

This is a direct result of Dark Tangent asking the Defcon forums for suggestions on making DC20 not suck. As what many consider a long time attendee, frequent speaker, and often, loudest guy in the room, I take this as a challenge. I also have been publicly critical of some of the changes over the years and if you complain about something and don't have a suggestion on how to make it better, well, you just suck. I don't want to suck, so here I am offering suggestions.

As a critic of these things, I promised DT an essay on how I think Defcon 20 can revolutionize itself for another 20 years of craziness and insanity in the Nevada desert. This is that essay.

This essay reflects my own opinions from my own experiences. There may be things I don't know all the facts on. I am not intimately involved in the con planning and as a result, not aware of all the details or logistics that may be behind things I critique. **I intend no disrespect or insult to those involved in anything I may critique.** If I am ignorant of something, feel free to correct me and I will publicly adjust anything that needs adjusting. I love Defcon. I have loved every year I have attended and I want to see it improve for the future. These are my opinions, but Defcon is still DT's baby (well, legal adult now) and it's his decision and those of the other organizers and coordinators to expand upon or implement if they choose. I'm more than willing to assist or discuss where I can.

At times I will be talking to DT directly in this essay, other times, to attendees in general. I intend for this to be a public document to spur some debate among the community and really get some energy going for DC20.

1 – Background

My first Defcon was Defcon 7 in 1999, just at the front of the dot com wave. I had been interested in security for years, since high school in the mid 1990's and finding vulnerabilities in my school network and the emerging broadband networks that were starting then. I took up the job in my high school to maintain and lock down these systems. Every time I did, someone would come up with something new. I loved security for the challenge, the cat and mouse game. It was always changing and never the same day twice.

Defcon came on my radar in '97 or '98 after I started getting into the community locally. Some news article or what not, I don't remember, but I found some video of DC6 and was hooked. Fast forward and the next summer I made the pilgrimage down the west coast and across to Las Vegas for DC7. I was hooked. That first year was like none other. I didn't realize it, but I had finally found my family. Since then, I've quit jobs to go to con, I've scrimped in lean times and splurged on flush times, but always I make the pilgrimage. I go, not because of some career need or job requirement, but because I wanted to be there to have a couple days of feeling normal and being around normal people. Early on I tried to separate my day to day life from Defcon and the underground. Early on I would not have thought about putting Defcon anywhere near my resume or let my employers know I went. Now it's a badge of honour that I attend, not as resume fodder or status, but one of pride because I've been a part of something wonderful that has come to define who I am.

Yes this all sounds kind of silly and emotional, but that is how I feel and I am far from the only one who does. So many of my friends feel similarly about con and have similar stories about doing what it takes to go to con. I hope they speak up as well.

2 – Cultural Shift

At my first con, it was certainly still a hacker con, or at least the waning days. It was like minded individuals there because they wanted to be. Shortly after, around DC8 or DC9, things changed. Suddenly companies were paying for the trip, and it became a marketing point that a companies employees went to Defcon. At that point, the con took a turn to appeal to a more corporate angle and things that were useable back at work on Monday, rather than larger, more informational talks about how things worked, it was about the quickly useable.

I think it was DC 9 when DT posted an open letter to the community about the future of the con. The con was starting up the slippery slope of the exponential growth curve (Read it at <http://defcon.stotan.org/open-letter-dc9.txt>) and the problems he mentions are not new. This letter was half a lifetime ago in Defcon years and we are still trying to sort it out.

One of the points mentioned was the injection of money into the con via businesses paying for trips. This suddenly brought a crowd that had different ideals and widened the 'us' and 'them' ratio that makes me realize we lost something. I deal more with this later on in my suggestions, however I note it here as well.

We can never go back to 'the way it was', its just not going to happen. Some of the smaller cons are filling that need nicely I feel, but Defcon cannot go back. What we can do is figure out where to go from here and steer the ship, so to speak.

In no particular order, my suggestions for DC20:

3 - Suggestions

CFP:

No major problems with the CFP process, Nikita rocks. A bit of confusion on-site as to where to go for reg and where to go to pick up human badge payments but I chalk that up to new venue adjustment.

On the note of speakers payment. It's \$200 cheque or 2 X Human badges which usually get sold for the retail of \$300 cash. Kind of an odd disparity. Why not call it \$300 either way and save hassle for the speakers in unloading them should they choose not to gift them.

Talks:

We also need some new blood on stage. I've been speaking for 6 years and others for even longer. While familiar faces are not a problem per-se, how many people are semi-automatically green lit to the exclusion of those who may have something great to contribute but are not the most eloquent in their CFP submission. I would like to see a track specifically devoted to first time speakers, in particular ones without security day jobs. In this way, Defcon is not some high point to aspire to, but a friendly place that gives other hackers a place to start and share. Maybe not one of the big rooms, but something to give people a start. The guy working the milkshake machine's ideas can be just as good as anyone elses.

I'd like to see more position paper type talks where someone doesn't have a neatly wrapped up little exploit, but work in progress, or a really good idea that gets 15-20 minutes to 'pitch' it to connect with people who can contribute. The barrier to entry for a lot of people is that they don't have all the pieces but no voice to find others to complete the puzzle, why not tap the 12,000+ brains in attendance?

I'd also like to see some more non-security talks. The maker movement has exploded and that sort of lateral thinking and creativity is what hackers are all about and should be included, particularly from the standpoint of home brew electronics and how they can be used in new and interesting ways. The DIY drone stuff is a good example. At the very least, remove the perception that there needs to be a security angle to be considered.

Looking back at the past cons (DC7 for example), you see a lot more boot strap type talks, where a system, concept or idea was explained. Firewall basics, forensics, credit card systems, privacy, etc. Back in DC7 there was hardly a single talk that dropped a zero day (BO2K excepted), it was all talks "Here's what you need to know to get started, now go, hack away and learn more for yourself". The talks today are all about the 'money shot'. 19 slides and 45 minutes of build-up to the 20th slide and the last 5 minutes which is the exploit/hack/final product. These talks (of which I am guilty of as well) seem to be the new norm. A story followed by a single 'hey cool' moment, but not a lot that you can take away other than to apply the patch or disable some setting when you get to work on Monday. They're not much other than a pseudo product announcement for a company. Not the best value in my mind. I like talks that inspire and inform, rather than justify a research budget. CCC camp made a point of directing energy to hackers going into space. Why not talks about what you need to do to start your own space program? Why not intro to bio hacking? Just thinking out loud here. I'm starting to look into some fun wireless protocols that are over my head, but if I could do a talk to pass along what I know in order for others to run with, I like the idea.

While not every talk recently is entirely security related, money shot style talks, I think there is room for more, different talks. There are now hundreds of events that people can drop product announcements at. If that's what these other cons want to do, that's fine, lets do something different and reinvent the con.

Villages:

To that end, while the villages are wonderful to have, perhaps there should be some expansion. Several rooms for 'bird of a feather' type gatherings, villages that only run for one day so there's less commitment required to run it (commitment is a major turn off for some people to run something). Get people with similar interests and expertise into the same room to compare notes and hopefully collaborate and watch amazing crap happen. A few years ago in the wireless village we had a 'birds of a feather' about wireless security that was very enlightening and led to some interesting ideas. I can see perhaps one morning or afternoon being devoted to a topic, rather than whole weekends.

Schedule:

There are too many talks. I'd rather have a limited schedule from 10am - 5pm and then be free to party and roam. The social aspect is key to sharing information and collaboration that makes a community. Perhaps a more limited schedule of talks that end earlier in the day, but the villages remain open for another couple hours before parties are started. i.e. Speakers from 10-5, then you can retire to villages or eat from 5-7 or 8 pm, then the parties can start till whenever. The problem this solves is the ability for people to see talks and then go and learn and apply the skills in the villages that may be related to what they learned in the day.

This would also be handy if you had tracks setup on themes (hardware, software, menswear, whatever) that could break out into the above mentioned 'Birds of a feather' type of discussion where that days

theme talks could all meet and compare notes.

Defcon Kids

I was one of the people very concerned with Defcon kids. It was not as bad as thought, and there were some positives but some problems were noted by myself and others.

As discussed on the forums, DC kids should be a supplement to Defcon, not an event of its own. Like any other village, it's a place to learn but in this case, for the young ones. A village with a 'must be this short to attend' policy. A lot of the press and discussion confused the purpose. It was made out to be an event where non-hacker parents could bring their kids like some sort of tourist attraction or weird summer camp.

Indeed a lot of people seemed to believe it was not a village, but something separate. Ellen even noted that some of the parents taking kids in had no DC badges and didn't know that they were supposed to register themselves. This indicates to me that the parents had no interest in Defcon and their view of DC kids was different than intended.

It should be made very clear next year that it's a village like any other at Defcon (but with a 'must be shorter than this line requirement') and the parents must also have badges to enter. Whoever is manning the door at DC kids should be inspecting the parents too (if they weren't already)

I have no problem seeing DC kids at con in the future, however it should be made acutely clear that it's for DC attendees who choose to bring their kids to con as a place for them to learn the same things as the rest of us, but without having to deal with the possibility of becoming an orange goo in the waffle of some drunk hackers boot by being underfoot in the wrong place. It also keeps the kids from competing for resources at the other villages like the soldering stations at the HHV or practice kits at the lock pick village. I'd hate to see someone get stabbed with a soldering iron, adult or kid.

It should also be clear that the rest of con, should they choose to attend, is full of adult content. I never want to see the DC kids or any other event at DC require attendees to censor themselves. The freedom of Defcon should never be impinged because someone choose to bring their kid.

Culture:

When did Defcon go from a hacker convention to a security convention? When Defcon started, it was a party for like minded individuals to get together and meet, and compare notes. From everything I've read, there were some talks, some other planned events, but no major structure to speak of. Interviews about those early days always note that at the time, there was no security industry. The people who attended did so because they loved what they did and were interested in a personal rather than career level. After the dot-com bubble that all changed obviously once money was brought into the picture.

Early in Defcon's history, there was not much out there that was like it, there was hardly a forum for the security community to share ideas and compare notes. Now there are hundreds of security events around the world. These often end up being nothing but announcement venues for the latest exploit, bug, tool, etc. Sadly Defcon has become part of this circuit where companies submit papers and talks just so they can advertise there. Look at the DC7 speaker list and there are is only a tiny number of speakers using real names, the rest are all nicknames and hardly any company affiliations mentioned.

These people were not doing it for recognition for work or to advance in their job, it was for the love of it and personal recognition and respect from ones peers. Now you see press releases with companies touting how many of their employees are speaking at Defcon. Also look at how many presentations nowadays have a corporate logo in the corner of every slide. While I can acknowledge that there is some good research coming from corporate sponsorship and for a long time, Defcon was one of the few venues for that research. I feel that now it is inappropriate for them to fill up Defcon now that there is now a huge number of events that may be a better venue for their efforts and style.

Defcon has always been what you make it. A lot of these companies don't seem to be contributing in the same sweat and blood equity that others have. If they step up and run a village, offer hallway classes, and just make themselves available to teach others and provide a positive contribution as opposed to using the Defcon name for advertising purposes and attention whoring, then I and others would welcome them to stay.

(Huge caveat that I can't attest for everything or everyone who works for a big company and attends Defcon does not put their back into it and do some really cool and worthwhile contributions to con. I have no intention of slighting anyone in that regard. I am just merely pointing out what I have seen and what others have seen. They get the benefit of speaking, but the con does not get anything in return)

As a suggestion for DC20, I say we need to re imagine what Defcon is. Is it a hacker conference or a security trade show? I say we take it back to its roots, a party for an extended family to compare notes and come up with new and crazy ideas. Make it a place the hackers we want to be there will come, but not for those who don't contribute. There are other conferences out there now that they can attend and do their thing, lets make it a place for our community (not excepting that some people have a foot in both worlds). I'd rather have the starving college student that built something cool in his dorm room and hitched out to Vegas and crashing on a couch than a guy with an expense account who leaves after the talks to his off site hotel room to entertain clients.

To this end, separating Defcon from Blackhat is a key factor to reclaiming the roots of the con. The fact that Blackhat attendees got a free pass to Defcon (and now just a discount) means to me that there is a certain percentage of people who stick around just because they have a free pass and work is paying. Get rid of the free pass/discount/whatever and you eliminate some of the 'gawker's' who come just to look at the funny haired freaks. At the current rate of \$150, if someone cant bother to fork over that small amount, do we really want them?

This will be an incredibly controversial topic, full of debate. I'm the first to say we shouldn't exclude the college student after he graduates and gets a job with an expense account, but it still comes down to why he is going. Is it because he loves it, or simply because work is paying for a free trip to Vegas.

There is no measure of this. No simple shedding of blood test. It's a hard issue but one that I think is critical to address. Though a gladiator style battle does sound like a fun event.

Advertising:

To the end about culture at Defcon, something needs to be done about advertising. I talked with a number of event organizers and have been one myself. Many couldn't put on some of the events without some sponsorship to offset costs. While I have no issue with some small acknowledgement of sponsors and help, there is a difference between acknowledgement and outright advertising.

(Note that this is about sponsorship for operating costs, not for prizes which I am cool with acknowledging)

Note the difference in the pics below. The first image is the banner under one of the projector screens for capture the packet. Many of the sponsors are hacker companies and in the vendor area. It was out of the way, and acknowledged them as sponsors.



Compare that with what was in the room next door in Amateur CTF



A 6 foot trade show banner. Yes it was the company running aCTF, but there was also a large banner on the table and another sign on the back wall. It was a lot more in your face and troubled me. It was now a blatant advertisement as opposed to simple acknowledgement.

I look at past years where lock picking events were put on by DC groups out of their own pocket for the fun of it. The amateur CTF was another case of a DC group stepping up to do something because it was cool and filled a void. Even the tamper evident contest is another example, it was put on by DT, out of pocket, because he wanted to see what the DC community would do and we did not disappoint.

There are realities that these things cost money, but there is a point where Defcon should step in and set some rules on such advertising. If the event cant run with those restrictions in place, then it should be replaced with something new, and changing things up can be a good thing.

Contests:

I like contests, it's well known that I have participated in many over the years (with a nasty habit of losing, but still) . The Beard and Moustache contest was a welcome addition, red beard did a great job of having a contest that I never realized the community would be so competitive over. I'm curious to see what people will do next year to up their game

I always viewed Defcon contests as the Hacker Olympics. I would like to see and encourage more contests that pit skills against each other to crown a king or queen. At the very least, providing an environment to 'do the things law enforcement tells you not to' is very nice to have as it gives you a safe place to apply your skills. Any contest that does this gets my full endorsement.

Positive effects:

The hacker community can change the world. Seeing Johnny Longs work with IHC has been amazing. This past years response to Barkode's illness and the 'be the match' and the blood drive was truly inspiring. 96 people signed up for the blood drive in the first hour, making the lady from the red cross nearly cry at the response. These actions should be encouraged beyond con and in the rest of life. What other problems can we solve or help with over a weekend?

We need to think beyond the EFF and IHC (continuing to support of course) and charities in general and thinking about what 12,000+ freaky geniuses can put our minds to. i.e. The CCC camp announcement about a hackers-in-space effort. In the case of something like the tamper evident contest, make part of the challenge to bring a simple and cheap tamper device of your own making to be judged on the simple and cheap portions and then tested by the other teams. The contest proved the problem, now the challenge should be the solution.

A recent idea was to get the Mohawk-con crew (where suitable quality and length) to collect hair that is cut off for a wigs-for-cancer-patient type charity. It's waste anyways and can do some good. Also encourages those who ordinarily get Mohawks and gives them more of a charity excuse.

4 – Conclusion

I've been going to Defcon for 12 years. I come home and tell friends what happened and they always believe me because, as one friend told me “You can't make shit like that up”.

I want to see Defcon keep going for another 20 years. Looking at the con and how it gets pulled off each year with 95% volunteer labour is amazing. If it wasn't worth it, people wouldn't do the amount of work they do and there would not be a con. The volunteers and the attendees are some of the most amazing people I have ever had the privilege of meeting. I hope that future generations have the chance to experience the amazing community we have here and now. This essay was written with keeping that spirit alive for them to experience and contribute too.

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(Written over many a beer powered evening – 8/10/11 to 9/17/11)

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