



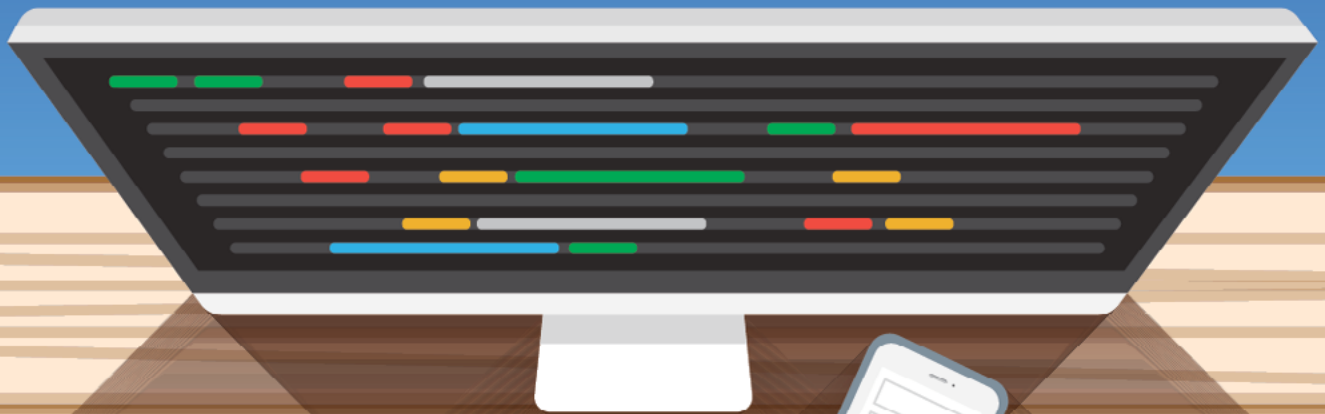
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Building a Conference Schedule

# Building a Conference Schedule

Eli White

It's been a week since we finished the process of selecting talks and publishing the schedule for our upcoming php[tek] 2016 conference. Every time we publish a schedule, I receive many questions about why someone wasn't accepted. I do my best to answer those, but it's always tricky.



I recently talked to someone who mentioned that they were considering not responding to the Call for Speakers because they had not been accepted in a while. As I told them, not being accepted is not solely based on how great your submissions are. Numerous other factors come into play.

I'd like to explain how we at php[architect] select sessions. The process varies for each conference we put on, and it can be drastically different for conferences put on by other people. However, I wanted to describe our "baseline" to be open about it and help other speakers.

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*Conferences are really like parties, and an A-list party is one where A-list people are in attendance. You figure out who are the really important people to invite and get them to show up as speakers or as guests. Then everybody wants to be there. If you don't know who the important people are, you shouldn't be doing a conference.*

— Tim O'Reilly

## The Ratings

First, we review submissions as they come in throughout the Call for Speakers. We have a team at php[architect] who go through every submission, whether we get 300 or 600. We rate them all individually on their own merits. The talks are rated in random order for each reviewer to help mitigate any issues with people seeing talks in a specific order, which can help or hurt a specific talk.

We use a half-blind method of rating here. As a reviewer rates a talk, they first see just the title and abstract, and they rate it solely based upon that information using a scale of 1-5. After the initial rating, if the rater chooses, they can see the name of the presenter and adjust his or her rating. For example, this happens when a talk about a specific tool looked good, but after the initial rating, the rater realized the speaker is the tool's creator; this can bump the rating from *good* to *great*.

The raters consider the specific conference and its overall goals, which topics the team feels are hot at the moment, and the specific themes we are highlighting that year. Therefore, a talk that might get a 5-star rating for php[world] may only get a 3.5-star for php[tek]. Those can change from year to year. We don't share the raw reviews with submitters because they aren't useful outside the full context of the conference and every other submission we received.

## The Spreadsheet

The next step of the process is less time consuming, but it's much more mentally taxing. I import all the talks and their average rating scores into a spreadsheet for easier sorting. I break them up into three tabs (for our conference purposes): Sessions, Tutorials, and Short Talks. Each category has a specific number of slots available in the conference schedule.

The general process involves tracking how many slots to fill for each category. For example, for php[tek] 2016<sup>1</sup>, we needed 38 sessions, 6 tutorials, and 8 short talks. You might think it would be easiest to sort the talks by average rating from high to low and then select the top 38, 6, or 8 talks in the appropriate tab, giving us an amazing schedule. Yes, we would like to do that, but...

For many important reasons, we can't be that straightforward in our selection process. Much more goes into making what we consider the "perfect schedule". This is the point that makes most speakers upset. It's rare, but you can have an amazingly high-rated session and not make it into schedule. Why?

## The Budget

Well, there are many reasons. First, we are a company, and we need to hit our bottom line. We have to consider our budget. We spend a significant amount paying for speakers' flights and hotels. For that reason, we prefer to get two talks from any speaker we select. We also have to be careful about how many international speakers we accept because those flights are significantly more expensive (up to 4x as much).

The first thing my co-chair and I do is sit down and look through the list. We start with the tutorials, then move on to the short talks and the sessions. Starting at the top of the list, and for each talk, we ask, "This is their highest-rated tutorial. What's the next highest-rated submission from this speaker? Is it good enough to accept?" We slowly work down the entire list, looking for two talks from each speaker as we go. Sometimes we remove a speaker because his or her highest-rated talk only got 4.67 stars and their next talk only got 3.12 star, which we deemed too low. Note that with the number of amazing submissions we get, we often have over 200 talks rated 4.5 or better.

Eventually we hit a point at which we are *close* to having a full schedule. Typically we reach a painful situation where we have 1 or 2 talk slots left and 5 to 10 people who could fill them, all equally rated. At that point, the next phase begins, which is...

## The Balancing

In this step, my co-chair and I take a step back, and brace ourselves for the most painful part of the process. We look at the schedule as a whole, thinking about which topics are covered and which aren't. Do we have too many talks on X? Did we manage to select something on Y? Did we get so many talks on Z that it's obviously a hot, up-and-coming topic, and did we accept enough of them?

Now the *art* of the selection process begins. Talks are added or removed, and we compare how the schedule looks after these changes. We have to make sure we have enough but not too much of each topic we need. Some of the more controversial parts of the

<sup>1</sup> php[tek]: <http://tek.phparch.com>

process occur at this point. We need to look at things that will make the conference “sell”. While we want as many new faces as possible, do we have enough “known names” to help us sell tickets? Will people pay extra to see the talks we chose for Tutorial Day? Have we ensured that none of the talks conflict directly with topics covered on Training Day or Tutorial Day, leading attendees to avoid buying tickets for those extra days?

After all this is done, we have a schedule. But it's *still* not final. At this point, we hop on a Google Hangout with all our team members. We go through the schedule again, sometimes once and sometimes up to three times, with fresh eyes, looking for imbalances: advanced vs beginner, topics, speakers, draw, etc. It all plays into our decisions. During this time, talks that were in may be pulled out, and others take their place. This is also when we start begging our CFO to loosen the purse strings a bit, and we often add a few extra speakers, especially those who might only cover one topic just because it is extremely important or the session will be amazing.

### Finalization

After all that—which usually happens in the span of only one week—we have what we consider a final schedule. We make one final pass to catch typos, to make sure speakers aren't giving two talks in the same slot or on the same day, and to polish the schedule to get it ready.

Finally, we announce it and cross our fingers, hoping that people really enjoy what we put together. I get the amazing job of telling speakers they were accepted and the heart-breaking job of telling the rest that they weren't. That heart-breaking job is even worse when I talk to people I knew were right on the cusp or even in the

running at one point before being removed during the balancing process.

In all honesty, that still doesn't end the process. We have to deal with keynotes. Inevitably, a speaker drops out, which restarts the entire process as we refer back to all our notes to determine how best to fill that gap in the schedule.

### In Conclusion

There you have it: insight into what goes into making a conference schedule. Don't let this discourage you from speaking or submitting talks. In fact I hope it does the opposite. In most cases, the reason that a talk wasn't accepted has less to do with you not being an amazing speaker, or concocting the perfect magical incantation of an abstract that means that you are accepted. Selection is based on so many factors as to be mind-boggling. Personally, I've had years where I was accepted at 15 conferences, followed by a year where I was accepted at zero. It's just part of how everything fluctuates.

I wanted everyone to have an honest look at how and why we select our speakers and presentations. The reality is that we can only accept a small portion of the submitted talks. And by far, the majority of them are awesome talks that we wish we could accept all of them.

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*Eli White is the Managing Editor & Conference Chair for php[architect] and a Founding Partner of musketeers.me, LLC (php[architect]'s parent company). He has now been the conference chair for two different companies, and a total of 9 conferences past or upcoming. Hopefully for many more as well.*

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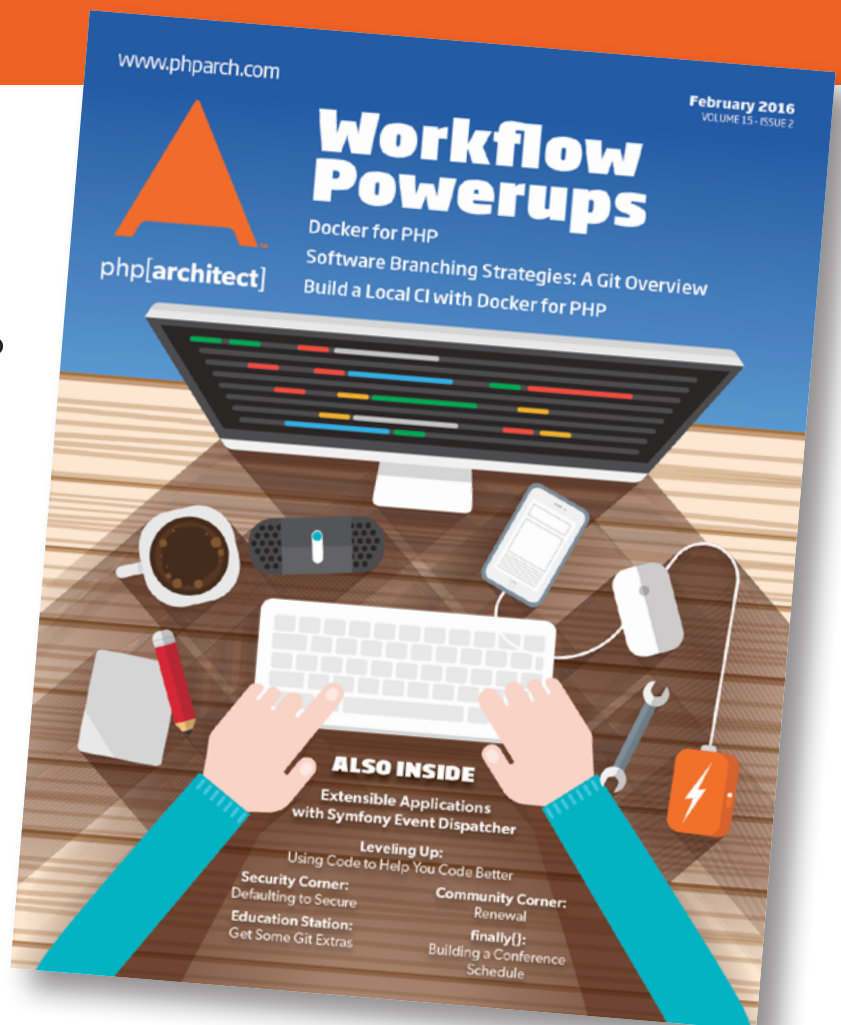


"This porridge is just right." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldilocks\\_and\\_the\\_Three\\_Bears#/media/File:The\\_Three\\_Bears\\_-\\_Project\\_Gutenberg\\_eText\\_17034.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldilocks_and_the_Three_Bears#/media/File:The_Three_Bears_-_Project_Gutenberg_eText_17034.jpg)

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