

# Mix & Mingle

A New Breed of Get-Togethers Fosters  
a New Way of Thinking

BY GREG ROCHE



"HR is kinda stuffy," Heather said as she stood next to the bar waiting for the DisruptHR event to begin. "Most HR events focus on the old way of doing things, so anything that mentions disruption is something I'm interested in."

Heather is one of the more than 300 HR practitioners who attended a DisruptHR gathering held in the industrial-turned-trendy RiNo neighborhood north of downtown Denver. Attendees networked with other HR professionals while they enjoyed cocktails and food-truck fare before the speakers started.

The presentation format for DisruptHR is simple:

- 14 speakers
- Five minutes each
- Any HR topic
- No limits.

And there is one caveat: The speakers must push the audience to think differently about HR.

DisruptHR and similar events around the United States are part of a grassroots movement bringing new ideas to the HR masses. They also are challenging the traditional HR conference content and format.

# Meet & Mingle



## Out with the Old

Consider most large, well-known HR conferences:

- Are typically multiday events.
- Located in a convention center in a large city intended to accommodate thousands of attendees.
- Speakers are recognized experts in their fields.
- Attendees sign up for a targeted “track” of sessions that caters to their individual HR interests.
- Attendees meet other HR leaders from around the world, with whom they may never speak again.
- There are keynotes, breakout sessions and panel discussions.
- There is a massive volume of information for attendees to absorb.
- They’re expensive.

Both the WorldatWork and Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) annual conferences will run attendees between \$1,000 and \$2,000 in 2018, depending on how early one registers and membership status. Travel expenses add to the grand total of both events. To assist prospective attendees, both associations’ websites feature “Convince Your Boss”-type pages to help craft the business case.

## In with the New

Now look at grassroots gatherings like DisruptHR. What’s the appeal of this new breed of get-together?

“I think people enjoy the format,” said Jennifer McClure, co-founder of DisruptHR. “The events are designed to facilitate connection, fun and learning — all within a couple of hours. They’re typically cheap or even free to attend, so the time and money commitment is minimal. But the opportunity to learn something new and build some new, interesting relationships is huge.”

DisruptHR started in Cincinnati in 2013 when McClure and fellow HR leader Chris Ostoich were having lunch and talking about ways to encourage new HR ideas.

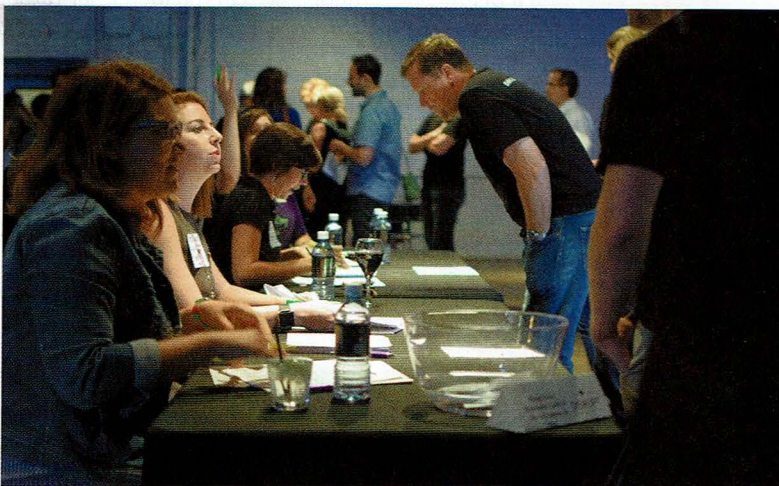
“I felt like there was room for a ‘different’ type of conference or event for HR and recruiting folks to attend,” McClure said. “One where new and innovative ideas were encouraged and shared.”

The wheels of possibility started turning in Ostoich’s head, McClure said, and he came up with the idea for DisruptHR from that conversation.

“At the time, he was the community organizer for Ignite events in Cincinnati, and he thought that we could do something cool by using the Ignite presentation format: Five minutes and 20 slides that advance automatically every 15 seconds,” she said, adding that members from the broader business community (not just HR professionals) are encouraged to attend to share their ideas about the workplace, talent and the future of work.

From there, the duo launched DisruptHR Cincinnati. After posting and sharing videos of the presentations and through social media, inquiries started coming in from people in other cities about starting local chapters. Since 2013, DisruptHR has grown to more than 100 cities in 24 countries. Many cities hold more than one event each year. But that’s not the only “anti-HR” conference out there.

The appeal of local, low-cost, frequent HR events has given rise to organizations like HR UndergroundX (HRUx), founded by Nick Larche in January 2016. Denver-based companies host four to six HRUx events each year, all of which feature local speakers





sharing their HR ideas and practices. The gatherings are free and feature food, beer and opportunities to network with other HR practitioners in town.

Larche explained that the idea came to him while sitting in a Mile-High SHRM chapter conference. "Sitting at the conference with only a few familiar

That, he said, is why he decided to go with the theme of "The Underground."

"The Underground refers to a movement that avoids the trappings of mainstream thought," he said. "We have witnessed this in music, art and political dissidence. We simply added the HR industry to the list.

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faces, I realized that there was a lack of community in the HR space here in Denver. I founded HRUx to change that."

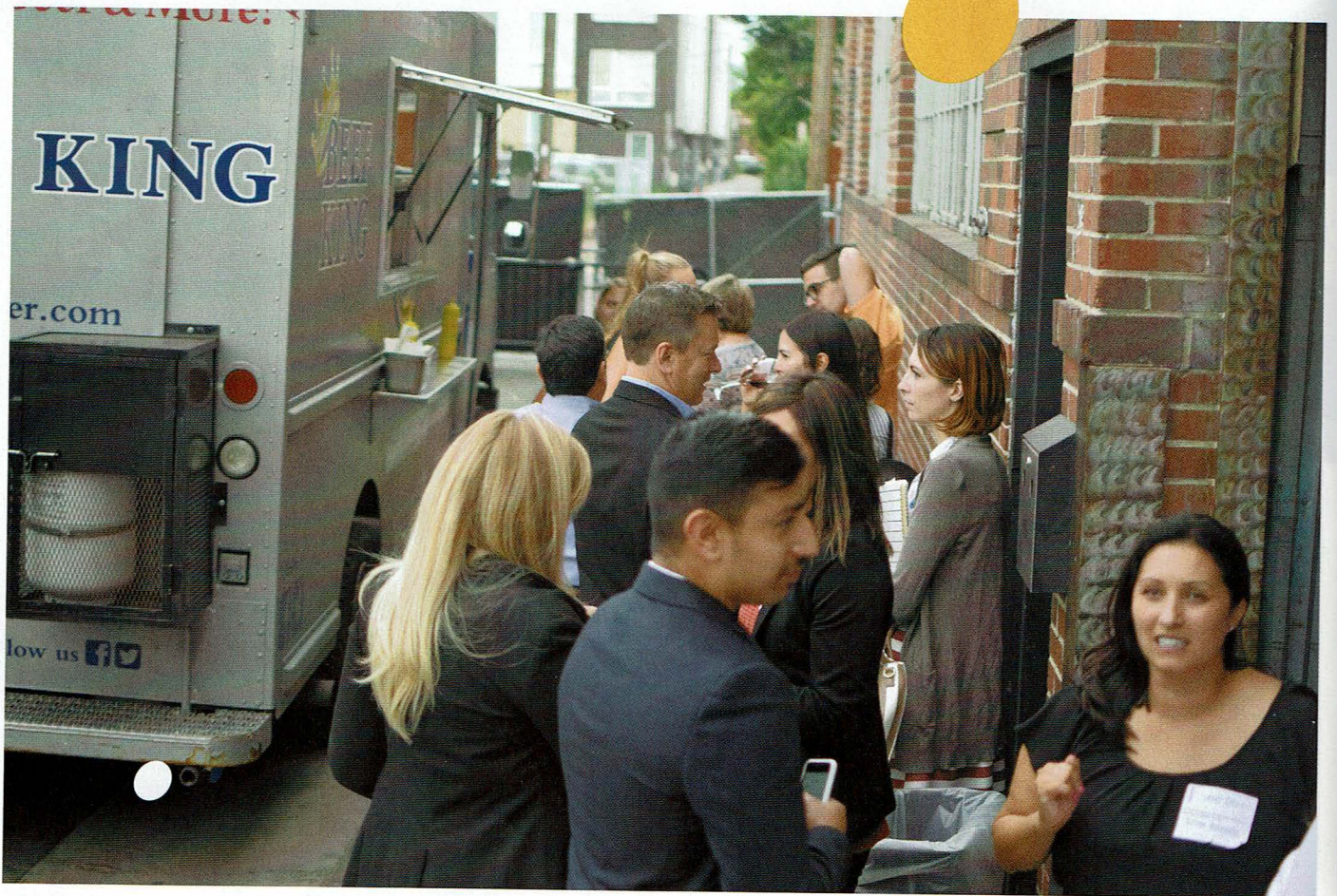
Larche's goal is simple: Build a sense of community. The goal is achieved, he said, through the event's format.

"It happens when you make it engaging and conversational, fresh and edgy, and you do it multiple times a year," he said. "We don't charge our members annual dues. There are no fees to get into any of our events. It's meant to be as far from 'establishment HR' as possible, while still being able to reach the audience that might otherwise attend those types of events."

We are graffiti artists tagging our organizations with new ideas and new ways of thinking. We are incendiaries that are burning outdated and unnecessary practices. We are rioters that are overturning the way HR has always been done."

Along with challenging the HR status quo, other grassroots HR events have been designed to address one common, large-conference attendee problem: What to do with what you learn *after* the event ends.

"I've spoken at conferences around the nation and been an attendee at even more, and they all send me walking away feeling, 'That was awesome. I can't wait to get started and do that,' and then



reality sets in and I procrastinate and just never actually do it, despite my best intentions,” said Ryan Batchelor, founder of HRFuel. “We wanted to create something different. Something that people could walk away from having already started something awesome. Something that helps move traditional HR into the future and get all of the emphasis back on the people.”

The format for HRFuel focuses on delivering innovative ideas to attendees and providing the first steps for them to implement the ideas they’ve heard.

“It’s a one-day event that focuses on four different facets of people operations,” he said. “There are four speakers that lead interactive discussions with the audience, and when an attendee walks away, those presenters have helped coach him or her through an action plan and have even supported him or her in completing the first step of that action plan. This allows the audience to get a great understanding of the various facets of human relations or human resources, but also take it back to the company and know how to present the value proposition to implement the plan.”

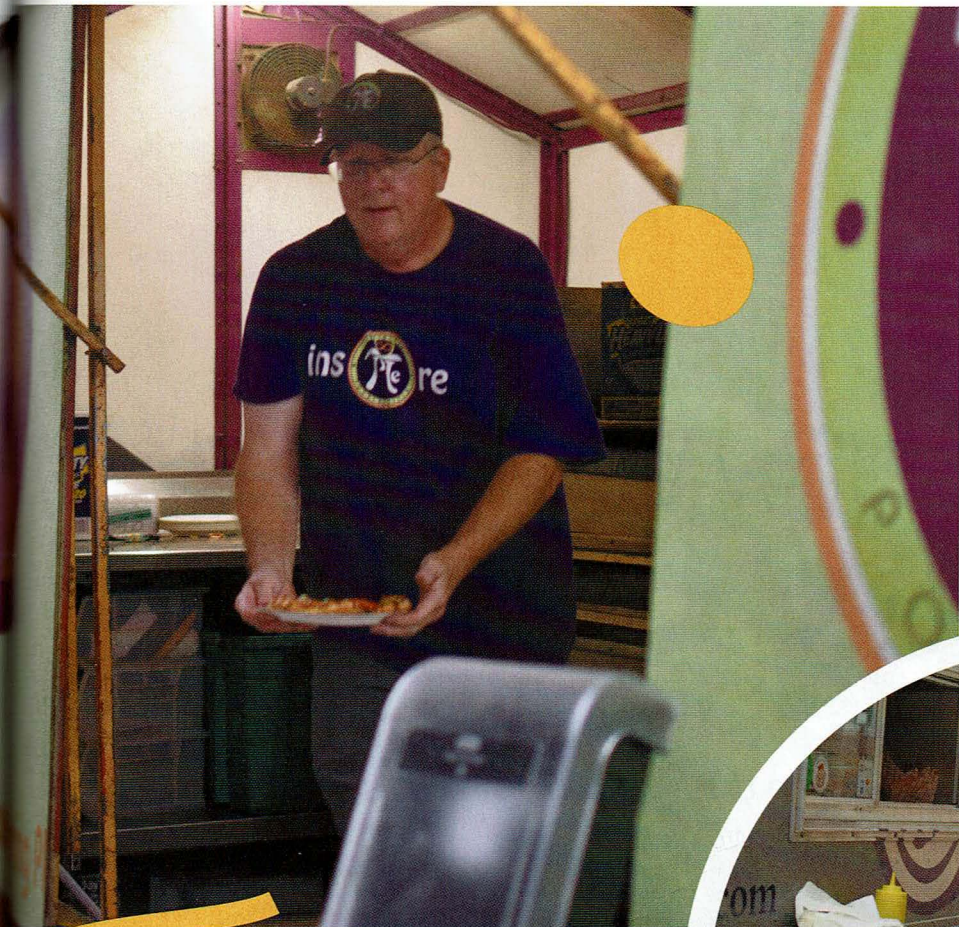
In its initial stages with its first event scheduled for early this year in North Carolina, Batchelor expects to expand the HRFuel format to multiple events in other cities.

#### Disruption Expanded

Local, low-cost and accessible all are terms that apply to these events. And as more come about, one test of their power on the HR industry will be the effect they have on the larger HR organizations that control the conferences and certifications. Already, some of these established HR entities have taken note of these smaller, alternative organizations — and don’t quite agree with the theme of “disruption” that these grassroots movements are creating.

Alex Alonso, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP, is senior vice president of knowledge development at SHRM, and he addressed these smaller events in a July 18, 2017, blog, “Why ‘Disruption’ Makes Me Erupt.” He

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specifically mentioned DisruptHR, calling it one of the “new-age meeting groups” that “are rarely helpful and they seldom deliver.” Alonso also drew a colorful distinction between old and new HR events by pointing out that, “I take issue with the ‘disrupt’ movement because it makes me feel like a crotchety old man yelling at the kids these days to get off my lawn.”

It’s important to remember, though, that these grassroots HR events don’t require attendees to choose between the old or the new.

“We have many of the same people at DisruptHR and SHRM events,” McClure said. “And DisruptHR is not meant to be a competitor or alternative to SHRM. We see DisruptHR as something to attend in addition to SHRM events.”

Whether grassroots HR events and organizations will continue growing remains to be seen. However, the characteristics that have led to the explosive growth of these events — frequent, local, low-cost, a multitude of ideas and speakers — may be the approach established HR organizations can leverage to connect with the next generation of professionals. **ws**

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