans always says:

"If you have no local usergroup, you ARE the local usergroup."

Let's get started! Because organizing everything by yourself is a great deal of work, finding one or two like-minded people to help you out is a great idea. Get yourself the right set of tools needed to organize meet ups, set a date, and get a speaker, and you'll be on your way to your first birthday as a usergroup. Don't forget to register yourself as <http://php.ug!> And remember: Find your own way. What worked for us in Amersfoort may not work for your situation. As such, get moving and start your own story!



STEFAN KOOPMANSCHAP runs his own business called Ingewikkeld, organizes WeCamp, and has been involved in starting several usergroups in The Netherlands and BeNeLux.

Twitter: @skoop

php[tek]²⁰¹⁶

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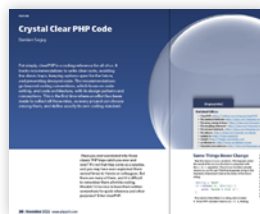


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