[Data-Science-Professional-Development-Boston] Ideas + Meeting Summary

Aaron M <ajmerlob@gmail.com>   Thu, Jan 15, 2015 at 1:20 AM
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DS ProD Boston,

As you may have guessed - this Meetup group is about Professional Development (ProD) for people in the Data Science (DS) field. I'm going to attempt to take a multifaceted approach that is orthogonal to the existing Data-related Boston Meetup scene. The kickoff meeting was very encouraging, and I collected some great feedback.

The current Boston state-of-the-art Data Meetup is the 6:00p pizza, 7:00p technical talk, 8:00p network Meetup. I'm not disparaging them! During high season I attend 2-3 a week. As they come up, I will recommend specific ones that seem to have a career development focus. (As Pablo Picasso once said, "good Meetup organizers copy, great Meetup organizers steal"). I'll try to put together some Meetups like this - that said, at the moment I'm more interested in focusing on innovative delivery methods:

Meetups impose structure on interactions - I'd like to try to innovate on that structure a little. In today's kickoff meeting, I proposed:
- A focus on small groups
  - 200+ person meetups are great for 'networking' and presenting content - this group focuses on professional development.
  - Professional development depends on forming deeper relationships, learning from peers, and seeing things from different perspectives.
- Getting the right* combination of people in these groups
  - Everyone has 1) something different to offer, and 2) unique professional development goals
  - People are in different stages of their career (considering DS, seeking a job, entry, mid, late, etc)
- Considering alternatives to lecture-style Meetups
  - More intimate peer-to-peer discussions about DS, career roles, tools, methods, etc
  - Do something with other Data Scientists (i.e. about 15% of this group is also in a hiking Meetup)
  - The non-dating version of Data Scientist Speed-Dating
  - The Meetup equivalent of [Nerd Sniping](#)**

* How would we create the "right" small groups? If this was ANY other Meetup group, I might suggest random assignment. Since this

is the Data Science group, I'll suggest profile-based matching*** based on survey data.

** The idea of having 5-10 person Meetups centered around a small, hands-on project really resonated with Kickoff Meetup participants. A few concepts emerged as winners:
1. Throw the same problem out to different small groups (potentially meeting separately) - like a short, distributed hackathon
2. Select a DS topic, call for volunteer group leaders, each leader does a short talk, demo, project, walkthru, or something - after all are complete, groups that produced something share their results back to the community - like a weird, non-deterministic Meetup map-reduce
3. Small groups poll members for a few things that members recently did that epitomized Data Science; 1-2 people per Meetup talk about their approach, give a demonstration, or lead a hands-on session - like a longer, less formal lightning talk.

I also pitched the Kickoff Meetup participants on a re-imagined Boston Data-related Meetup concept. Each month:
1. I'll ask if you can commit to being in the same room as X specific people (but you won't know who yet), on at least two different occasions, for at least 45 minutes.
2. If you agree, I'll use sophisticated DS*** to select the coolest X people for you (and them)
3. The newly assigned group will start an email chain, and try to schedule a few times to meet. Could be 2 times with the entire small group, or maybe 3-5 times with only a part of the group each time. (The idea is for each member to be with each other member twice).
4. The group will hash out what they want to do - i.e. meet once at a restaurant/bar/Esplanade/library/workplace/house to chat/demo/project/etc, meet once to go on a hike, etc
5. At the end of the month, you check in with the community about your last month (and can elect to sign up for the next month). Next month you'll meet different people.

Depending on the number X, after one year, you might have actually gotten to know about 50-100 Data Scientists fairly well. That sounds compelling to me!

*** Above I suggested using sophisticated DS to match people based on survey data. This is actually my first ~~attempt at Nerd Sniping~~ call for volunteer small-group leaders. Reach out to me if you'd like to 1) lead a discussion on how you might approach that problem or 2) lead a small, hands-on workshop on implementing (a rudimentary version of) that algorithm. I'll connect you with people interested in participating.

Of course, the matching process will need some data to work with. I have made a set of provisional survey questions / data format, but this community should continue to evolve the dimensions that we measure to create optimal matches. Here's my second ~~attempt at Nerd Sniping~~ call for volunteer small-group leaders. Reach out to me if you'd like to 1) lead a discussion on data collection methods / controlled vocabularies / analyzing survey data or 2) lead a small, hands-on workshop on building a data collection tool. [I'm immediately thinking either the Java Play 2 web framework or the R Shiny package because those are my jam].

Provisional Questions:
Where are you in your career? [1:Student, 2:Entry, 3:Early, 4:Mid, 5:Late]
Job seeker?
Recruiter?
What programming languages do you use and what is your level of expertise? [Controlled Vocabulary Required]
What software packages or tools do you use and what is your level of expertise? [Controlled Vocabulary Required]
What application areas / industries interest you and what is your level of subject matter expertise? [Controlled Vocabulary Required]
What data applications interest you and what is your level of expertise? [Controlled Vocabulary Required]
Geographic/City Preference? [City names where you would travel. (Most people are in Boston or Cambridge)]
Preferred mix between getting and giving mentoring? [1:Mostly Get, 2:... 3:Even Mix, 4:... 5:Mostly Give]
For the next month, would you like to meet a diverse group of people or mostly people similar to you? [Diverse, Similar]

I actually had a great time today in a small group environment at the kickoff meeting. Even if this format doesn't seem ideal to you, leave your comfort zone and give it a try! Data Scientists are curious and continuously experimenting / testing hypotheses!

What do you like? What do you hate? Please send me feedback on any of the above!

Can't wait to see what happens!

Cheers,
Aaron

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