

ETHNOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT OF QUANTIFIED SELF MEETUP GROUPS

A Project Report

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The Undersigned Graduate Committee Approves the Project Report Titled

ETHNOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT OF QUANTIFIED SELF MEETUP GROUPS

by

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Abstract

This project report documents an ethnographic assessment completed in collaboration with Quantified Self. Quantified Self started in the San Francisco Bay Area, but has become a worldwide community of people that practice “self-tracking” as a way to build new habits or undergo beneficial change through generating self-knowledge. Self-tracking projects are wide ranging, and Quantified Self has become the main venue for self-trackers to share their personal projects in meetings that follow a show & tell format. From the original group started in the Bay Area in 2008, there are now more than 50 Quantified Self (QS) groups worldwide. QS Labs (the central organizing group in the Bay Area) offers support and guidance to people that want to start a new meetup. To enable leadership at QS Labs to provide better support to emerging groups, an ethnographic assessment was designed and conducted. The assessment sampled the experiences from a variety of QS meetup groups, in order to understand the barriers and obstacles for organizers, and to identify the points of innovation occurring in different groups. Findings from the assessment were presented in a report to QS Labs in March 2012. This project report also provides significant background information on Quantified Self, self-tracking, and meetups. The client report combines aspects of basic and applied research, as an applied ethnographic description. Data collection for the client report followed a praxis approach to applied anthropology as an orientation for research, from Warr (1992) and Singer (1994).

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INTRODUCTION

History of the report

The client report I produced was the result of a collaborative research design, which attended to the interests and concerns of both leaders and individual community members. The idea for the research came out of a conversation I had with Gary Wolf, co-founder of Quantified Self (QS), in September 2011. I first found out about QS more than a year before this meeting in an article in the San Jose Mercury News. The article described Quantified Self as a “geek elite movement...where individuals measure the minutia of moods, weight, pain, muscle mass, even their inner most thoughts, in an effort to know themselves better and improve their lives” (Krieger 2010). It seemed that QS was a potential research population where several aspects from my training in anthropology converged: critical studies of science from Latour (1987); medical anthropology influenced by Kleinman (1980, 1988), Good (1994), and Rose (2007); and technology studies from Dumit (2000), Turkle (2008), and Schull (2008).

During the time between reading the article on QS and the meeting I had with Gary Wolf, I had explored other research topics before being set on an applied project. I initially spent my first two semesters conducting background research for a different project, collaborating with some faculty members. However because the faculty project stalled, I decided to revive the idea of research on QS. I proceeded with uncertainty,

unsure if I could collaborate with QS Labs on an applied project on some aspect of the QS community, or if I would follow thesis track research.

Fortunately my adviser, Dr English-Lueck, had a contact with the current director of Quantified Self, Alexandra Carmichael. Through this contact, I was able to begin building rapport with some members of the leadership team at QS Labs, and to meet other people in the QS community. Everyone at QS was interested in the prospects of my research, and they began to think of ideas for applied research projects. During this development phase, I completed the IRB requirements for research approval. The IRB process was an opportunity to define the area of research and develop interview materials, shifting my general interests into a directed research trajectory.

It took several more months before that meeting with Gary Wolf occurred, the meeting that ultimately determined the topic for research. In the meantime, I conducted an initial round of interviews with members of the QS community, which helped form a solid foundation of background research. The experience from this research phase highly influenced the eventual meeting with Wolf. The project we decided on could only have been designed after arriving at some common ground through the initial round of background research.

Out of the meeting I had with Wolf in September 2011, we were able to come up with an applied research project. I asked Wolf if there was any aspect of the QS community that he and other members of the leadership team would like to know more about, which could be illuminated through ethnographic research. Quantified Self is a

movement that started in the San Francisco Bay Area but has since branched out, with many different people starting other QS groups in different cities across the United States and around the world. QS Labs (the central organizing group in the Bay Area) want to encourage and provide support for organizers of new groups. However, members of the leadership team at QS Labs does not know all of the organizers of these different groups and what their situation is as well as they would like. The project was designed to ethnographically assess the process of creating new groups. Through sampling the range of experiences in the different QS groups, I would be able to produce a report that would inform new ways for QS Labs to provide support to organizers. The general goal was to understand the following questions: Why do different organizers start groups? What are the challenges and barriers organizers have been encountering? What are the points of innovation are occurring in the groups?

Following the meeting, I proposed the idea for this project to Dr English-Lueck. This idea seemed to fit with the tradition of ethnographic assessment, so research began. I designed a new interview instrument with input and feedback from Gary Wolf on the kind of questions that I should ask the organizers. In November 2011, I began interviewing organizers of QS groups in different cities across the US and in Canada, and completed the interviews in January 2012. During the month of February, I analyzed the interview data and wrote the findings in a report, which I presented to QS Labs in March.

In applied anthropology, the deliverables do not usually give full recognition to all the time and work spent conducting research. The finer details of research are often irrelevant to research sponsors, who are mainly interested in actionable information. In addition to outlining the processes of the client-directed research, the purpose of this project report is to illuminate on some of the finer details and implications of the collaborative project I conducted with Quantified Self Labs.

Problem statement and research approach

The research questions from QS Labs were: Who are the people starting QS groups? What are they doing? What is their situation? How can leadership at QS Labs provide assistance? The problem statement for me as an applied anthropologist was, given the desire for leadership at QS Labs to know more about its extended community, how can I sample the variation of experiences and diversity of groups, such that the research findings will be directly useful to QS Labs in their goal of providing support to organizers and groups? Furthermore, what applied approaches would best inform research design? My first goal was to learn more about the community in order to understand the variation out there through background research. The research approach that I used for this project can best be described as a community-based ethnographic assessment, following a praxis approach to applied anthropology (Singer 1994; Warray 1992).

Research on the QS community presents an interesting case for anthropology. Member practices are extremely diverse and wide ranging such that it would be nearly impossible to cover them all. In addition, the community is widespread (with groups on almost every continent). While diffused physically, cohesion is maintained through online interaction, and now, the yearly conferences. The issues emerging from this population are also numerous, from topics such as personalized medicine, agency over health care and health data, to questions of the social construction of science, and the value placed on quantification and objectivity. During my research, I was only able to scratch the surface of some interesting topics that have theoretical implications for anthropology, especially medical anthropology and science and technology studies.

Format of the report

This project report is divided into five main sections. The first section focuses on background information on Quantified Self, self-tracking, and meetups. This information will provide a clearer understanding of the setting for this project. The background information provides an initial round of insights, which reflects the entirety of my research, from both rounds of interviews, participant-observation at Quantified Self events, and from reading posts on the Quantified Self blog at quantifiedself.com.

The second section, “Methodology and Research Design,” focuses on the research conducted for this project. The project had two phases of research, and this section elaborates on the details of each phase. This section ends by providing insights

from fieldwork, focusing on the operational reality of the different phases, and elaborates on some of the obstacles encountered during the project.

The third section, “Situating the Client Report,” outlines some of the insights from the client report. This section is a reflective inquiry into the data collection and analysis process, where I situate the client report within these processes. The content and form of the client report were a result of a negotiation between research questions from the client of the research, and participant members of the research population. In this section, I illuminate how this negotiation was a central part of creating the client report.

In the fourth section, “Broader Context of Quantified Self,” I expand on ethnographic insights about the QS community, in order to situate the project report within the greater context of QS. Throughout my year of research, I necessarily became familiar with many aspects of the QS community in order to address the research questions from QS Labs. This broader context shaped the information that went into the client report, and can affect how we read the report.

In the last section, “The Client Report and Applied Research,” I situate the research for the client report within a broader context of applied research. First, I explore how the client report is an applied ethnographic description of the community of QS organizers. The client report has obvious applications for the QS community. However as a text formed around ethnographic description, the client report may be useful to a broader audience. Next, I demonstrate how the research approach was one

configuration of a praxis approach to applied anthropology. A praxis approach directly follows theory to inform research practice, and involves community members in continuing dialogue to refine research questions, discuss theoretical implications of research, and consider the applications of findings for future interventions.

SECTION 1 - Background Information

Before going into the details of the research, I begin here by outlining the setting for the fieldwork. Three terms that need to be defined that emerged from fieldwork are, Quantified Self, self-tracking, and meetups. First, Quantified Self (QS), is the organization I collaborated with for the ethnographic assessment. Quantified Self started in the San Francisco Bay Area, but in a short time has become a world-wide phenomenon. Next, self-tracking, is a set of practices that members of QS undertake. Self-tracking can take many forms, but generally is any deliberate, methodical project focused on some aspect of a person or the world they live in, in order to generate data that can potentially be used for self-improvement. Finally, meetups, are the format through which the QS community organizes and interacts. A meetup is simply a group of people that come together to socialize along a common interest. In this case, the common interest is self-tracking, under the heading of Quantified Self. Understanding the meetups is important because the QS Meetups were essentially the site of research for my project.

The origin of Quantified Self

The idea for Quantified Self came out of conversations in 2007 between Kevin Kelly, one of the founding editors of Wired magazine, and Gary Wolf, one of the first

writers for Wired and at the time Contributing Editor for the magazine. Both Wolf and Kelly had been interested in “techno-culture” and the emergence of new kinds of technological tools. They were trying to decide on a new project to collaborate on within the field of new technology. Both had been interested in the spread and use of computational devices for communication for years, but at that time, social networking was on the rise, and neither Kelly nor Wolf were interested in the social networking phenomenon. They were trying to find something new and emerging, which was forming in the world of technology, but not yet identified. Their hope was that they could find something that would continue to grow in importance and complexity, and would produce interesting questions relating to technology and the use of technology.

They were looking at new technologies, trying to see if there were some things out there that at first glance seemed disparate, but could actually be subsumed under a common frame. The technologies that popped into focus were things like the spread of GPS and location services, personal genomics, cloud computing, new and more powerful sensors and forms of data storage. One of the common trends they saw, which still continues, are new waves of very complex technologies (such as smart phones) becoming adopted and brought into very intimate places of people’s lives. New technology always advances in order to have new applications and answer new questions, but the new trend they saw emerging had technology providing information on the person, regarding both behavior and biology, in ways not possible before—such as providing constant monitoring of location via GPS, or a personal map of your DNA

sequence. The frame that Wolf and Kelly identified contained new technologies that provide a different quality of information, data, or feedback to the people that use these technologies.

The name Quantified Self came about in an effort to describe this new frame. “Quantified” is the technology piece. Quantified in this sense means “the language of machines,” and refers to both the processes of the machines and the “language” machines use to convey information to users. This information can be numbers, raw data, or representations of data, like graphs and charts. “Self” refers to the person, and whatever aspect of the self is under examination. From the beginning, the intended focus of QS was on how people are using new technologies, how they are incorporating them into their lives, and the changes that occur. Rather than being about the technology in itself (the fact that there are new devices that do new things), Wolf and Kelly were interested in what it means when people use the technology. They wanted to know more about what technology means in the context of its use. Essentially, they were interested in the personal and social meanings of technology.

After identifying this frame and settling on the name, Kelly and Wolf originally thought that they would just start a blog and write about interesting things that fit within this frame. In addition to the blog, Kelly had the idea to start a QS Meetup (a group of people interested in technology in use, that fits in the QS frame), and hold the first meeting at his office. They were not sure what would happen at that first meetup or how many people would come. They spread word about the meetup through their

networks and decided to have whoever came share a story, or idea on something that fit within their frame. They called the meeting the “Quantified Self Inaugural Show & Tell.” About 30 people attended, they pulled out whatever snacks and beverages Kelly had in his office, and started the evening by casually socializing. After a while, they decided to start the discussion. As Kelly stood at the front of the room about to start, someone walked in late. Kelly decided this person, because he arrived late, would have to present first. The late comer, turned out to be a graduate student in Human Computer Interaction, who had been tracking detailed data on how he was spending his time during the year he spent writing his dissertation. He walked up to the front of the room, opened up this notebook computer and showed a graph that represented data he collected. Wolf and Kelly were stunned. This was the perfect beginning presentation for Quantified Self. They had guessed that this kind of application of technology was going on, and by accident, they had found it. The personal story of this time tracking project was exactly the kind of thing they were hoping to find.

Kelly and Wolf do not attribute discovering the frame of QS as a result of their knowledge or prescience, but rather from a lucky guess, one of many guesses they had made in their careers as journalists (most of which Wolf says, did not lead to anything significant). However, they were able to identify that they were on to something with that first presentation and the discussion that followed at that first meetup. This first meetup went so well that they knew they had to have more. After the second meetup, held a month and a half later, Kelly and Wolf realized that what they had found was very

important. They had found people eager to share personal projects about the application of technology. They found it fascinating to hear about technology from the perspective of a personal narrative, so much different from people just talking about technology, stating opinions, or making predictions. The narratives illustrated engagement with an emergent future, through personal stories of technology in use.

After those first two meetings, there was still no indication where QS was going. It became clear that people had stories and that they had created a venue for people to publicly share. One of the attendees at that second meetup, Steve Dean, also immediately recognized that QS could be the start of something very interesting. Dean, who was visiting San Francisco on business and happened to find out about the QS Meetup, approached Wolf and Kelly and asked if he could start a QS Meetup back in New York. Dean thought that there would be some interest in New York, and Kelly and Wolf were excited at the prospect of QS growing. Thus, after only two show & tells, the second QS Meetup group was founded on the other side of the country. Since then, there are now over 50 QS groups holding show & tells in about 20 countries around the world.

Meetups and Meetup.com

Quantified Self has become a worldwide phenomenon in part because of the efficient tool available for organizing. This tool is the website Meetup.com. Meetup.com is a website that allows anyone (for a small monthly fee) to start a “meetup” in their

area. A meetup, simply put, is a group of people that come together to socialize around a common interest. The idea behind Meetup.com is to “use the internet to get off the internet – and grow local communities” (e-mail to Meetup.com members, September 11, 2011).

The idea for Meetup.com has an interesting history in itself, and came about in the months following the World Trade Center building attacks on September 11, 2001. Scott Heiferman, co-founder of Meetup.com, lived a few miles away from the site of the attacks at the time, and he noticed a change in the people around him in the months after 9/11. He found himself talking to neighbors and people around the city more than ever before. Prior to this, he did not place a high value on face-to-face interaction, because he felt the internet provided enough opportunity for interaction through information sharing and communication. The only time he thought of his neighbors was when they were causing a nuisance.

He noticed an important change in the feeling of the city, and thought this terrible event, 9/11, could be the catalyst for bringing people together. The community feeling that grew across New York and the new connections New Yorkers were making is what inspired the idea for Meetup.com. The website was launched a few months later. The stated mission of Meetup is to “revitalize local community and help people around the world self organize” (“About Meetup,” Meetup.com).

Meetup now boasts (as of March 8, 2012) 9.5 million members, organized into 92,000 groups in 45,000 cities around the world. On Meetup.com, anyone can search for

local meetups around all kinds of interests, from outdoor activities, games, languages, animals, and of course, technology. A quick search of meetups within 25 miles of San Jose yielded 1,149 groups. With a free user account, people can join meetups, become part of a local common interest community, and attend group meetings.

Quantified Self has been using Meetup.com to organize its events from the beginning. Each new group makes their own group page for the QS Meetup they are starting in their own city. The website allows organizers to create events to which members are notified via email. They can then RSVP, and attend. Individual local organizers are responsible for their own meetup groups, but members of the leadership team at QS Labs try to provide support for people that want to start new groups. Wolf and Kelly encourage meetup organizers to keep the focus of QS Meetups on presentations of personal projects. The types of stories presented at the show & tells have expanded to be more than just about technology, and the meaning behind personal applications of technology, but to include a wider range of practices which all fall under the frame of “self-tracking.”

Self-tracking

Self-tracking projects take a wide range of individual forms, all of which essentially do the same thing—monitor and record data on a particular aspect of a person or their life. Some common dimensions of life people are tracking are health, finances, time, location, work or productivity, physical activity, and sleep. The

interesting thing about these self-tracking phenomena now showcased in QS Show & Tells, is that while the initial frame that Wolf and Kelly identified was from grouping certain technologies, self-tracking as a frame includes a wider range of practices and projects, some of which do not incorporate much sophisticated technology.

Self-tracking is not exactly a new phenomenon. That is why it casts a larger frame than what Wolf and Kelly identified as QS by grouping new technologies. Some members have been tracking aspects of themselves long before QS existed. However, it is the case that a wave of new devices has enabled people to measure things with greater ease than ever before. Many of the devices are related to personal health and fitness, such as pedometers, heart rate monitors, and scales. These are not necessarily new technologies, but because of wireless technology and advanced sensors, these devices do have new capabilities. The main difference for many of these new devices is that the device companies offer data storage and analysis services on their websites. These services make it easier for people to make sense out of biometric data, and potentially make lifestyle changes based on these data.

The recent evolution of smart phone technology has created the veritable ubiquitous self-tracking tool. The capabilities of smart phones have opened up the possibilities of what can be tracked, with the ability to use third-party applications. Now anyone with the wherewithal can create a self-tracking app designed to keep track of nearly anything imaginable. Smart phones are now becoming much more common. Nearly 50 percent of all U.S. mobile subscribers use smart phones (Cocotas 2012).

Because self-tracking apps can be very easy to use, some self-trackers think it is only a matter of time before everyone picks up the practice.

The emerging Quantified Self phenomenon

One of the goals Wolf and Kelly had in starting QS was to create something that would throw off interesting questions, and this has definitely been happening. In becoming a worldwide phenomenon, Quantified Self has taken on a life of its own, and in some ways, taken on a different meaning. With the expanding frame of self-tracking, QS has to navigate relationships between the evolving fields of technology and medicine.

What started in the Bay Area as an experimental meetup has grown into a worldwide community of self-trackers. Even so, QS Labs as an organization is extremely minimalist. No one “works” for QS as their full time job. It is even an explicit goal to not make organizing QS feel like work. That said, QS Labs has grown to have an affiliated leadership team to help organize local events, provide support to new groups as they grow, and bring the larger community together in QS conferences held in both the United States and Europe. The goal of providing support to the growing QS community is one of the explicit goals of QS Labs. As new meetups start all around the world, organizers have questions, and QS Labs want to assist these new groups in order to see them succeed. If not for this goal, my project would never have come to be. There are many activities going on in the QS community. For my project, my intention was to

sample the variability of what is happening in the different meetup groups in order to provide QS Labs with insights into their own global community.

SECTION 2 – Research Design and Methodology

The research for the client report primarily consisted of two phases of semi-structured ethnographic interviews. The first phase of interviews was exploratory research to better understand the range of self-tracking practices in which members of the QS community engage. The first phase provided a foundation of background information for the second phase of interviews. This second phase directly focused on discovering information to create the client report about organizing QS Meetups.

In addition to the first phase of interviews, two other sources provided background research for the client report. Participant-observation, at the first QS Conference, and meetings of the Bay Area QS Meetup was one source. The participant-observation gave me a chance to interact with members of QS, and see the group in action. The second source was research on the QS blog (quantifiedself.com). The blog was started at the same time as the meetups, and can be seen as a partial written archive of QS. Posts on the blog range from personal self-tracking stories, to philosophical discussions, and updates about meetups worldwide.

Interviews: Phase I – Research design

Before I designed the applied research project in collaboration with QS Labs, I conducted an initial phase of exploratory research. In the event that an applied project

was not possible, this phase of research would have been used for a thesis on self-tracking based approaches to personal health management. Because QS Labs was interested in having me conduct some research on their organization, this phase of research became background research for the applied project. The interviews in this phase covered a broad range of topics, and were designed to take two sessions to complete (see Appendix A for interview instrument). The first session focused on the personal side of self-tracking, and the second session focused on the social aspect, by asking about individual involvement in the QS community.

Because my research focus was on how people are using self-tracking practices and technology to manage their health, the first section of the interview was designed to elicit a life history/illness narrative. Following Kleinman (1980, 1988) the goal of the first section of the interviews was to understand the lived experience of people with different health issues, and how explanatory models that self-trackers create, come to include self-experimental methods and consumer technology as viable interventions. The concept of explanatory models comes out of Kleinman's work as a clinical medical anthropologist. Kleinman writes about the different ways clinicians and patients understand and describe the same health issues. He makes a distinction of terms between what a clinician understands as *disease*, and what a patient or family member experiences as *illness*. The way someone understands a health issue will influence how he or she determines acceptable treatment options, so the concept of explanatory model also incorporates the ways people on all sides of a health issue evaluate

treatments. The concept of explanatory models is useful for looking at self-tracking practices, especially for people whose self-tracking practices are extremely goal oriented, who often contest conventional clinical understandings of health and clinical treatment.

The goal of the life history aspect of the interviews was to provide more context to the explanatory models of self-trackers. I wanted to understand the different trajectories that lead people to start self-tracking, how people step into a worldview that includes self-tracking, and then, how lived experience differs after taking up self-tracking as a practice.

The second section of the interviews was designed to find out how different people understand what QS is, and to sample the range of involvement people have with QS. If the goal of the first section was to understand the personal aspects of self-tracking, the second section sought to understand the social aspects and the larger QS phenomenon. Quantified Self is different things to different people. Participants were asked, in their understanding, what QS is, and how things like technology configure into QS. This section of the interview was more evaluative, in that participants were asked to reflect on the role QS has in their life, and how that influences their self-tracking decisions.

This phase of the research took a praxis based approach following Singer (1994) and Werry (1992). A praxis based approach to applied anthropology “involve[s] study participants as equal partners in open discussion of theoretical assumptions that

underpin the search for pragmatic solutions to everyday problems” (Warry, 1992:156). Members of the research population are often very self-reflective and interested in higher level, theoretical questions about their own practices. It was my intention to engage research participants in discussions of my theoretical orientation as an anthropologist interested in medicine and technology, and get reactions from the participants on how anthropological theory may be useful in understanding self-tracking practices. The goal was to “explain theory and evaluate its validity in light of the practical concerns of research participants” (Warry, 1992:160).

Interviews: Phase I – Methodology

This phase of research consisted of semi-structured interviews with 11 self-trackers in June and July of 2011. I interviewed eight of the participants, and a research assistant, Daniel Powell, interviewed the other three. Most of the interviews were conducted over two sessions, with each session approximately one hour in length. Three of the interviews were completed in one, two-hour session.

I recruited interview participants with the help of Alexandra Carmichael, Director of Quantified Self, who allowed me to make a recruitment post on the QS blog. People that were interested in participating contacted me via email. I replied to everyone that showed interest in participating, providing them with more information on the research, and inviting them to schedule an interview.

Only three participants were located close enough to conduct interviews in person. The rest of the interviews were conducted over Skype, a free for use video calling program. For the in-person interviews, each participant signed an informed consent form. For the distance interviews, each participant was sent a copy of the informed consent form and asked to return a signed copy. Interviews were recorded either with a digital voice recorder for in person interviews, or with MP3 Skype Recorder, a freeware Skype add-on, for distance interviews.

Interviews: Phase II – Research design

The interviews in the second phase were designed to directly inform an ethnographic assessment of QS Meetup groups. The idea for research on the QS Meetups was proposed by Gary Wolf, co-founder of QS, in a meeting I had with him in September 2011. Wolf provided the initial research questions (see Appendix B), from which I created an interview instrument (see Appendix C). The interview questions were then sent to Wolf for further input and suggestions for other questions.

The interview was designed to learn more about the background of the organizers and why they started their meetups. I asked people how they got into self-tracking, and then why they made the decision to take on an organizing role. The rest of the interview focused on evaluative/assessment type questions about the experience of organizing a meetup. The goal of this was to understand some of the barriers and challenges for organizers, and to identify the points of innovation occurring in different

groups. During the interview I asked organizers to assess the extent to which QS Labs already offers support to them, and in what ways QS Labs could be more supportive.

The research was designed as an ethnographic assessment following the tradition of assessment research in applied anthropology. Probably the most well known types of assessment are the different types of rapid assessment¹. However, because of the extended time frame for the research, and relatively small scale for the project, some of the specifics of rapid assessment did not apply to the research design (such as, working in a team, triangulating data with multiple sources and methods). Different sources of data were used for the background research, triangulating interview data with blog research and participant-observation. Although because all of the participants in the assessment research were key informants, and the sample size was large relative to the population (11 groups sampled out of 18 that fit the criteria, from 34 groups worldwide at the start of the research), the interviews alone provided a wealth of data. The goal was to sample from as many groups as possible that fit the criteria for the research. A general goal was set to complete at least 12 interviews, sampling from groups of different size. Research suggests that data saturation can be reached in as few as 12 interviews (Guest et al. 2006).

This phase of the research also took a praxis based approach, especially on the community aspects from Singer (1994). In a Community-Centered Praxis approach, there is constant dialogue on “how to put anthropologist skills (in problem definition, research,... program design, report preparation, use and interpretation of data, policy

formulation, evaluation, etc.) to effective use in the service of community defined ends” (Singer, 1994:341). At every step of the research design process, members of the research population contributed to problem definition, and use and interpretation of data. This included members of the leadership team at QS Labs, and from the individual meetup organizers. “Through this process, community members and the anthropologist alike come to delineate more sharply the issues at hand and collectively to produce a theory (explaining the nature of the problems that are of central concern to the community) to guide subsequent action” (Singer, 1994:341). The interviews were designed to be flexible, such that different community members would be able to bring forward their most important concerns. The research was also designed to elicit ideas for action, in this case support strategies from QS Labs.

Interviews: Phase II – Methodology

This phase of the research consisted of 12 semi-structured interviews with organizers from 11 different meetups. Ten of the participants identify primarily as founding members of their meetup, and the other two primarily identify as co-organizers. Because one of the main research questions focused on why people decide to start a new meetup, I sampled primarily from founding members of QS Meetups. All interviews were completed in one session, ranging from approximately 45 minutes to one and one half hour.

Participants were recruited via email with the help of Alexandra Carmichael, Director of Quantified Self, providing e-introductions. The sample included organizers from meetups ranging in size. The smallest groups had as few as 20 members, and the largest group sampled had nearly 1000 members. The two criteria for selecting groups were that they must have had at least two meetings, and be a primarily English-speaking group. All organizers from groups that fit these criteria were contacted, and all organizers that were interested in participating were given an opportunity to schedule an interview.

Since the interviews were conducted with organizers from all over the United States and Canada, all interviews were conducted via Skype. All interviews were recorded with MP3 Skype Recorder. Each participant was sent the informed consent form and asked to return a signed copy.

Participant-observation – Research design

I included participant-observation in the research to provide a foundation of background information. The participant-observation took place at the first Quantified Self Conference held in Mountain View, California, on May 28 & 29, 2011, and at three meetings of the Bay Area QS Meetup in July, August, and November 2011.

The QS Conference took place early in my research, prior to designing the assessment of QS Meetup groups. Because the QS Conference was in the early phase of research, the goals were to learn more about QS by attending the conference and to

meet some of the people in the QS community. Two of the meetings of the Bay Area QS Meetup also occurred before the assessment and one while I was conducting the assessment. The goal of the first two meetups was similar to that of the participant-observation at the QS Conference, to meet people in the QS community and generally learn more about QS. During the assessment research, the goal shifted, and I tried to understand more about what a meetup is, and identify the aspects that may possibly differ between groups of different sizes in different locations. Attending the meetup added some context to what organizers were talking about in the interviews, through firsthand experience of a QS meetup.

Participant-observation – Methodology

The methods for the participant-observation were generally the same in all situations, even when the focus for the research shifted. Participant-observation is the ubiquitous anthropological research method: “participant-observation combines participation in the lives of the people under study, with the maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data” (Fetterman, 1989:45).

I informally spoke to people at the QS Conference and the meetups. In all occasions, I identified myself as a graduate student at San Jose State University in applied anthropology conducting research on QS. I took notes on my interactions with people as well as the content of presentations and general notes about each event. I

paid special attention to the use of terms at these events, to identify self-tracking specific terms, or other “QS jargon,” and how different people may be using the same terms differently.

In the spirit of participant-observation, I also attempted to conduct several of my own self-tracking projects. It would be difficult to observe at any great length self-trackers self-tracking, because these practices are integrated into activities people do throughout their day. I attempted to compensate for this by attempting to track myself. All of the projects eventually ended prematurely, without completing my intended goals. However, attempting to do self-tracking was invaluable, and provided first hand perspective into the process of monitoring and collecting data on one’s self.

Blog research – Research design

Quantified Self essentially consists of two parts: one part is the meetups, and the other part is the QS blog (quantifiedself.com). As such, conducting research on the blog was essential in order to attempt a complete understanding of QS. Because the blog was started at the same time as the first meetup, in some ways it is a written record of the history and growth of QS.

The approach for research on the QS blog was somewhat like archival research. The goal was to become more familiar with QS through reading the entire blog starting with the earliest post. The blog consists of nearly 60 pages, with around ten posts per page, organized chronologically by date of post. Posts vary in length, from quick updates

about a new meetup, to extensive interviews with toolmakers, stories of personal tracking projects, and philosophical commentaries on self-tracking. Also linked in many posts are videos of presentations filmed at QS Meetups all around the world, or other videos of interest relating to self-tracking. Quantified Self has a page on the video hosting website Vimeo (<http://vimeo.com/groups/quantifiedself>), with over 300 videos of presentations. Additionally, blog posts at times are linked to peer reviewed journals, news and magazine articles, and other blogs or websites.

Blog research – Methodology

I methodically read every post on the QS blog starting with the earliest post. I looked for posts that might especially reveal important information about QS, and took notes on these posts. Posts that were especially revealing often focused on an important topic, debate, or contentious issue in the QS community. I compiled a document that highlighted interesting discussions of these larger issues around self-tracking. In addition, I looked at much of the information linked to in blog posts, including articles, videos and other websites. I focused on content that was especially useful to provide context, and help me understand how QS relates to other aspects of the fields of science, technology and medicine.

Analysis and data representation

During the course of the interviews, I conducted an iterative analysis, where data from each interview informed the ones that followed. Systematic analysis of all the

interview data took place after all the interviews were completed. I reviewed each interview recording and created transcription summaries of each interview. The transcription summaries were divided into statements and each statement was coded for theme and content. Instead of relying on the themes in the interview instrument or using the research questions to organize the data, I organized the themes around topics the interviewees mentioned as most important or relevant. The intention was to let the organizers collectively inform the analysis and data representation rather than sorting through the interview data in order to answer the prefigured research questions. The goal of the analysis was to synthesize the information that participants offered, and to present it in an easily accessible format.

In terms of data representation, interviewees often had different experiences with or, opinions on, different topics. I tried to represent these as different spectra, blending similar responses or positions together, while at the same time trying to preserve the individual voice of each interviewee. When there was a unique position on any topic, I tried to highlight that response to indicate the variability of organizer experiences.

All the information in the client report came from direct statements made by the participants. Some of the statements that were especially poignant, I highlighted by creating text boxes which were positioned in sections with a complementary topic. The idea behind the style of data representation in the report was to create a “roadmap” of the QS Meetups, where these text boxes would serve almost like “landmarks.”

The background research mostly served as a means to understand more about the QS community. This primarily informed the data presentation by allowing me to integrate QS specific terms in ways that could make the data more useful. In addition, background research on statistical data of QS Meetup groups, which I used to inform my sampling strategy, was used to create graphs in the report. The data for the graphs was on the date each group was founded, the number of members, and the number of meetings each group has held. All of the information is available on the individual Meetup.com pages for each group. I created a timeline with a program called Vertex42, and under the timeline, I created a bar graph, in Microsoft Excel, with the member and meeting number data. This data was used to show that there is no clear trend of growth for QS Meetups, and that qualitative research might be a better approach to understand the growth (or lack of growth) of QS Meetups.

Comments on research design and methodology

Despite the intended research design and methodology, actual fieldwork procedures differed in some ways that are worth reporting. The reality of fieldwork changed the focus of the research, in ways that actually improved the quality of the interview data. In addition, some of the methodological problems with conducting distance interviews are worth mentioning.

Comments on research design

The research design for both phases of interviews was modified as I progressed through the fieldwork. Generally, the focus of the interviews changed as the participants identified important issues and topics from their experience, around either self-tracking or organizing a meetup. In addition, as I became more familiar with self-tracking in general, and the terms used within QS, the quality of the interview data improved from the increased competency in engaging with participants on different topics.

During the first phase of interviews, focus of the interviews changed significantly from the original research design. I began my research with the assumption that the practices of self-trackers are primarily goal oriented, focusing on a specific health problem. As I progressed through the interviews, a greater range of self-tracking practices became apparent, and I explored a wider range of topics in the interview other than just health. Self-trackers are monitoring things such as time, productivity, location, and finances, in ways that do not necessarily correlate to health. Self-tracking projects about health often have more of an exploratory aspect that I originally thought. Often, self-trackers are not collecting data to address a specific health problem, but are more generally interested in health optimization. They use tracking to explore ways to improve their health in a more general sense.

Another assumption I had coming into the first phase of interviews was that all of the participants would be significantly active in the QS community. Granted that participants had to contact me through a recruitment post on the QS blog, it would

seem like a safe assumption to expect participants to be active in the QS community. It turned out that about half of the sample was significantly involved in the QS community, and the other half, just casual readers of the QS blog. This led me to shift the focus of the interviews to look at self-tracking as a phenomenon that is not necessarily connected with QS.

Other changes in research design came from collaborating with a research assistant for the first phase of interviews. Before the interviews began, I met with the assistant to brief him on the research plan and provide some background information. We had one other meeting after each completing some interviews. Both these meetings were helpful, providing feedback on the research as designed, and generating new questions to ask participants. These meetings also contributed to an expanded understanding of some of the research questions.

The research design for the second phase of interviews also shifted as the interviews progressed. The initial research and interview questions were developed in collaboration with Gary Wolf at QS Labs. The purpose of the research design was to have the client set the agenda for the research on their own community. However, after beginning the interviews, it became apparent that in some cases participants were interested in different research questions, which were not addressed in the research design. These questions were incorporated into future interviews. In some ways, the initial research design was focused too narrowly. The focus of the interviews changed, and instead of just addressing the research questions I focused on surveying the

“landscape” of the meetups, and let each organizer address the topics they felt were most important. While the general focus of the research remained on the meetup groups as designed in collaboration with the client, the agenda for each individual interview was set by the participant.

Another unexpected change happened in the second phase of the interviews. When I interviewed organizers were dealing with a specific problem, they often asked how other organizers handled similar situations. At first, I wondered how much information I should offer to the participants. Even though the goal of the interviews was to produce a report meant to help meetup organizers, at first I held off offering information and thought that the final report would be more valuable than insights I could provide at that particular moment. However, as the interviews progressed and organizers continued to ask for insights, I began to offer information that might be helpful. This also improved the quality of interview data, as participants often offered new details on their situations in light of the insights I provided about the situations of other organizers. In some occasions, organizers even provided some comparative analysis, being able to relate their experiences to the experiences of others. This comparative analysis provided novel insights that I may not have been able to arrive at. Because of this, I began to offer information during interviews, as part of the research design.

Comments on methodology

The methodology for the second phase of interviews had some problems worth reporting, such as recruiting participants and scheduling interviews. At first, I tried to contact potential participants directly for recruitment. This did not turn out to be an effective strategy. I then asked Alexandra Carmichael, Director of Quantified Self, if she could assist me in the recruitment. While this greatly improved the response rate, about half of the organizers contacted did not respond at all. The next problem was scheduling interviews with the remaining organizers who were interested in participating. It was extremely difficult to schedule interviews, even though my schedule during the interviewing process was extremely flexible. Often it took weeks or months before actually scheduling some of the interviews.

None of the organizer interviews took place in person and this presented methodological problems. All interviews were conducted via Skype, and I encountered some technological difficulties. In one instance, my computer crashed during the interview. Fortunately, the program I used to record the interview saves the audio file as it records, so I did not lose the recording. However, I was also using my computer to take notes, and the text file was not recoverable. In another instance, my internet connection malfunctioned and the call was disconnected. By the time the connection was fixed, the participant was unable to continue the interview. These breaks in the interviews caused disruptions in the flow of the interviews and the data collection process to be delayed.

There were other procedural issues regarding the interviews. In some cases this had to do with the conditions of the interview. In one case, the participant scheduled the interview to take place over lunch. During this interview, it was very difficult to engage the participant while he was eating.

Another procedural problem happened when dealing with time zone differences. I always scheduled interviews in terms of the participant's time zone, and tried to make that clear. However, in a few interviews the participant thought that the interview time was set in my time zone rather than theirs.

The other main procedural issue was whether to or not to conduct interviews as video calls. During the first few interviews, I did use video. I assumed it would improve the interviews by simulating face-to-face contact. However, it turned out that using the camera was distracting, with both the participant and myself having to frequently adjust the camera during the interview. Using the video feed also requires a larger amount of data transfer, and can make calls sound "choppy." For later interviews, I did not use the video, in order to improve call quality and remove the distraction.

SECTION 3 – Situating the Client Report

The ultimate result of my research is the client report presented to QS Labs (see Appendix D for the full report). This client report holds different value for each constituency within the Quantified Self community. For the clients, the report is a resource from which new support strategies can be planned. For meetup organizers and self-trackers, it is a snapshot that captures several aspects of the QS community. For the members of my graduate committee, it is physical evidence of the research I conducted. For the purposes of my applied anthropology project report, I would like to reflect on the framework used to collect, filter and present data, interesting both to QS Labs and to the larger QS community. Quantified Self is a movement in which data collection and analysis is intrinsically interesting, so this reflection is directly relevant to the client.

The client report contributed to the information base of QS Labs in two ways: first by providing new insights, and second by confirming information QS Labs either knew or presumed about the meetups. This aspect of the client report has to do with the reception of the information by QS Labs, and is an insight not evident by simply reading the report.

The investigative frameworks for the client report also resulted from a negotiation between the original research questions set by the co-founder of QS, the topics that individual organizers felt needed to be addressed, and what I as an

anthropologist could uncover through qualitative research methods. The client report is a physical artifact that was produced through this iterative negotiation process. This is another aspect of the client report that is not evident by simply reading the report.

New insights and confirmations

In the most general sense, the main research question was, “what is happening in the various QS Meetups that leadership at QS Labs does not know about?” Following that, the client report did two things: it produced provocative insights the clients at QS Labs did not suspect and it validated assumptions the clients had about aspects of organizing the meetups.

QS Labs already have a set of recommendations for organizers, as a FAQ for meetup organizing on the QS blog². Gary Wolf, co-founder of Quantified Self, wrote the FAQ, and the recommendations are based on the experience of the Bay Area QS Meetup organizers. Some of the research confirmed information on the FAQ. The main area of overlap of the client report with the FAQ is on the topic of format for meetings and presentations. The research verified that the suggestions in the FAQ reflect how people are running meetups, even for organizers who have not used the FAQ as a reference. Through the anecdotes from different meetups, the additional piece that the research provides is an evaluative aspect, presenting how different formats work in different situations. While the FAQ presents a kind of best case scenario for meetup

organizing, the research presents a complementary piece, which is the actual lived experience of organizers.

The report systematically addressed the concerns that organizers felt were important. In some cases, QS Labs was already aware of some of these concerns, as some of them are addressed in the FAQ, such as how to get venues for meetings. The client report helps configure concerns and problems into the larger experience of organizing. Instead of being treated as discrete problems that individual organizers have, the report shows how any current or future organizer can experience a range of different situations. I presented a more complete picture and addressed several aspects of organizing the FAQ does not address. Anecdotes also helped to exemplify common concerns or problems and provided another layer of context to the organizer experience.

Research questions as a negotiation

The new insights from my research result from an iterative negotiation of research questions. This negotiation was an interplay between the research questions proposed by QS labs, what I, as an anthropologist, could uncover through ethnographic methods, and the questions that interviewees identified as topics of interest about their own community. I “translated” the research questions from QS Labs into an interview instrument, based on what I could uncover through ethnographic research. I then submitted the interview instrument to QS Labs for further comment and suggestions. I

integrated the suggestions into the version of the instrument I used for the interviews. The agenda for each interview however, was in some ways set by each participant. Organizers would reframe questions based on their own experiences, even suggesting other questions for me to ask in future interviews, about aspects of their own community they would like to know more about. Again, I had to determine what questions could be answered through ethnographic inquiry. In the end, the client report represents my attempt at addressing the larger research questions from QS Labs, and the questions of organizers, attending to the concerns of both leadership and community members.

For example, one of the main research questions from QS Labs was: “why are some groups are growing and others are not?” There is no clear pattern of growth for QS Meetups. To some extent the older a group is, the larger it becomes, but some groups are growing much more rapidly than others are, and some groups are stagnating. From that, one research question looked into whether the attributes of the organizer, or how an organizer runs their group, contributes to the success of the group, and how the choices organizers make can foreclose other options. This translated in the interview into asking organizers about their leadership styles, and how their leadership styles might influence their groups. Organizers that were having trouble growing their group, however, were more interested in practical ways to help grow their group. The concept of “leadership style” was elusive, and it seemed like several organizers did not want to correlate their personalities with the success or failure of the group. Instead, organizers

expressed their views on what kinds of insights might be more useful. Organizers often presented issues they were dealing with, and asked if other organizers have similar issues and how they might overcome these issues.

The client report reflects the questions from QS Labs and from the collective group of organizers. I was still able to capture some of the original research question, to find out about different personal attributes of the organizers. In my client report, I presented this as a section on “the organizer profile.” Correlating the success or failure of a meetup with the profile of the organizer, however, was not something I could conclude through ethnographic research. I could attend to the questions of organizers, and look at whether other organizers have the same operational problems they have, and ways they might overcome these problems. In the client report, I addressed the questions of organizers, and presented a range of experiences organizers had on different topics, and potential ways to overcome problems based on their responses.

Overview of the client report

I attended to the questions from QS Labs and the organizers by creating a “roadmap” of the QS Meetups. There are three main challenges that nearly all organizers mentioned. These challenges relate to how to get new members, how to get presenters, and how to find venues for meetings. The main barrier that prevents organizers from overcoming these challenges is lack of time. The rest of the findings are

structured into six topics, which provide context to the three main challenges and the main barrier.

The report begins with some basic background information on the landscape of QS Meetups. The first section, “The Meetup Profile,” focuses on the characteristics of meetups, the organizers and co-organizers, and the cities where QS Meetups are starting. From there, the report moves to explore the outlook of organizers. The second section, “Goals & Benefits,” focuses on the different kinds of personal and group goals organizers have for their group, and some of the personal benefits organizers enjoy from organizing their meetup. The next step was to look into what organizers go through to get their meetup going. The third section, “Planning,” explores some of the different aspects of managing a meetup and planning a meeting. Because getting reliable venues is an issue that came up in nearly all the interviews, the fourth section, “Venues,” focuses entirely on the venue problem. Operationally, the different meetups are similar in many aspects, but also have some differences. The fifth section, “Format,” focuses on how different organizers run their meetings. Organizers mentioned several ways QS Labs has already assisted them with their meetup. The final section, “Support & Recommendations,” focuses on the different aspects of support, and offers some ideas based on responses from organizers. Below are some highlights from the client report.

The meetup profile

Organizers of QS Meetups come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are graduate students at large universities, others work in the health sector, and several of the organizers work developing self-tracking related tools or other technology in some design or engineering capacity. They also have different engagements with self-tracking. Most organizers see themselves as “advanced users,” but depending on the project, their practices fall along a spectrum from low technology involvement to high technology involvement. In addition, while some organizers were tracking when they started their meetup, others were not.

The cities where people are starting QS meetups tend to have a few characteristics in common. Cities often have active tech communities. Organizers mentioned several attributes of a tech community, which can include the presence of tech start-ups, hacker spaces, and other tech related meetups. Cities such as Toronto, Seattle, New York, and of course the San Francisco Bay area, are among the locations with very active tech communities.

Some meetups are in cities that are a major center for the health industry, such as Louisville, Boston and Washington DC. In some cities, there is a major presence of large health insurance companies. One organizer specifically mentioned that some health insurance companies are starting to show interest in self-tracking as a way to potentially gauge the health of individuals, and whether they are a risk from an insurance perspective. Other cities are major centers for health research, both in the

private sector and in research universities. Some organizers said they feel like a QS Meetup belongs in their city because of the strong health industry presence and that their own interests in self-tracking mostly relate to health.

Goals & benefits

Organizers share some common goals, which are either personal goals or goals they have for their group. As personal goals, organizers want to grow local self-tracking communities, become more social, and explore professional opportunities in the QS community. For group goals, organizers want to build an environment where new ideas can be created, expand the group membership outside of tech circles, and have the group members set the agenda for the group. More often organizers are making progress on their personal goals; growing local self-tracking communities is the most obvious one. Making progress on group goals can be more difficult. One challenge has been expanding the membership outside of tech circles. Most people come across QS because they are interested in the technology. Without that interest, it is less likely that someone would ever come across QS.

Meetup organizers enjoy several personal benefits from having a leadership role. The most frequently mentioned personal benefit that organizers get from the meetup is the opportunity to meet new and interesting people. Organizers genuinely identify and connect with the people that attend the meetings. Often the type of people organizers see drawn to self-tracking are very curious, self-improvers, and life-long learners.

Several organizers mentioned building new friendships with people they met at meetings. A few organizers also mentioned that they enjoy connecting different people together within their local meetup community. Sometimes organizers connect people around a common interest, or because they are working on very similar, or even very different projects, and might benefit from one another's input. Simply providing the space where productive interactions can result is one of the personal benefits for meetup organizers.

Planning

Organizers have to plan meetings in order for the groups to be active and grow. One of the biggest concerns around planning is deciding how frequently to have meetings. Meeting frequency ranged from one group that meets consistently every month, to a few which had not held a meeting in more than six months. Organizers mostly agree that six to eight weeks is the optimal time between meetings.

The features of Meetup.com make it a convenient tool for planning, although a few organizers have trouble with some of the features of the site, and some complain about the fee. Organizers differ on how actively they advertise for the group and meetings. More advertising may be necessary in places where Meetup.com is not well known.

For the most part, organizers find it difficult to line up presenters for meetings. This is viewed as a challenge for organizing. Only the larger groups seem to have success

lining up a full program of presenters. Some of the mid-size groups try to get a couple of presenters to commit beforehand, but still have to hope some attendees come to the meeting intending to present. For the groups that do not line up talks beforehand, at times organizers have felt like meetings needed more presentations.

Venue

For some organizers, finding venues for meetings is incredibly difficult. In fact, finding venues either was or continues to be a problem for almost all organizers. Finding venues will likely be the task organizers spend the most time on, especially early on. The model that works in the Bay Area and New York meetups, soliciting attendees for spaces, works great because of the large member base to draw upon. However, for smaller groups and especially new groups still planning their first meeting, it is up to the organizer to find a venue. Finding a venue so that the meetings can happen is probably the most important factor for how successful any particular meetup will be, because it is the first one or two meetings that inspire organizers to continue coordinating the meetup.

Format

The format for meetings generally depends on the size of the group. Most of the organizers like the informality of the smaller meetings. They like to have everyone go around the room and introduce themselves. At the very first meeting of many groups, all the attendees took turns talking about what they were working on at the time, either

their personal self-tracking project or a tool they were developing. Organizers mentioned liking this format, and feel that everyone who is coming to the meetings probably has something interesting to share.

Once the size of a group grows and meetings happen more frequently, the format usually shifts to being less interactive and the presentations become more formal. For the most part, people prepare a talk of a certain length, often between five and ten minutes. Some organizers from the more established groups see the need to curate talks, and try to bring in if not more polished, at least more directed talks.

Presentations tend to fall on one of two sides, either strongly focused on personal self-tracking project themselves, or on the tools used for self-tracking. Leadership at QS Labs tries to encourage that the presentation space at meetings be for personal self-tracking projects. Toolmakers are free to present personal projects they have done with tools they developed, but making a “sales pitch” for the tools is generally discouraged. Organizers from other meetups more or less feel the same way about the content of meetings. The “Three Prime Questions” (What did you do? How did you do it? What did you learn?), generally guide personal project presentations at most of the meetings.

Support & recommendations

Organizers feel that leadership at QS Labs makes a genuine effort to support them. Being provided with contacts has helped several organizers get their group

started. The FAQ for meetup organizing has been helpful. Providing a videographer and posting the videos on the QS blog helps groups feel connected to the source. Having meetings announced on the QS blog and Facebook page also help groups feel connected.

Based on feedback from organizers, there were several recommendations for QS Labs.

- Create open channels of feedback for organizers to share their problems and ideas with QS Labs, and create channels for feedback so individual members can share ideas with their group and QS Labs.
- Create stronger connections across leadership, so that organizers can feel more connected with each other, and provide peer support.
- Encourage groups to have several co-organizers, so there is less work for any one person to do, and to increase the diversity of ideas, projects, and people coming to the meetings.
- Encourage organizers to make event planning more open, so individual group members can help organize. Members may not want to take a leadership role, but may have an idea for a onetime event.
- Find ways to supplement presentations, especially for the smaller groups, where organizers may feel like it is not worth scheduling meetings because there is not enough presentation content.

Findings presentation

A full report of the findings (see Appendix D) from the assessment research was presented to Gary Wolf and Alexandra Carmichael at QS Labs in March 2012. The report was well received, and QS Labs is already using information from the report for new support strategies. At the upcoming Quantified Self Conference, to be held at Stanford University in September 2012, I have been invited to co-facilitate a breakout session on meetup group organizing.

SECTION 4 – Broader Context of Quantified Self

The aim of my project was not to produce an exhaustive, classic book-length ethnography on QS. However it was necessary to expand my understanding of QS and some of the aspects of self-tracking practices in order to create the client report. The activities that directly relate to organizing a QS Meetup occurred within a larger context of the QS phenomenon. This broader context shaped the information that went into the client report, and can affect how we read the report. Some of the core issues within the QS community remain ambiguous and fluid, and in some cases create contention and divide the community. Through the interviews and analysis, insights into these tensions were revealed and new questions were raised about the QS community. Full treatment of each topic or issue around QS and self-tracking, would take a significant amount of focused research to address properly. I would like to explore in brief some of the central ideas or aspects of QS I became familiar with during my research, to help situate the client report within the context of the QS phenomenon.

The most important insight is that QS is not a monolithic community where everyone involved shares the same ideas about, and interests in, self-tracking. For every aspect of, or issue within, the community, there is always a range of positions or opinions. The main tensions, which are discussed below, center on data collection, and whether self-tracking should, or can, be considered science.

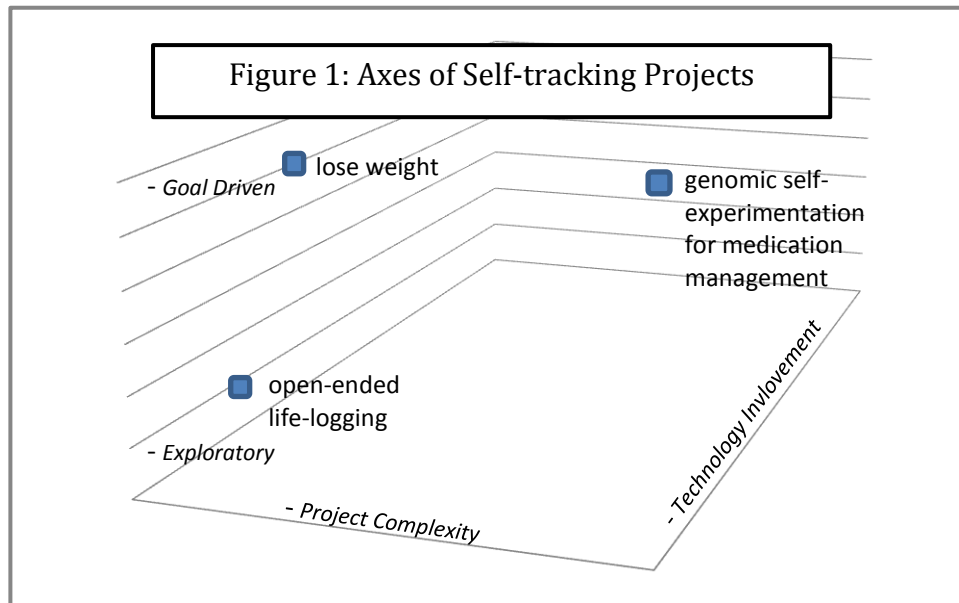
Some topics are only of interest to a select sub-set of QS practitioners. Some are interested in personalized medicine, others less so. Others are deeply interested in the agency they can exert over professional health information shared with providers. In some ways, self-tracking based approaches to health care are a critique of conventional medicine. Through personal presentations, QS has become a forum for people that advocate for greater agency over health care decisions and information, by way of personalized medicine, and access to professional health records and data.

The practice of self-tracking

The range of self-tracking projects that people take on is diverse and tracking can focus on almost any aspect of life. Grouping by domain, such as sleep or weight, is one way to describe self-tracking practices. However through my research, I identified three axes that can be used to describe or locate self-tracking projects within the spectrum of these phenomena. Figure 1 (below) represents the three axes as a three-dimensional field, with sample self-tracking projects plotted as examples of how projects configure within this space.

The first axis is the degree of technological involvement. Self-tracking projects can heavily rely on complex devices with advanced sensors or on sophisticated laboratory tests. In other cases, self-trackers may use only a pencil and paper. The technology axis is essentially the initial line that delimits what can or cannot be tracked. In order to monitor and record data, you need certain sensors and recording devices. In

some cases, self-tracking projects are driven by the technology; because there are sensors and devices to take measurements, people are using these technologies to monitor and collect data. In other cases, the self serves as both the sensor and the recording device.



The second axis is the level of complexity in the design of the self-tracking project. On the more complex side are projects often referred to as “self-experiments.” Self-experiments usually employ the scientific method to some degree, collecting baseline data, testing hypotheses, and in some cases controlling for variables. Some self-trackers try to find correlations across data sets, for example, trying to figure out what factors affect their sleep quality, by monitoring and recording data on sleep quality, and correlating that data on their activity before bed or even ambient data such as room temperature at night. On the less complex side of project design are practices like “life-

logging.” There is a range of different practices people will call life-logging, but one example of a simpler form in terms of project design, would be basic journaling. A practice such as keeping a dream journal is considered self-tracking, in that it produces knowledge about the self through recording information, even though the data are not numerical.

The third axis self-tracking projects can be plotted on is the extent to which projects are explicitly goal driven or exploratory. Some self-trackers have particular goals when starting a project, like wanting to lose weight or improve sleep. Other self-trackers collect data with the intention that they will be able to do *something* with the data in the future (what that something is, may or may not be known), or in some cases track things just to keep track of them. Examples of this last case are things such as tracking daily step count with a pedometer or using mobile phone applications to “check in” to places you visit each day simply to have a record of that.

Self-tracking projects can configure onto these axes in almost any way imaginable. The categories on each of these axes are also negotiable. Different people may not agree what constitutes a high or low level of technology involvement. In some cases, someone might not even consider things like pencils and paper technologies. Similarly with practices such as journaling, some might argue the extent to which journaling would be considered life-logging or even self-tracking. There are also secondary factors that can help classify a project, such the length of a project, whether the project is an intervention or data collected to inform an intervention, and whether

the data collected is primarily objective/collected by passive sensors, or subjective/based on self-assessment.

Self-tracking data

The tag line for Quantified Self is “self knowledge through numbers.” In some ways, this tag line does not completely capture the range of self-tracking practices, but it does draw attention to two of the main focal points within the QS community around data. We can start by looking at the second half of the QS tag line, “through numbers.” As mentioned earlier, the range of data collected by self-trackers is not always numerical. Some of the insights I discovered during my research focus on the different types of data self-trackers collect and how they evaluate what kind of data to collect. The first half of the QS tag line, “self knowledge,” represents the analysis and synthesis of self-tracking data and the quest to integrate data back into one’s life in a meaningful way. The analysis and integration aspect is one of the focal points for the QS community. Data can be a problem in itself, for self-trackers that want some higher-level analyses, or for analyses that produce inconclusive results.

Data & recording data

Aside from the self-trackers that focus on practices like journaling, in the majority of self-tracking projects, people collect some kind of numerical data. Possibly, because the term “quantified” appears in the title of the movement, much of the discussion around data focuses on “quantitative” data. Self-trackers describe

quantitative data as numerical data about things that are objectively measured.

Examples of this type of data are things like weight, urine pH, and blood glucose levels.

These data do not require any assessment by the self-tracker in order to record them and each data point would be read the same by anyone.

The other type of data self-trackers refer to is “qualitative” data. Qualitative data is more difficult to define. When self-trackers make self-assessments for things like mood, or how rested they feel after a night of sleep, people often refer to this as qualitative data. These data are not objectively measured. Instead, it requires a subjective assessment on the part of the tracker to collect the data. In this case, the self is the sensor for measurement. What complicates this idea of qualitative data is that it can be numerical or non-numerical. Self-trackers often create a self-assessment scale to keep track of sleep quality on a scale from one to five, but may track mood by keeping a log of different mood states (i.e. happy, sad, anxious) throughout the day. Both numerical estimates and descriptive terms are subjective assessments treated as qualitative data by self-trackers.

The differences between quantitative and qualitative data have created one of main tensions within the QS community. This tension rests on not only the type of data (quantitative or qualitative), but also how data is collected. Some self-trackers have a strong desire to have passive sensors gather all their tracking data, relieving them from the need to actively collect, and thereby selectively filter, the information. The assumption is that passive sensors have greater accuracy and consistency, and are

better for recording standardized measurements. In addition, passive tracking is often understood as being more objective. The mechanical sensors in wearable devices that measure things such as heart rate variability and galvanic skin response are disinterested in the measurements they record.

On the other side, there is active tracking. Active tracking relies on the self-tracker to act as recording device. The assumption is that with active tracking, there is greater risk for error and less standardized data collection. For example, time diaries that track activity by place involve an active process of selecting and recording information. Active tracking like this can require a greater degree of diligence if the goal is to collect standardized information. In addition, active tracking is often understood as less objective. The sensor in this case not a device, but the self being tracked—an interested party. However, self-trackers often mention that active data collection leads to a greater degree of self-reflection on practices, and can be more useful for projects aimed at creating behavior change³.

As an anthropologist with some training in both qualitative and quantitative research methods, I have to admit that I was somewhat perplexed by the use of these terms within QS. Quantitative data, in my understanding, refers to something that is measured, numerical, or in some way used for statistical analysis, such as survey data. Qualitative data, on the other hand, does not lend itself to statistical analysis, such as data from semi-structured interviews or participant-observation; these data are about description that cannot be directly measured or assigned a numerical value.

This quantitative/qualitative - objective/subjective issue remained a conundrum until I heard a conversation about data at a QS meetup. During the conversation, someone shifted the use of terms from quantitative/qualitative to objective/subjective. This discussion helped me to conclude that much of the data debate within QS over the superiority of quantitative over qualitative data is actually a dispute that asserts the accuracy of objective data and suspects knowledge claims based on subjective assessment. The discussions about data in QS often pit quantitative data over qualitative data, in a hierarchy of information. In their quest for generating self-knowledge, self-trackers strive to achieve accuracy and robust methods that will not only arrive at conclusive results for their own purposes, but also convince skeptical outsiders of the value of the self-tracking approach. The value placed on quantification likely comes out of the connection of objectivity (as impartial, disinterested assessment) with accuracy. Similarly, value is placed on passive sensors for data collection because of increased accuracy.

It is difficult to say for sure what influences each individual self-tracker to take a stance on the data/data collection issues. I think in some ways, data collection for self-tracking is an extension of practices of accounting and the value placed on measurement, objectivity and quantification, coming out of commerce, science, and other professions that rely on quantification. Quantification is a social technology, which establishes credibility at a distance (Porter, 1996). This is the rationale behind having standardized weights and measures, and quality grades for goods. With standardization,

people in commerce can know what they are buying and trading at a distance, without ever having to see the goods. Through standardization, quantification and objectivity become connected in commerce, but this connection is also made in professions like accounting (Porter, 1996). By relying on the “facts” created by numbers, accountants become impartial actors with the ability to proctor bankruptcies and fairly attend to creditors, and conduct cost-benefit analyses for public engineering projects (Porter, 1996). Numbers build trust by not relying on human judgment.

Data collection through self-tracking is a type of research and one of the major influences on self-trackers are popular and professional understandings of scientific research (whether self-tracking is, or can be, science is another issue discussed below). Some in the QS community have academic or professional training in science or engineering, this scientific disposition of some members has some effect on the rest of the QS community. Objectivity is of course, connected with knowledge creation in professional science (Latour, 1987), and scientific objectivity translates as the valuation of quantitative data in QS.

Not every self-tracker involved with QS is concerned with these debates around quantification and objectivity. Some self-trackers have a pragmatic approach and do not value one type of data over another—the different types of data are simply different types of data. Similarly, active and passive sensors are just different tools to collect data. With a pragmatic approach, all these become different options, available for different

situations, and different kinds of tracking projects. Each approach or tool has strengths and weaknesses, and each can be applied appropriately in different situations.

Data analysis

The topic of data analysis is important when examining self-tracking practices. The goal of self-tracking is to produce self-knowledge and while sometimes the raw data itself is enough to produce insights, more often data analysis and interpretation is required. For the most part, self-tracking projects are about collecting data, and doing something with the data. After collecting data, some self-trackers struggle trying to make meaning out of the data and understand how these data actually reflect on, or represent their lives.

Often self-trackers create data visualizations, especially when they present their projects at a QS Show & Tell. Data visualizations are important in that self-tracking data is easier to understand and reflect on when represented graphically. For goal-oriented projects, data visualizations can help determine if the project was successful. For exploratory projects, visualizations can provide a better sense of what is going on and become part of the process of transforming numerical data into self-knowledge.

Other than creating visualizations, some self-trackers aspire to conduct statistical analyses, at least with numerical data. While doing something with the data is ideal, there are many occasions when a “data pile” builds up, which never undergoes analysis. The main problem is that people do not know what to do with the data sets. They might

not know how to do statistical analyses or how to create visualizations. Even for self-trackers with training in quantitative analysis, finding significant correlations in self-tracking data is often difficult, especially for projects with a complex research design. The data can contain too much “noise” such that findings are inconclusive. Some self-trackers become frustrated with their inability to make meaning out of the data, unable to translate the data into self-knowledge that would provide insight into their lives.

It may seem difficult to understand why people would collect data and not ever use it. For some people this happens because they become fascinated by the technology, and the process of gathering data. Self-trackers that fall in this category often describe themselves as “science-minded” in some way. Often they work professionally as engineers, programmers, have scientific training, or work in a tech related field, where gathering data is necessary to do almost anything. A data driven professional life transfers over into personal life and people begin quantifying their self and world in order to have a better understanding of their situation. Often, when people in this position come across self-tracking technology, it just makes sense for them to start tracking. However, sometimes people get more interested in the devices and the services than what these things can do for them. The gadgets themselves can be appealing to people interested in new technology. Data in this case, is almost like a byproduct of the technology if self-trackers are not ardent in finding practical ways to apply the data.

Not everyone has the “data pile” problem. Some self-trackers create very simple projects, or have feedback mechanisms set in their project design, so that data can easily inform their practices. Some self-tracking tools that are available, automatically translate the raw data into data visualizations, saving a step in the data analysis process. Life-loggers can avoid this problem altogether, because their goal is not to conduct statistical analysis. Part of the goal of life-logging is simply keeping the log. However, I have encountered self-trackers that would like to have easier ways to index and search through their journal data.

Science and personal science

The most contentious issue within the QS community is whether or not what self-trackers are doing can be considered science. Whenever this topic is brought up at a QS Show & Tell, the crowd becomes split, and harsh words can be heard supporting one side or the other. This tension arrives in part because engineers, programmers, or people who have professional training in the sciences, comprise a vocal segment of the self-tracking community. On one side, there is a paternalistic desire for some to keep what science does separate from what everyday people do; science belongs in a lab and not in the home. On the other side is a desire in the QS community to make other people take self-tracking seriously. Some self-trackers I interviewed do not share their projects with friends, family, or co-workers because they are afraid that others will think they are being “obsessive compulsive,” “self absorbed,” or a “hypochondriac.”

Attempting to overcome the perceived stigma from people outside of self-tracking is likely what motivates some people to push these practices toward scientificity.

The term self-experiment reflects this push toward science. Self-experimentation implies things that self-tracking does not. Self-experimenters aspire to model the scientific method (to the degree that is possible), with standardized methods and data collection processes, hypothesis testing, and controlled variables. However, self-experiments which take self-tracking to such a level of sophistication are the exception. Different self-tracking projects have some aspects of self-experimentation. To some extent in many self-tracking projects, people are testing hypotheses, particularly when they are trying to create a specific change. Self-trackers often have a general idea of what effect the intervention they are tracking will produce. However, without some of the other aspects of scientific research, hypothesis testing alone may not be enough to make self-tracking a science. Critics of self-tracking as science point to several particular aspects of scientific research, which are not present in self-tracking. The main concerns are about three tenets of scientific research that all relate to the scientific validity of results—generalizability, repeatability, and double-blind research design.

Some people in the QS community assert the position that the goal of science is to produce generalizable knowledge. However, the goal of self-tracking is to produce self-knowledge, so generalizability across a population is not necessarily a goal. Generalizability can apply to self-experiments, in that the findings reflect more than a specific condition of the self-tracker. In this sense, generalizability pertains to when or

under what conditions the results are valid. The results from a self-experiment may pertain only to a person under a specific condition. If the goal of the project is to create a specific condition, the results should be generalizable and apply to every time a person is in that condition. If the goal is to create self-knowledge that is not contingent on a specific condition, results should generalize across all states. Concluding generalizability may be possible for some projects, but the work to *test* whether findings are generalizable, may be outside the scope of a self-tracking project.

One of the tests for scientific validity is whether the findings are accurate enough to be repeatable. Repeatability may be more important than generalizability, but the two are closely tied. Where generalizability demonstrates the findings are accurate across different conditions, repeatability would demonstrate that the findings were accurate in the first place. Repeatability may be easier to achieve in a self-experiment. However, it is often difficult to repeat self-experiments. There are usually many uncontrolled or unknown variables in self-tracking projects and self-experiments, and exact conditions are difficult to recreate.

The results of self-experiments are sometimes challenged because projects do not have double-blind research design. Some suggest that there is a lack of critical distance in the research, and are concerned that a placebo effect can account for positive results in self-tracking projects. Some people conclude that without having the check of double-blind research design, self-tracking is not science. It is difficult to work around the double-blind research design challenge. Self-experimentation requires

actively exploring different self-intervention strategies. The self-experimenter is involved in every stage of the research design and implementation. If scientific research is contingent on having a double-blind research design, then self-tracking, in most cases, cannot be considered science.

The term “personal science” has been coined by Seth Roberts, one of the early members of QS. Roberts is trained in experimental psychology and is emeritus professor at the University of California, Berkeley. The term personal science captures what self-tracking can be when it adopts the aspects of science that are relevant and appropriate. In Roberts’ assessment, innovation in professional science (“basic science” is the term Roberts uses) is stagnating and he sees that personal science can become a source of great discovery. Roberts sees that professional science is severely limited in some important ways that personal science is not. Scientists, especially in research universities, have to protect their reputation and careers, which includes raising grant money for their research and to support graduate students. As a research scientist, Roberts has experienced the reality of this first hand. These professional requirements to some extent direct scientific research. In terms of having time to explore different research directions, personal science has more freedom than professional science. The main area where Roberts believes professional science has the advantage is with material resources. However as technology improves and becomes more affordable, personal scientists will be empowered with new capabilities.

Agency over health care and information

There is a segment of the QS community interested in finding ways to assert a greater degree of agency, both in terms of medical treatment options, and in the ability to access to health records and data. This interest in agency over health treatment options and health information is an important aspect of the QS community. Some self-trackers began monitoring themselves because they have some medical issue that doctors had failed to diagnose properly, or for which symptoms continued despite being prescribed treatments. This is an interesting twist to the health disparity issue, as the majority of people in the QS community are college educated, upper-middle class, with health care coverage, yet when they have a health issue, the health care system still fails to provide adequate care. People in this situation begin self-tracking to arrive at better diagnoses for themselves, or find personalized treatments that are more effective.

Personalized medicine

Quantified Self has become a magnet for people interested in personalized medicine. Personalized medicine as an approach to health care, critiques conventional medicine, which is based on the supposed “average patient” and standardized treatments that will be effective across all cases. Some self-trackers find conventional practices to be insufficient in terms of diagnosis and treatment. They believe that more examination is needed to properly understand a health condition, and that treatments should be personalized to fit the specifics of each patient.

Some people in the QS community see that self-tracking and tracking technology can potentially contribute to the personalized health movement. Self-trackers are already creating and using new technology in their attempts to find personalized approaches to self-care. By examining their lives more closely, self-trackers are finding different factors that are affecting their health. Through self-experimentation, people are finding new interventions that, based on the evidence they have collected, work for them. What “work” means is different for different self-tracking projects. For self-trackers who are trying to lose weight, or lower their cholesterol or blood pressure, what constitutes improvement is relatively non-controversial. “Evidence” for improvement in other areas, like sleep quality, or cognition, may be more elusive.

There is a range of responses from medical professionals, to the personalized medicine through self-tracking phenomenon. Some doctors see the value in self-tracking, and are receptive to the data self-trackers produce from their projects. Within the QS community, I have heard the term “quant-friendly doctor” used to represent the phenomenon when professional doctors are willing to use self-tracking data as a resource to arrive at diagnoses that are more accurate, or to determine the efficacy of current treatments. Part of the basic protocol of a doctor’s appointment, is asking the patient questions such as: How often are you experiencing a particular symptom? On a scale from one to ten, how severe are the symptoms? How severe are the symptoms when you take the medicine? From my own experience being a patient at different

times in my life, usually I am only able to offer vague estimates when asked questions like these. A detailed record that keeps track of this information can be very useful for medical professionals.

I have also stories from members of the QS community, of physicians who are not receptive to self-tracking data. In some cases, doctors reject the validity of self-tracking data, and dismiss conclusions as amateur speculations. Some self-trackers wonder if physicians see the “amateur” approach as a threat to professional opinions.

Agency over health records and data

The problems people face obtaining health data and records are issues discussed in personal stories in the QS community. This is related to the personalized medicine topic, in that this often concerns the category of self-trackers that are trying to solve particular health problems. In their search for a better diagnosis or treatment, self-trackers want to have access to their professional health records or health data to inform their projects. There are several cases where self-trackers fought to have access to complete files of their health records or health data (for instance, data collected by an implanted pacemaker). This issue raises significant questions about agency over personal data, as in these cases, the doctors, or the pacemaker company, claimed ownership of the data and initially denied patient access to their own personal information.

The access and ownership of data collected by self-tracking tools is another contested issue in the QS community. The ability to access such data is a key component of exerting agency over one's life. Many current tools on the market do not give a user access to the raw data. Often users can only access processed data, visualizations, or the data may be only available to view online without the option to export the data to other formats where the user could conduct offline analyses. This data agency issue has inspired some self-trackers I have met, to "hack" their devices, modifying the software or hardware to enable access to the raw data, or to make a device capable of other new functions.

SECTION 5 – The Client Report and Applied Research

It is worth asking the question, “when you apply anthropology, just what is it that you apply” (Bennett 1996:S28)? Bennett suggests that, “the question is seldom asked, because there is no really satisfactory answer” (1996:S28). In a discussion of design anthropology, Blomberg et al. (2003) list four principles of ethnography that carry over to inform applied research. The principles are, natural setting (understanding a research population within their natural setting), holism (looking at activities in context of a larger set of activities rather than in isolation), description (presenting an account of the research population as they occur), and members’ point of view (understanding situations from participant perspectives). Many fundamentals of social or cultural anthropology, both in terms of methods and theory, carry over into practice, such that Rylko-Bauer et al. suggest, “‘anthropology in use’ more accurately reflects disciplinary reality” (2006:187). In this section, present my project report within the context of anthropology in use.

One of the biggest things dividing academic (or basic) and applied research is the differences between the texts each type of research produces (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006). In this section, I present the ways in which my project was a blend of applied and basic research, and that the client report can be read as an ethnographic text. The research approach for the project report centered on a continuing community dialogue for

defining research questions, discussing theoretical implications, and for considering the applications of the findings. As such, I discuss how my research orientation contained aspects of a praxis approach to applied anthropology, following Warry (1992) and Singer (1994).

Applying ethnographic description

Applied and academic anthropology have been at odds for the last several decades. The postmodern critique, which rejects the imperialist roots of the discipline, has created an impasse between theory and practice (Singer 1994). One of the major tensions between academic and applied anthropology centers on the perceived differences in the results of research. The assumption is that academic (or basic) research is for the sake of knowledge creation and addresses theoretical problems, whereas applied research is for advocacy or intervention and addresses human problems (Baba 2000; Hill 2000; Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006). This characterization is of course not exactly accurate (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006), and as Warry (1992) suggests, anthropologists are able combine applied and basic research on a single project. My intention with this project was to attempt one possible configuration of combining applied and basic research by creating an ethnographic description of the research population. This description contains valuable information for members of the larger QS community and can serve as a resource for others as well.

The descriptive orientation

The role of the anthropologist is to conduct research, and to provide accurate descriptions of research populations. Some researchers may have general research questions or interests, which prefigure why they may have chosen a particular population for research in the first place. However, anthropologists do not often take on research projects in order to test an application of anthropological theory on a research population—the goal is usually to capture data and produce an ethnographic description.

As the result of my research, I was able to produce a report that was a description of a community. I tried to capture the lived experience of community members, and understand the meaning behind their practices, in answering Burdick's call for "a vision that allows ethnographic analyses of social movements to be useful to movement organizers themselves" (1995:362). The report is an ethnographically informed description of the process of organizing QS Meetups. The interests of the primary audience for the client report guided my considerations regarding style and format for the data presentation. The report was brief inasmuch as to convey useful information to QS Labs and the larger community of organizers. My research methods were solidly grounded in the ethnographic tradition, and as such, I do consider the client report as ethnographic writing.

Applied writing as “atheoretical”

In analyzing the data I collected for the client report, I simply synthesized the information, rather than overtly theorizing about the practices of the research population. The clients at QS Labs were interested in practical information that did not require a theoretical treatment of the data (besides, the people at QS Labs have their own theoretical concerns about their community that they freely explore). The absence of overt theory in the client report does not mean that my research was atheoretical, as demonstrated in this project report, especially regarding some of the considerations for research design. As the deliverables of applied research “often focus on hard data, well-defined methods, and concise policy recommendations...not surprisingly, theory used in such research is often hidden” (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006:184). Thus without companion texts such as this project report, the use and potential implications for anthropological theory remain largely unexposed.

Applying ethnographic knowledge

The client report can be put to use by more audiences than just the clients of the research. Of course, QS Labs will likely benefit the most from the information in the report. The report was well received, and leadership at QS Labs has already informed me that they have several new ideas for ways they can help support meetup groups inspired by the report. In terms of other uses of the report, even though the research focused on QS Meetups specifically, some aspects of the report may apply more broadly

to other kinds of meetups, or other types of organizations similar to meetups. The client report also has new information on QS and their organizational structure, as some of the basic ethnographic insights from my research. Other researchers interested in personal health movements, such as QS would find the client report useful, especially when coupled with this project report. That the client report has potential appeal to different audiences for different purposes, demonstrates the utility of combining basic and applied research.

Praxis in community-centered research

The postmodern critique of anthropology's colonial past has motivated practicing anthropologists to search for a model of "non-imperialist praxis," which "does not impose solutions nor even define community problems in need of response" (Singer 1994:336). Following Warry's (1992) praxis approach applied anthropology, and Singer's (1994) model of Community-Centered Praxis (CCP), I present my research as one configuration of these research approaches. While the setting for my research is decidedly different from the case studies in Warry (1992) and Singer (1994)⁴, nonetheless, there is sound reasoning to use a praxis approach in a wide variety of research applications. A CCP/praxis approach to research is ideal for community-centered consultancy research, such as the research for my project. I would argue that the client report is a direct product of considerations I made during my research, which mirror aspects of CCP and praxis approach to applied research.

Praxis

The anthropology Warray advocates “places ‘practical’ activity, informed by theory, at the center of applied research” (1992:155). The term that captures this, theory-informed practical activity, is praxis. For the concept of praxis, Warray draws from Marx’s (1845 [1986]) critique and suggestion that we ought to use knowledge (philosophy or theory) in order to change the world for the better, and similarly from Habermas (1973), who also suggests that “theory can only inform practice” (Warray 1992:156). Not only should theory inform practice, anthropologists should communicate theoretical implications of their research, to research participants, and in turn, how theory might inform intervention. The theory used for the research should not be applied externally, but “must be created from communicative action that involves participants as equal partners in research” (Warray 1992:156). A praxis approach changes the relationship between the researcher and knowledge production, by including the research participants’ view, thus, “return[ing] decision making...to the community instead of conceding this task to the expert” (Warray 1992:157). This approach empowers research participants, and, “can take place only by allowing theory to inform practical action and by returning knowledge for use to its point of origin” (Warray 1992:157).

Community-Centered Praxis

Singer proposed CCP as a research approach in response to an attempt by Johannsen (1992)⁵ to “discover a model for a non-imperialist praxis, one that does not impose solutions nor even define community problems in need of response” (1994:336), by merging post modernist and applied anthropology. CCP is informed primarily by two principles from Barger and Reza: “First, it is the needs and goals of a particular community-based group which are being served, and it is this "target group" which has the initiative in seeking changes. Second, the applied scientist takes a clear value position and an active involvement in change events” (1989:257). Similar to the praxis approach of Warry, with CCP the anthropologist engages in a community dialogue. Singer proposes that anthropologists engage in community dialogue to define the scope of the research, and then to figure out how best to take advantage of the anthropologist’s skills to arrive at community defined ends. “Through this process, community members and the anthropologist alike come to delineate more sharply the issues at hand and collectively to produce a theory (explaining the nature of the problems that are of central concern to the community) to guide subsequent action” (Singer 1994:341). Through the dialogue and subsequent research practice, a “reciprocal exchange” occurs, where community members gain from a transfer of skills and knowledge (empowered from the findings of research and the capabilities to utilize the knowledge), and the anthropologist gains from acquiring “a growing awareness of the subtle complexities of community life and experience” (Singer 1994:341).

With community defined ends, co-creation of knowledge and theory, and empowered community members in charge of interventions, the applied approaches Warry and Singer offer seem ideal as an answer to some of the criticisms applied anthropology faces. Surprisingly, neither the praxis approach nor CCP have made much impact in the literature. A review of articles that cite either Warry or Singer, reveals that most authors focus more on the case studies in each article as they apply to other research on similar populations⁶. The exception is Kozaitis (2000), who offers her own research model, CARE (culture, assessment, research, and engagement) which is more akin to Participatory Action Research, than CCP/praxis approach models.

Praxis in relation to the client report

While I did not intentionally follow the models offered by Warry or Singer in the research design for my project, post hoc analysis of the considerations I made in the research design included aspects of what both authors propose, and I consider that my project can appropriately be considered one configuration of a praxis approach to applied anthropology. Both Warry, and Singer admit that following the models they propose can be difficult in different research settings. In some cases, including participants in the co-exploration of theory, or in defining problems and questions for the community may not be possible, or community members may not be interested in dialogue with anthropologists. As such, a praxis approach will work differently in fieldwork depending on the situation. In the case of my research, the participants were

all very interested in engaging in dialogue about anthropological theory, methods of applied research, and the implications of the eventual client report.

The research for the client report began with community-defined ends. QS Labs had a specific goal in mind, finding new ways to support organizers of emerging meetups. I had a dialogue with leadership at QS Labs on what role I could take as an anthropologist, conducting research on the community of organizers, and what skills would be relevant for producing knowledge that would help QS Labs achieve their goals. The dialogue included discussions of theoretical implications of the research population. In the initial conversation I had with Gary Wolf, he brought up the concept of *habitus*, and we discussed how it may apply to a self-tracker's quest to build new habits. We also discussed other dimensions of theory, such as, self-tracking practices as a reach for greater agency over health care choices and health information, versus competing theories, such as the Foucauldian notion of disciplined bodies through Biopower⁷.

As the interviews with meetup organizers progressed, the dialogue around research questions and theory continued, iteratively including the perspective of community members for each proceeding stage of the research. Each interview began with an introduction of the project. I described the nature of the research and the research questions from QS Labs. I made my position in the project as an anthropologist clear. I stated what I hoped to accomplish, and generally, how the information from the research would inform potential interventions. The input I received from participants on each of these topics iteratively refined the orientation of the research.

Discussing the research questions with participants would lead to discussions about alternative research questions that might more accurately reflect concerns of the meetup organizers. The interview was intentionally designed to elicit from participants, research questions they would like to me to investigate. In this way, I attempted to bring in each participant as an equal partner in defining the research questions.

The topic of my role as an anthropologist, often lead into discussions about anthropological research methods and theory. Several participants were familiar with anthropology, having taken anthropology courses in college. Most of the participants were not familiar with applied anthropology, and were interested to hear about the range of different settings in which practicing anthropologists work. In discussing my role in the research project, participants offered their perspective on how I could use my skills to help generate knowledge for the community.

Discussing my theoretical interests in medical anthropology, and science and technology studies, often led into conversations about theory in medical anthropology (such as agency, and explanatory models) or science studies (such the social construction of scientific knowledge). In one interview specifically, I discussed the topic of “surveillance medicine” with the participant. Generally speaking, members of the research population are very self-reflective on their practices. Participants were often eager to hear what insights anthropological theory could add to their own understanding, and evaluated the extent to which the theory I offered might apply to their situation, or self-tracking.

Mentioning the potential applications of the research often led into discussion about the support role of QS Labs, and new ways individual organizers imagine the report might be used. Several organizers were having difficulties with their groups, which they were thinking about, or actively trying to solve, alone or with the assistance of QS Labs. Some organizers welcomed the research and hoped it would answer some of the questions they have been wondering about, by looking at the experiences across the different QS Meetups. Organizers sometimes mentioned specific issues they were having, and asked if others had the same issue, and if they did, how these issues were overcome. While I was somewhat reluctant at first to offer information, as the interviews progressed, I began to offer more information based on the stories of other organizers. In this way, knowledge exchange started taking place during the data collection phase. As I learned more about the community of organizers, I could return that information back to different members of that community.

It is clear that my research took a praxis approach. Every step of the research focused on continuing dialogue between members from the research population at all levels, regarding methods, theory, and application, and returning useful knowledge back to the community. Practicing anthropologists have a role in acting as short-term consultants in community based organizations (Wilson 1998), similar to the position I had in this project. A praxis approach is ideal for community-based projects, to negotiate the intended focus for the research between the research sponsors, the research population, and the anthropologist, whose role is to uncover and organize ethnographic

knowledge. With a praxis approach to applied anthropology, the skills of the anthropologist become the tools of the community, and the means to reach community-defined ends.

Praxis and ethics

I am not suggesting that by ascribing the nomenclature of praxis to my research project, it becomes elevated to a place of privilege over other applied research projects. I imagine that many other practitioners involve different aspects of what Warr or Singer advocate, without ever knowing or referencing a praxis approach, by simply following sound research practices. As applied researchers, practicing anthropologists have to follow ethical guidelines for research. Even though the Society for Applied Anthropology was the first group of practicing anthropologists to create a code of ethics⁸, practicing anthropologists have not become immune to critique. Events such as Project Camelot (see Solovey 2001), continue to remind us of past breaches in ethics. Current projects, such as the Human Terrain System (see Gonzalez 2008) continue to question the ethics of applied social science. I think the utility of the praxis is more than just about attempting to bridge the theory–practice divide. Emphasizing aspects of the praxis approach can help remind us to keep ethics in the foreground, and to demonstrate to others that as practitioners we take ethical considerations of research seriously.

Notes

¹ Among the different types of rapid assessment are, Rapid Assessment Process (Beebe, 1995, 2001), Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Procedures (Taplin et al, 2002), and Rapid Rural Appraisals (Chambers, 1994).

² The FAQ is found at <http://quantifiedself.com/how-to-start-your-own-qs-showtell/>

³ One of the most often mentioned active self-tracking projects comes from one of the members of the Bay Area QS Meetup, Robin Barooah. Barooah wanted to lose weight and feel more energized, so he designed a simple project where each day a few hours after eating lunch, he would ask himself if he felt either energized or lethargic. Barooah did not keep a record of the data, or conduct any analyses. Just by creating an opportunity to reflect on his behavior each day, he was able to lose 45 pounds over the course of a few months.

⁴ The case study in Warry's (1992) article is about designing health programs and delivery strategies with the North Shore Tribal Council and Whitefish Lake First Nation, in Canada. The case study in Singer's (1994) article focuses on community partnership in the Hartford Needle Exchange Program.

⁵ Johannsen (1992) suggests in this article that through the blending of postmodernist and applied anthropology, a new form of anthropological practice will emerge, which will be mutually beneficial for both sides. The self-reflexive orientation of

post modernist anthropology would act as a check for applied anthropology, creating an anthropological practice that would not impose research questions or projects on populations. However Singer (1994) argues that several aspects of the post modernist orientation are antithetical to the idea of anthropologists as actors in interventions. Singer also states that it is not necessary to merge post modernist and applied anthropology in order for the applied field to benefit from greater self-reflexivity.

⁶ A few authors (such as, Napolitano & Jones 2006; Singer 1997; Trotter 2011; Waterston 1997) site Singer (1994) for the aspects that relate to the field of medical anthropology. Fewer authors site Singer for implications for applied anthropology (such as, Bennett 1996; Seithel 2004), and implications for educational anthropology (Cammarota 2008; Hyland 2000). The vast majority of articles that site Singer relate to public health (such as Bond 1997; Dulmus & Cristalli 2012; Gorman et al 1995; Israel et al 1998; Jacklin & Kinoshameg 2008; Lantz et al 2006; Miller & Greene 2005; Poehlman 2008; Singer et al 1995; Shaw 2012), either because each article focuses on research on populations with HIV, or on community-based, or participatory research. However, none of the research takes CCP as a research approach.

The majority of authors citing Warry (1992) either reference his case study in relation to other research on First Nations in Canada (such as Dyck 1997; Hedican 1995; Jacklin 2009; Jacklin & Kinoshameg 2008; Schensul & Trickett 2009) or regarding continuing attempts to bridge the theory/practice divide in anthropology (such as Baba

2000; Bennett 1996; Burdick 1995; Cammarota 2008; Hill 2000; Kozaitis 2000). However, none of the authors specifically follow the praxis approach that Worry advocates.

⁷ Foucault (1978) uses the concept of Biopower to describe the way that a population is managed in modernity. The modern state is contrasted against sovereignties. In a sovereign state, power is centralized in the monarch, who essentially reigns authority over who lives and who dies. In this situation, the various forms of state control arise directly from the center. In modern states, power is more diffuse, and in order to manage a population, states need to find ways to make the population manage itself. One of the important ways this occurs is through *normalization*. Normalization is the product of increased information collected about populations, and the creation of statistical averages, such as normal ranges for blood pressure or body mass index (BMI). Normalized averages present a “standard” which members of a population measure themselves against, and ideally, self-manage to meet these averages.

The practices of self-trackers could be seen fitting in with this assessment of modernity. Self-trackers often use normalized standards to design projects and measure their progress against, either trying to meet or exceed the standards. However, a segment of self-trackers are interested in re-evaluating norms, and producing self-knowledge, which at times contradicts authoritative knowledge (such as Seth Roberts’ experiments eating half a stick of butter every day to improve cognition, at no detriment to his cardiac health). Some aspects of self-tracking are a reaction against the

inadequacy of the “advice” about how to manage one’s self that we receive through the diffuse biopolitical frameworks. To label self-tracking as a product of Biopower would mean casting any kind of self-management or self-improvement as such, and would ignore any aspect of the self-trackers’ quest for greater agency and knowledge of the self.

⁸ The first SfAA code of ethics was published in 1951. The current version can be found at <http://www.sfaa.net/sfaaethic.html>.

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Appendix A: Phase I interview instrument

Quantified Self and self-tracking based approaches to health management

Purpose

The goals of this project are to:

1. Understand the goals of self-tracking and self-experimenting.
2. Examine what self-trackers do with the data they collect.
3. Examine what kinds of self-experiments they conduct.
4. Capture the variation of meaning behind self-tracking practices.
5. Sample the variation of self-tracking practices.
6. Deepen conceptions of the human-technology interface regarding health management.
7. Determine whether self-tracking has made a difference in people's lives.
8. Discern the criteria by which people choose self-tracking practices, determine their efficacy, and gauge success.

The objectives of the interview are:

1. Obtain general descriptive background about the interviewees experience with self-tracking and self-experimenting, the material culture relating to self-tracking; the interviewees health management history.
2. Elicit stories of changing self-tracking practices over time, and changing relationships to technology and data about one's self.
3. Obtain a narrative around the interviewee's involvement with Quantified Self (meet-ups, QS blog, etc.). Special emphasis on initial reactions to QS, the motivations for participating, and what drives continued participation.
4. Discern the models of health management, including key metaphors and symbols, to get at what the ends of the practices are, and their 'rules' around self-tracking, self-experimenting and involvement in the QS community.
5. Reaffirm descriptive elements of the interviewee's personal health management history, and elicit evaluative commentary.

Interview Questions:

Opening

1. Can you tell me your age and occupation?
2. About how long have you been self-tracking?
3. How long ago did you find out about QS?

Part 1: Quantified Self

4. [About meet-ups] How long have you been going to meet-ups? How often do you go?
5. Can you tell me about the first meet-up you attended? Why did you go? How did you find out about it?
6. Any other meet-ups that stand out you can think of?
7. What do you see as the role of meet-ups to be within your own practices of self-tracking?
8. [About the blog] How often do you read articles or watch videos on the blog?
9. What do you see the role of the articles and videos on the blog to be within your own practices of self-tracking?
10. How often do you make posts or comment on posts? What are the kinds of things you post or comment about?
11. [About the QS conference] Any reactions or reflections you have about the QS conference?

Part 2: Self-tracking

12. Can you start by going into a little about your health history up until the point when you started self-tracking?
13. How has the health history of some of your friends or family possibly influenced your own ideas about illness and health care, or health management?
14. What was going on in your life when you started self-tracking?
15. Can you tell me about your health history since you started self-tracking?
16. What was the first thing you started tracking, and what that?
17. Can you tell me about your past and current things you do around self-tracking?
18. Can you take me through your average daily routine for self-tracking?

19. What does a full cycle of self-tracking look like, Is there a daily cycle, weekly monthly?
What are all the steps?
20. How many different things do you track?
21. Do you track to just monitor your health and other things like time or finances? Or do you track to run self-experiments?
22. Can you tell me about some of the experiments you have conducted?
23. Any other experiments that you have heard other people do in the QS community that stand out?
24. Can you think of anything you are interested in tracking but do not track for yourself?
Any future experiments you would like to do?
25. Can you think of anything you would be interested in tracking but there isn't technology available to track it?

Part 3: Devices and technology

26. Can you tell me about the devices you have used or currently use for self tracking?
 27. What do you look for in a device? What makes a good one?
 28. Do you have any devices ion you right now collecting data? [ask to take a picture of the device]
 29. Are there any devices for self-tracking that you don't have that you would like to get?
- [END OF FIRST SESSION]

Technology cont.

30. What do you see as the role of technology in self-tracking?
31. What do you see as the relationship between technology and the Quantified Self orientation to health management?
32. How has your own life been changed or shaped by new forms of technology?
33. What do you see as the future trend of new forms of technology in health management or self-tracking?

Part 4: Data

- 34. What kinds of data do you collect?
- 35. What kinds of things do you do with the data you collect?
- 36. How do you understand the data to reflect or connect with what you do day-to-day?
- 37. How has what you do day-to-day changed as a result of the data?
- 38. Do you see any bad sides to collecting data on yourself?

Part 5: Summation

- 39. What do you understand the goals of self-tracking to be?
- 40. What were your expectations coming into self-tracking?
- 41. How would you react to a “failed” self-experiment?
- 42. Regarding the QS community, (the blog and meet-ups) what are the practices you like around the community? And why is that? What are the practices you do not like? And why is that?
- 43. Were you surprised by anything that you have encountered in either your self-tracking, or in your engagement with QS?
- 44. How has self-tracking made an impact on your goals, regarding health management or other things that you track? Or has changed your goals?
- 45. What have been the consequences of self-tracking and self-experimenting for you? Is there anything you would have like to do differently? Why?
- 46. How have other people in the QS community, or the QS community in general, been influential in your life?
- 47. How have other people, friends or family, reacted to your self-tracking or experimenting?
- 48. What do you see as the end to your self-tracking? How do you know it has been successful?
- 49. What is the single greatest impact self-tracking has made on your life?

Part 6: Ending Comments

50. Is there anything else you think might be important that we did not talk about?

51. Anything you would like to reiterate about your experiences?

End

Appendix B: Research Questions from QS Labs

I'm thinking about what pieces of it would be especially valuable to QS as a growing organization whose mission is to support these folks.

I think I would like to find out about the motivation and experiences of the organizers.

The movement grows when individual people find a way to connect with others and devote some time to forming a local community.

This is still a relatively small group of people.

Who are they?

What were the key factors that led them to start something?

What was easy and what was hard about it?

How do their qualities influence the culture of the local meetup?

What alternative ways of doing things are foreclosed by their choices, but visible in other communities where different decisions were made?

Appendix C: QS Meetup Assessment Questions

- How long self-tracking? How did you get into self-tracking? Where did you find out about new devices for tracking?
- How did you find out about QS?
- Do you just track data, or do you also conduct self-experiments?
- What are your thoughts on passive vs active tracking?
- How did you go from being just a self-tracker to a meet-up organizer?
- Why did you to start the meet-up? What was your desired outcome?
- When you began what did you imagine the meet-up would provide? As you began to actually start meet-ups, how were those expectations met? What expectations changed? Do you have any hopes that were not realized?
- What personal benefits do you enjoy from organizing the meet-up?
- What do you see as the future of your particular meet-up?
- What are the some of the key lessons that you have learned from organizing meet-ups?
What are the suggestions you would make to others wanting to organize a successful meet-up?
- What are some of the obstacles you have encountered in organizing meet-ups? Getting locations, using the meetup.com site to coordinate, getting new members?
 - What kinds of venues do you use?
- What are the obstacles you have encountered around conducting meet-ups?
Presentation technology, presenters, poor attendance?

- Is there a tech focused community in your area?
- How much do you give feedback to the presenters?
- What kinds of support has QS has provided in your starting the meet-up?
- Is there any support you would like that you don't get?
- Imagine someone was starting a meet-up, what advice would you give them?
- How do you like to run your meet-ups? Are you fairly hands on, hands off? How do you understand your own leadership style influences the meet-up?
- Can you tell me of a concrete example of how what you do in your group might differ from other groups you have experienced?
- Have you been to other QS meet-up groups? Did you model your meet-up off of the other ones?
- Have you been active in anything similar to a meet-up group? Is there any way that these other activities influence how you organize, or what you would like to get out of your group?
- Is there anything that you would have done differently if you were to start a new group?
- Would you like additional opportunities to lead, such as talking to the press or organizing different kind of events?

Appendix D: QS Assessment Report

Quantified Self Meetup Group Assessment

Prepared for:
Quantified Self Labs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Quantified Self Meetup groups are rapidly spreading to countries all over the world, and leadership at QS Labs does not know precisely much of what meetup group organizers are experiencing. Because of this, an ethnographic assessment was conducted to get a better understanding of the barriers and challenges organizers encounter, and to uncover some of the points of innovation occurring in different groups. The major finding is that there are three main challenges organizers face: finding reliable venues, getting people to attend meetings, and getting presenters for meetings. The main barrier preventing organizers from overcoming these challenges is lack of time. Six areas of interest highlight the other main findings.

The meetup profile

Meetup organizers come from a variety of backgrounds, as students, engineers, and technology and health professionals. They also have different engagements with self-tracking. Most organizers see themselves as “advanced users,” but depending on the project, their practices fall along a spectrum from low technology involvement to high technology involvement. In addition, while some organizers were tracking when they started their meetup, others were not.

Cities where QS Meetups are starting tend to have a few characteristics in common. Cities often have active tech communities, which can include the presence of tech start-ups, hacker spaces, and other tech related meetups. Some cities are also major health centers, with a large health industry presence, or centers for health research.

Goals & benefits

Organizers share some common goals, which are either personal goals or goals they have for the group. As personal goals, organizers want to grow local self-tracking communities, become more social, and explore professional opportunities in the QS community. For group goals, organizers want to build an environment where new ideas can be created, expand the group membership outside of tech circles, and have the group members set the agenda for the group.

Meetup organizers enjoy several personal benefits from having a leadership role. Organizers get to meet new and interesting people, be influential in making new connections between members, learn about self-tracking tools and methods, and feel like part of the global QS community.

Planning

There are several considerations organizers make when planning their meetups. Meeting frequency is one, and organizers mostly agree six to eight weeks is the optimal time between meetings. The features of Meetup.com make it a great tool for planning, although a few organizers have trouble with some of the features of the site, and some complain about the fee. Organizers differ on how actively they advertise for the group and meetings. More advertising may be necessary in places where Meetup.com is not well known. For the most part, organizers have difficulty lining up presenters for meetings, and this can be a challenge for organizing.

Venue

Finding reliable venues so that meetings can happen is a significant challenge for some organizers. Finding venues can take extra effort from organizers of smaller groups especially. Some organizers are not familiar with their city well enough to know the places their group could be meeting. While there are benefits from moving the meetings to different venues each time, some smaller groups consistently use a single space.

Format

The format for meetings is generally the same across groups. Presentations mainly focus on personal self-tracking projects, while some groups allow toolmakers to present works in progress to get group feedback. Smaller groups often have more Q & A, and are more conversational. Most groups have a social hour either before or after the presentations.

Support & recommendations

Organizers feel that leadership at QS Labs makes a genuine effort to support them. Being provided with contacts has helped several organizers get their group started. The FAQ for meetup organizing has been helpful. Providing a videographer and posting the videos on the QS blog helps groups feel connected to the source. Having meetings announced on the QS blog and Facebook page also helps groups feel connected.

Based on feedback from organizers, there are several recommendations for QS Labs.

- Create open channels of feedback for organizers to share their problems and ideas with QS Labs, and create channels for feedback so individual members can share ideas with their group and QS Labs.
- Create stronger connections across leadership, so that organizers can feel more connected with each other, and provide peer support.
- Encourage groups to have several co-organizers, so there is less work for any one person to do, and to increase the diversity of ideas, projects, and people coming to the meetings.
- Encourage organizers to make event planning more open, so individual group members can help organize. Members may not want to take a leadership role, but may have an idea for a onetime event.
- Find ways to supplement presentations, especially for the smaller groups, where organizers may feel like it is not worth scheduling meetings because there is not enough presentation content.

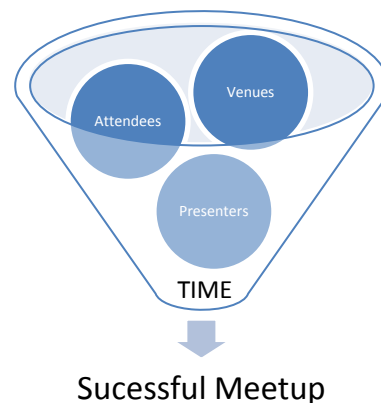
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to present the findings from six months of ethnographic research on Quantified Self meetup groups. The idea for this project came out of a discussion with Gary Wolf, co-founder of Quantified Self, in September of 2011. The QS global community is growing rapidly, and new meetups are starting all over the world. At the start of this research, there were 33 official Quantified Self meetup groups, now (as of March 16, 2012) there are 54. With the intention of finding out more about some of these meetups in order to enable QS Labs to provide better support to new emerging groups, we came up with an idea for a project focusing on meetup organizers. Gary thought it would be valuable to know more about who some of the organizers are, what motivated them to start a meetup, some of the challenges and barriers they have been running into, and some of the points of innovation occurring in the meetups.

What is a successful meetup?

When organizers discuss whether their meetup is successful or not, the main factors they consider are whether the group is meeting as frequently as they would like it to be, and if there are new people coming to each meeting. In addition to these two factors, some organizers also mention that a meetup is successful when organizing does not feel like “work.” The message organizers get from QS Labs is that organizing should not feel like “work,” and most of the organizers try to follow this advice.

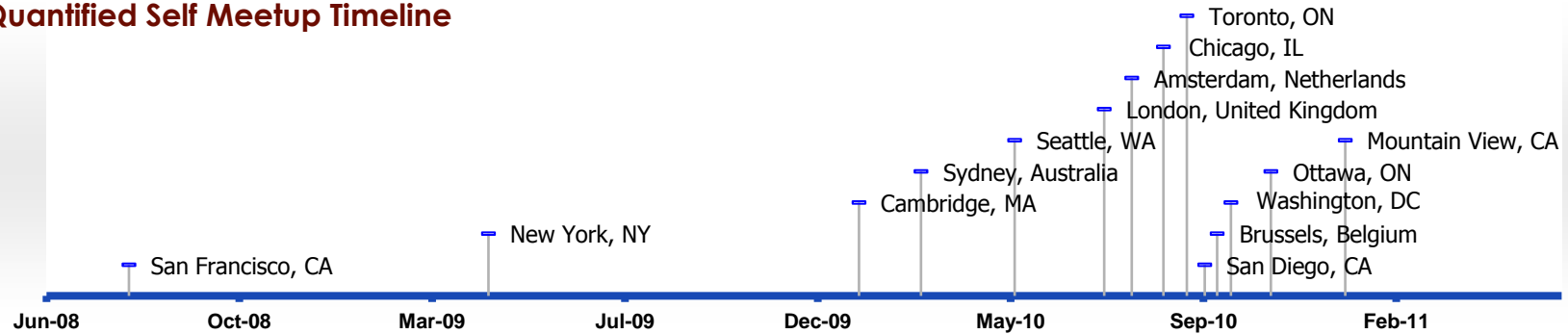
Concerning the hurdles for organizing a successful meetup, organizers consistently mention three main challenges: getting reliable venues, getting people to attend the meetings, and getting presenters for their meetings. These three challenges are connected in different ways for different organizers, in different cities, with different situations. The main barrier for many organizers that keeps them from overcoming these challenges is time. Organizers have to balance their personal and professional lives, in addition to organizing the meetup. These three challenges and the main barrier of time, are the pretext for all that follows, with each section of this report providing some context to what organizers are experiencing.



Which meetups are successful?

By using the criteria of meeting frequency and meetup growth, it is clear that some groups are more successful than others are. Some groups are growing faster, and other groups are meeting more frequently. One could assume that the longer established meetups would be larger and meeting more frequently. However, looking at some data on the meetups shows that this is not always the case.

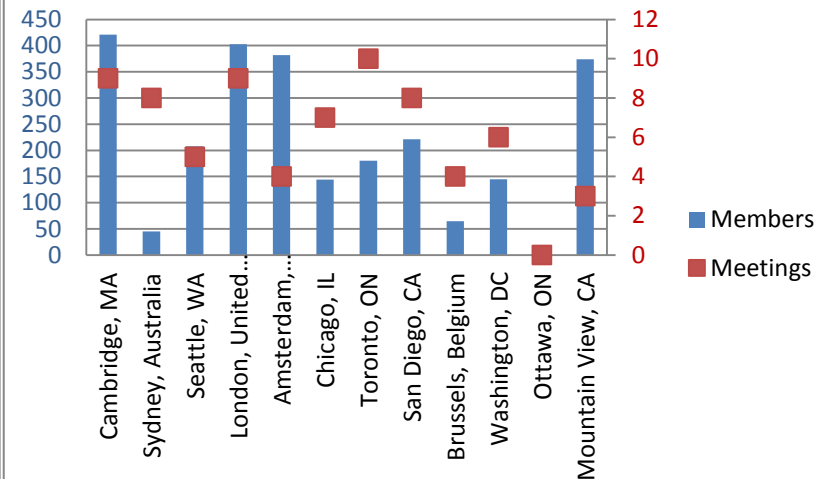
Quantified Self Meetup Timeline



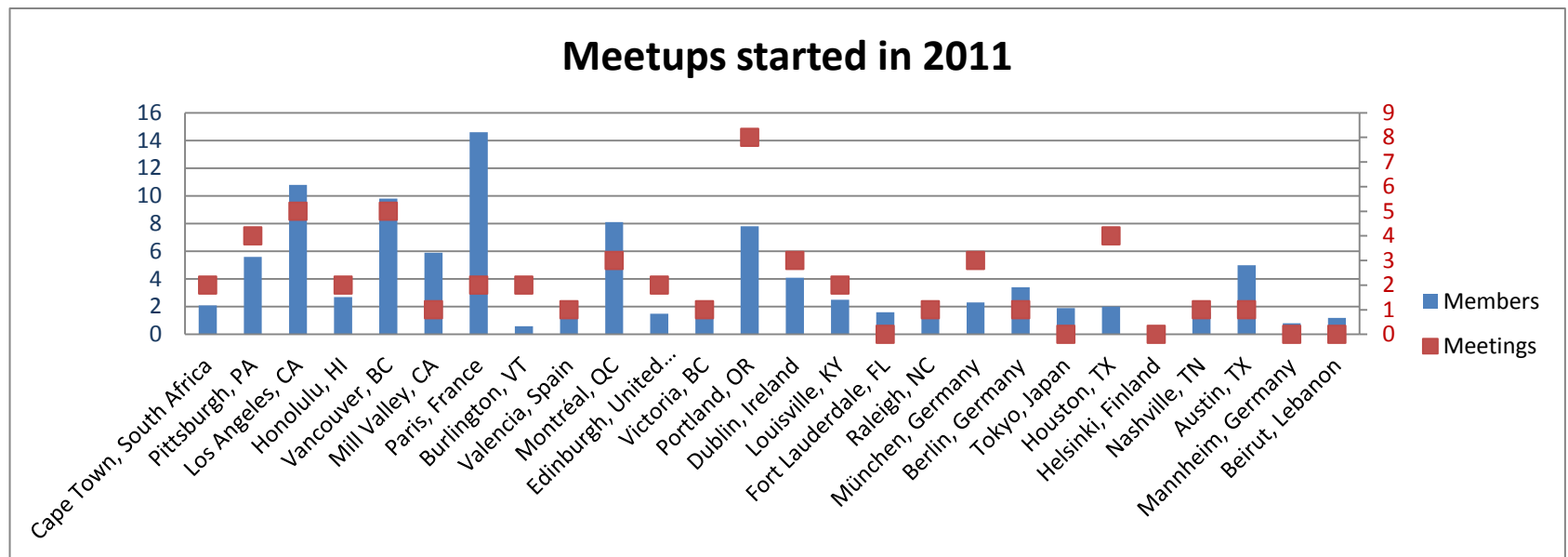
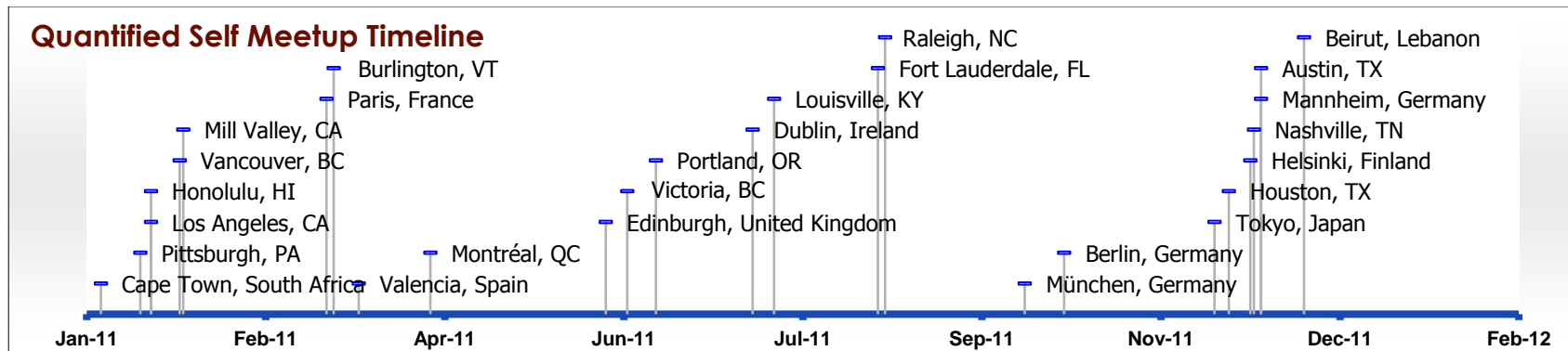
Meetups started in 2008/2009



Meetups started in 2010

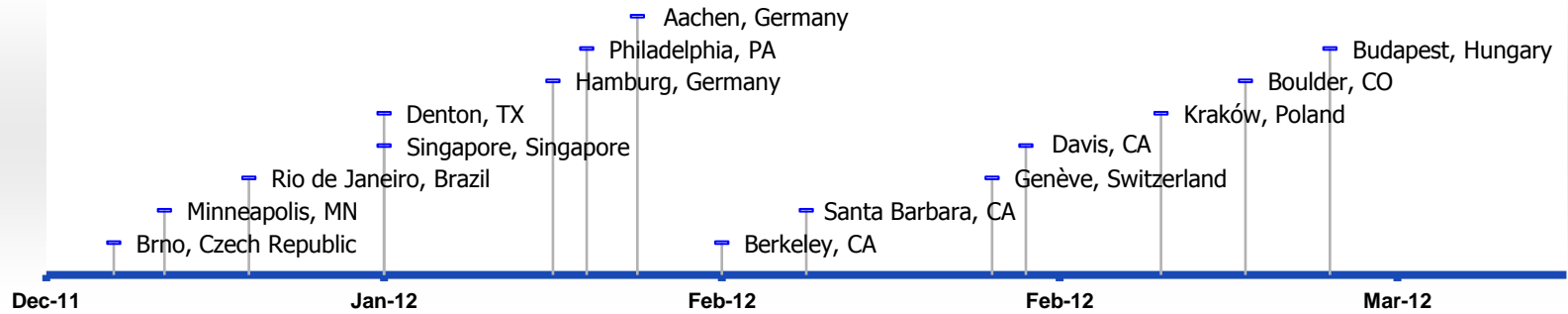


Timeline of meetups founded from 2008 – 2010, with data on total group members, and number of group meetings (as of March, 16, 2012)

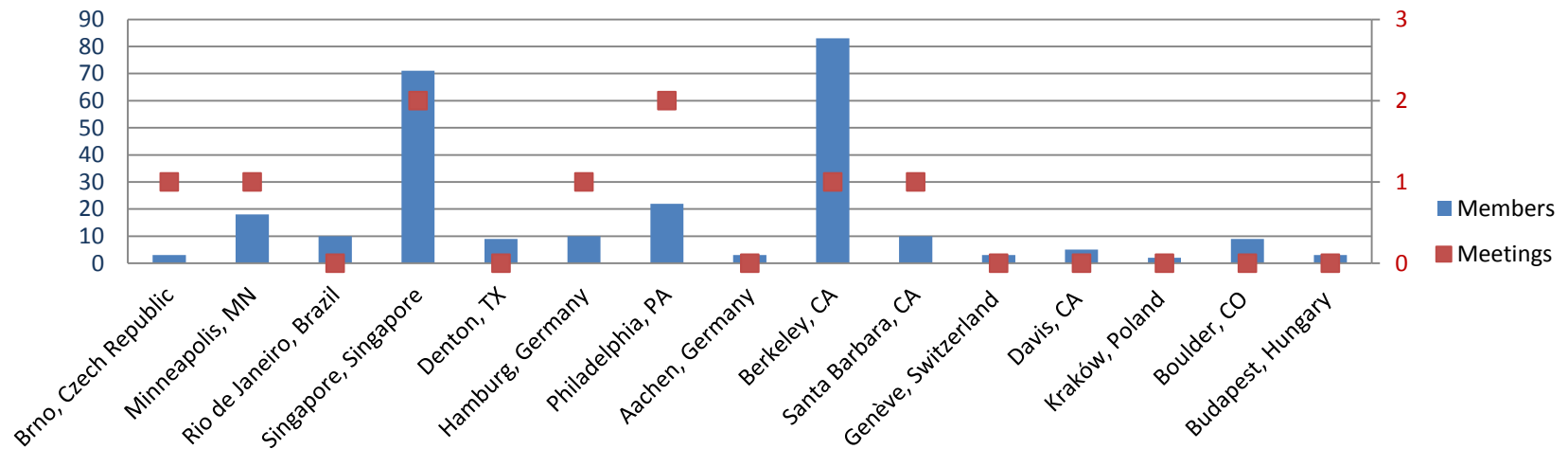


Timeline of meetups founded in 2011, with data on total group members, and number of group meetings (as of March, 16, 2012)

Quantified Self Meetup Timeline



Meetups started in 2012



Timeline of meetups founded in 2012, with data on total group members, and number of group meetings (as of March, 16, 2012)

Quantified Self Meetup Group Data

City	San Francisco, CA	New York, NY	Cambridge, MA	Sydney, AU	Seattle, WA	London, UK	Amsterdam, NL
Members	2085	1007	421	45	208	403	382
Meetings	27	17	9	8	5	9	4
City	Chicago, IL	Toronto, ON	San Diego, CA	Brussels, BE	Washington, DC	Ottawa, ON	Mountain View, CA
Members	144	180	221	65	145	12	374
Meetings	7	10	8	4	6	0	3
City	Cape Town, ZA	Pittsburgh, PA	Los Angeles, CA	Honolulu, HI	Vancouver, BC	Mill Valley, CA	Paris, FR
Members	2.1	5.6	10.8	2.7	9.8	5.9	14.6
Meetings	2	4	5	2	5	1	2
City	Burlington, VT	Valencia, ES	Montréal, QC	Edinburgh, UK	Victoria, BC	Portland, OR	Dublin, IE
Members	0.6	1.3	8.1	1.5	2.2	7.8	4.1
Meetings	2	1	3	2	1	8	3
City	Louisville, KY	Fort Lauderdale, FL	Raleigh, NC	München, DE	Berlin, DE	Tokyo, JP	Houston, TX
Members	2.5	1.6	2.1	2.3	3.4	1.9	2
Meetings	2	0	1	3	1	0	4
City	Helsinki, FI	Nashville, TN	Austin, TX	Mannheim, DE	Beirut, LB	Brno, CZ	Minneapolis, MN
Members	0.5	1.6	5	0.8	1.2	3	18
Meetings	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
City	Rio de Janeiro, BR	Singapore, SG	Denton, TX	Hamburg, DE	Philadelphia, PA	Aachen, DE	Berkeley, CA
Members	10	71	9	10	22	3	83
Meetings	0	2	0	1	2	0	1
City	Santa Barbara, CA	Genève, CH	Davis, CA	Kraków, PL	Boulder, CO	Budapest, HU	
Members	10	3	5	2	9	3	
Meetings	1	0	0	0	0	0	

As the charts show, there is no obvious pattern of growth for QS Meetups. There are groups with a very small membership base that have had many meetings. The opposite is also true. While the age of the meetup does have some correlation with size, this is not always the case. Some meetups started in 2010 are the same size as ones started earlier this year. Clearly there is more to these pictures than just the data, and finding out why some groups are growing while others are not will take more than just looking at the numbers.

The Research

This report is informed by 12 interviews conducted from November 2011 through January 2012. Ten of the interviewees identify as founding members of their meetup group, and the other two primarily identify as co-organizers. The sample included organizers from meetup groups of different sizes, ranging from very small groups of around 20 members, to the second largest group with now over 1000 members. The criteria for choosing a group were that it needed to have had at least two meetings, and be a primarily English-speaking group. Organizers for meetups that fit these criteria were contacted via email, with the help of Alexandra Carmichael, director of Quantified Self, providing e-introductions. All organizers that were interested in participating in the research were invited for an interview. During this time, I also attended three meetings of the Bay Area QS Meetup group, and informally spoke to some of the attendees and organizers at these meetings.

Use of Terms

The term “meetup” in discussion can refer to an individual QS Meetup group, the events a meetup group holds, and the website QS Meetup groups use to organize. For the sake of clarity in this report, I use different terms to differentiate these. The term “meetup” always refers to a QS Meetup group, unique to each city, or collectively sometimes as meetups, or simply groups. The term “meeting” always refers to the events each QS Meetup group holds. The website QS Meetup groups use to organize is always referred to as “Meetup.com.”

In most cases, Quantified Self is abbreviated as QS.

Format of the Report

Data from the interviews was arranged into six main topics, each with several sub-topics. The exact number of respondents for any position on a topic is often not mentioned, because for any topic there was always a range of responses, and further discussions with other meetup organizers will likely reveal other responses. I tried to blend responses that were similar together and present a spectrum of positions on any topic, while at the same time trying to preserve the individual voice of each organizer and have their experience inform the presentation of the data. Throughout each section, there are comment boxes. These comments are derived from direct statements made by organizers.

The report begins with some basic background information on the landscape of QS Meetups. The first section, The Meetup Profile, focuses on the characteristics of meetups, the organizers and co-organizers, and the cities where QS Meetups are starting. From there, the report moves to explore the outlook of organizers. The second section, Goals & Benefits focuses

on the different kinds of personal and group goals organizers have for their group, and some of the personal benefits organizers enjoy from organizing their meetup. The next step is to look into what organizers go through to get their meetup going. The third section, Planning, explores some of the different aspects of managing a meetup and planning a meeting. Because getting reliable venues is an issue that came up in nearly all the interviews, the fourth section, Venues, focuses entirely on the venue problem. Operationally, the different meetups are similar in many aspects, but also have some differences. The fifth section, Format, focuses on how different organizers run their meetings. Organizers mentioned several ways they feel QS Labs has already assisted them with their meetup. The final section, Support & Recommendations, focuses on the different aspects of support, and offers some ideas based on responses from organizers.

Section 1: THE MEETUP PROFILE

There is no single profile of a QS Meetup. However, most meetups share some common characteristics. Some of the characteristics that are extremely important for the success of one meetup, but not present at all in another.

This section explores...

- The profile of group organizers
- The topic of co-organizers
- The profile of cities where meetups are located

The People: Organizers

Organizer Background

People come into organizing a QS Meetup from a variety of backgrounds. Some are graduate students at large universities, others work in the health sector, and several of the organizers work developing self-tracking related tools or other technology in some design or engineering capacity.

Regarding self-tracking as a practice, it was about an equal split between those that came into organizing from a heavy technology supported tracking practice, those that are more “pen & paper” self-trackers, and those that were not tracking at all when they started the meetup. The different backgrounds that organizers have also give them different perspectives on self-tracking. Some look at self-tracking from a more individual perspective, as an approach to build new habits and create behavior change. Other organizers see the trend of self-tracking related technology as the latest development of contemporary technology, some aspects of which will become common in everyone’s lives. Some others see that self-tracking is a response to inadequacies in our current health care system, and hope that QS as a movement can help bring some of these critiques into discussions about the future of medicine.

Motivation

The motivation to start a local meetup is different for every organizer. Some organizers were inspired to start their own local self-tracker community after going to a meeting of the Bay Area Meetup, or after attending the first Quantified Self Conference. Organizers spoke of being inspired by the openness and honesty of the group and the stories people share about personal life struggles. Some people start a meetup in order to be inspired and inspire others to take on the task of self-tracking.

If you are thinking of starting a meetup, start it for personal reasons rather than business reasons.

Other organizers had not attended a QS Meetup before they started their own, but were motivated by the idea of building a local self-tracking community. These organizers usually are frequent readers of the articles and often watch the videos on the QS blog, read books

suggested in the articles, and generally try to educate themselves the best they can about self-tracking and the QS community.

Leadership Styles

Nearly all organizers said they try to have as little influence on the group as possible. Organizers feel that their role is to assist in creating the conditions for self-tracking communities to grow, simply by making meetings happen. In several occasions organizers specifically said they want the community to set the agenda for itself.

Most organizers have some experience taking a leadership role, but say that organizing a QS Meetup is very different from any of their previous tasks. Professionally, organizers have led design teams or the other project teams. Others have experience organizing clubs and activities from their time in college or even high school. However, organizers say the other types of organizing are so dissimilar that the experience does not reflect or influence how they run their meetup, or why they started the meetup in the first place.

Feeling connected to the group is important when stepping up to a leadership position. You should have a significant level of identification with the group, and feel that you want to contribute something back.

A few organizers said that starting a social group like a meetup is completely out of their character, even for some that have previous organizing experience. A few organizers in this position said that they do not feel like they are doing a good job organizing their meetup, and that probably someone else could do better. On the other side, some organizers said that they are naturally very social people, and that starting a meetup is not out of their character. Starting a meetup just made sense to them.

The People: Co-organizers

It seems like there is a lot of work to do to get a meetup up and running. Although, some organizers said that they might be making things more complicated than is necessary. In addition, some organizers do not feel like they have enough time to commit to organizing. This is why having one or more co-organizers is probably the best support a group can have to help make meetings happen.

All of the organizers who did not have a co-organizer said they would like to have one. However, just because a meetup has one or more co-organizers does not mean a group is more successful in terms of meeting as frequently as the organizers would like, and in not making organizing seem like extra work. In fact, one of the most successful groups in both regards (Toronto) is headed up by only one person, and other groups that have co-organizers, are not meeting as frequently as the organizers would like. This points to the fact that there is no best way to run a meetup that will apply in all situations.

If you do not have a co-organizer, try to get one. If you already have a co-organizer, try to get a few more. It is better to have people you can rely on to split up the work of organizing.

Granted that each group is different in terms of its leadership, overall I can suggest that in general groups benefit from having co-organizers.

Some benefits of having co-organizers are:

- Less load on any one person, splitting the duties can make organizing more enjoyable.
- Co-organizers can help diversify a group, especially when they have a different disposition towards self-tracking.
- Having co-organizers reduces the feeling of “ownership” in the group.
- Co-organizers may be connected into different networks, and can bring in different people.
- A co-organizer volunteers to be a regular supporter of a local self-tracking community, and if nothing else, is another person to be there at the meetings.

The Cities: Tech Community

For the most part, people are starting QS Meetups in cities that have a solid tech community.

Organizers mentioned several attributes that contribute to a tech community:

- If a city has tech related start-ups, or large technology companies established there.
- If there are other technology related meetups, or meetups on programming languages.
- If a city has an active hacker community and hacker spaces
- If a city has one or more universities with large or well known, technology related departments.

The Cities: Major Health Centers

Some meetups also are in cities that are a major center for the health industry. In some cities, there is a major presence of large health insurance companies. One organizer specifically mentioned that some health insurance companies are starting to show interest in self-tracking as a way to potentially gauge the health of individuals, and whether they are a risk from an insurance perspective. Other cities are major centers for health research, both in the private sector and in research universities. On occasion, organizers said they feel like a QS Meetup belongs in their city because of the strong health industry presence, and that their own interests in self-tracking mostly relate to health.

If there is any tech or health related event in your area like a Bar Camp or Health Camp, see if you can present, or get some members from your meetup to present. If nothing else, try to attend and meet new people that might be interested in a QS Meetup.

Section 2: GOALS & BENEFITS

Surprisingly, most organizers said that they did not start their meetup with any specific goal in mind. A comment that nearly everyone made is that they simply want to grow the community.

This section explores...

- The personal goals organizers have
- The goals organizers have for their groups
- The personal benefits that organizers feel the meetup provides

Personal Goals

Building community

Organizers that come to QS as long time self-trackers always mention how excited they were to learn that there is a whole community of people out there interested in connecting with each other along this common interest. These people often have no reservations when they realize they can start a meetup in their area and help build a local self-tracking community.

Before you start your meetup, experiment with some devices, find a few people that are into self-tracking and have some informal discussions. Almost start your meetup before you start it.

Being more social

Some organizers said that they started the meetup in order to have a new social outlet for interacting with people. This intention definitely fits with the spirit of meetups, which are about providing a format of people to socialize around common interests. Some self-trackers were looking for something to help get them out of their daily work routine, and starting a QS Meetup seemed like a good way to do that. For some, interest in this social aspect grew after meeting some of the leadership at QS Labs, and other people in the community, either at the first QS Conference or at a meetup in another city. Everyone that has met people from other meetups say that they genuinely like the people involved in the QS community. For them, starting a meetup is a reason for them to connect and interact with people in the larger QS community, while at the same time finding similar people in their own area.

Professional interest

A few organizers started their meetup coming from a professional interest in the QS community. Some had been self-tracking prior to starting their group, while others had not. Most of these organizers are toolmakers; they have the goal of building new tools and improving current technology. They see that one way to accomplish this is by hooking into the QS community, to see what people are using and start using the technology themselves. They would like to see more people using self-tracking related technology so that markets grow for the tools they want to create. These toolmakers also want to create technology that is useful to people, that fills a demand. The meetup provides a way to see what people are interested in and how they can have a hand in creating technology that will truly benefit people's lives.

One organizer who approached QS from professional interests had a completely different angle. His professional interests are in personalized medicine. He sees QS as being part of the technology piece of the current state of personalized medicine. Being not very technologically minded, he came into QS with the goal of learning more about the technology around self-tracking and how that might configure into future trends of personalized medicine. He also sees QS as a good platform for discussing and bringing more awareness to personalized medicine.

Group Goals

Focus for the group

Organizers generally share a vision about the environment they hope the group will create. They see the group providing an environment for the cross pollination of projects and ideas. The group can provide a productive space where people that were touching into the lines running into QS, collide into each other in ways they were not before. Organizers would like to see people in the group generating new, unique ideas together, simply from hanging out with one another. The intention is to help get some of these conversations started, and to make some of the invisible networks surrounding QS more visible.

As a group, organizers see the potential for their meetup to help reveal the diversity and caliber of projects, both personal and professional, going on in each particular city. The hope is for the group to reach new people and expose them to these projects, and that this will inspire them in new ways, help them learn and grow and start new projects of their own. The ultimate goal is to have new people step up one day and want to present their own projects, and inspire a new groups of people to have the cycle continue.

Don't make your group seem like it's only about technology; building habits, and behavior change is what's really important, and can be over-shadowed by the gadgets and technology. Some people might be turned off if the group seems too "techie."

Membership goals

As far as membership goes, most of the organizers mentioned that they want their group to expand into a more diverse range of people. For some of the smaller meetups this is particularly so. The membership for several groups started with people in the organizer's immediate community and extended networks. For example, for one meetup located at a university, the initial members mainly included other people from the university. For others well hooked into their local tech or hacker community, early members came from these networks. They would like to bring in people that are new to tracking and long time self-trackers. However, expanding out into the general population is a challenge for some organizers.

Most organizers do not have any goals around the size of their group. Several organizers said they want their group to grow "organically," and do not have a specific vision about the size

of their group. Some organizers of smaller groups see their group staying rather small, maybe growing to 200-300 members, with one fourth to one third attending each meeting.

Feeling of the group

Several organizers mentioned that they want their group to become more interactive. Rather than in just be a space for consuming something (i.e. attending the meetings just to watch a show & tell), they would like their group to become more productive and actively foster collaboration.

Some organizers mentioned specifically that they want their group to be a social thing first, and then about QS second. After meeting a few times, they feel like they have formed a group of people that they like to socialize with; that the common interest they share is specifically around self-tracking does not matter so much. For some organizers, there is this feeling like there should be some other activities they could do as a group, but many organizers have not been able to figure out exactly what to do. Some mentioned potentially making their group multi-segmented, and having different activities than just show & tells, making the group more experience based, running group experiments, or having field trips.

This coincides with another goal several organizers mentioned; they want to shift the focal point of the group away from themselves and onto the community. Organizers would like to see people in the group volunteer to organize other activities outside the show & tells, but they feel like they need to create the space where there is “permission” for people to do this.

Experience is key, give people a new experience with the meetings. Offer something new in their life.

Benefits

Meeting people

The most frequently mentioned personal benefit that organizers get from the meetup is the opportunity to meet new and interesting people. Organizers genuinely identify and connect with the people that attend the meetings. Often the type of people organizers see drawn to self-tracking are very curious, self-improvers, and life-long learners. Several organizers mentioned building new friendships with people they met at meetings.

Creating connections

A few organizers also mentioned that they enjoy connecting different people together within their local meetup community. Sometimes organizers connect people around a common interest, or because they are working on very similar, or even very different projects, and might benefit from one another’s input. Simply providing the space where productive interactions can result is one of the personal benefits for meetup

Reach out to people in your community that are doing interesting things that relate to QS.

organizers.

The QS community

One of the greatest benefits for organizers that are also avid self-trackers, is being part of a self-tracking community. Feeling that they are not alone in their interests and practice is a great motivator to continue projects. Some self-trackers are not comfortable sharing their practice with family and friends, worried that others might think their practices are signs of being “obsessive-compulsive” or “self-absorbed.” Discovering QS can be quite liberating, by knowing that people all over the world are into the same practices.

Some of the personal benefits of having a local QS community organizers mention are:

- The feedback they receive on personal projects from members of the group.
- Hearing other people present inspires them to build new habits and continue with projects.
- That they enjoy feeling like they are connected into a larger movement of people.
- That they enjoy sharing knowledge and experience around practices they are passionate about, with the hope that other people will benefit from this knowledge and experience.

An opportunity to learn

QS meetings are a great venue for learning about new things around self-tracking related technology. All organizers mentioned learning about new things is a personal benefit they enjoy.

Organizers mentioned specifically:

- Learning about new tools, technology, and devices
- Learning more in general about the fields of technology, health, and medicine
- Learning new ways to use self-tracking tools, including little tricks they say they would have otherwise never thought of.
- Hearing about personal projects can get you thinking differently about their own personal projects.
- Learning about other people’s motivations for self-tracking, and how these differ from one’s own provides perspective.
- Hearing deeply personal stories, which sometimes come up in presentations, can be especially moving and insightful.

Section 3: PLANNING

Starting a new QS Meetup requires some planning up front, but once the group is up and running organizers say it gets easier. Most organizers did not think about and methodically plan aspects of their group from the beginning.

This section explores...

- How frequently should groups have meetings
- Whether or not to advertise for meetups and meetings
- Whether or not to offer food and drinks at a meeting
- Whether or not to line up presenters before each meeting

Meeting Frequency

Organizers have to plan meetings in order for the groups to be active and grow. One of the biggest hang-ups around planning is deciding how frequently to have meetings. Meeting frequency ranged from one group that meets consistently every month, to a few which had not held a meeting in more than six months.

Quite a bit of thought goes into all this, but it's not as hard as you think once it gets going.

Two groups have been meeting consistently every six weeks. Organizers from both of these meetups (NY and Toronto) agreed that this was the ideal space between meetings. Having a meeting every month seems to be too often. One month does not give people enough time to run a self-tracking experiment or project and have something new to present. This is especially important for the smaller groups where a core of regular members are often the ones providing much of the presentation content. The organizer that holds monthly meetings mentioned that the energy has waned at the latest meeting, and that he should start planning them less frequently.

On the other side, having too much time between meetings is not conducive to building a strong self-tracking community. An organizer from one of the newer meetups mentioned about one person that joined the group on Meetup.com soon after their first meeting. This new member was quite excited to find the QS group and sent several messages to the organizers saying that he was eager to attend a meeting. Several months later the group still had not scheduled a second meeting. The new member grew extremely frustrated by this, eventually left the group, and sent the organizers a message stating his disappointment with them.

Based on the feedback from organizers, holding a meeting every two months seems to be the upper limit. Any longer than that and people may begin to forget the talks from the previous

You need to have meetings so that the group grows. Even if only a handful of people show up, it is worth having the meeting. Only five people might show up, but maybe 100 other people wanted to come but could not make it.

meeting. In the spirit of wanting to build a self-tracking community, it can be beneficial to maintain some continuity. One way to build the feeling of continuity is by having meetings at regular intervals.

Some organizers also try to keep continuity by having meetings on the same day of the week. However, most organizers do not see this as very important, and schedule their meetings based on whichever day is convenient for the venue.

Another consideration some organizers take when scheduling meetings is whether other large tech related meetups in their city are having meetings on the same day. This was only an issue for two groups. Some members of these QS Meetups also regularly attend these other rather large tech related meetups. Because of the overlapping circles, these organizers do not want to schedule the QS meetings on the same day. However, it was not considered a problem to schedule around these other meetups.

Pay attention to what is going on in your city. Set up custom Google searches for QS related key words in your area.

Meetup.com

Without the Internet QS would likely have not grown to what it is becoming today. Moreover, without Meetup.com, it would be difficult to organize as efficiently. Generally speaking, organizers think Meetup.com is a good way to organize and get new members. The site takes care of a lot of the work, with RSVPs, having the wait list feature, automatic reminders, and providing an easy way to send email messages to the entire group. Other features, like suggesting the group to people with related interests, also helps to grow the group. A few organizers mentioned that there were already people waiting for a QS Meetup in their city when they started the group on Meetup.com. This feature is especially helpful to get a new group off the ground.

Organizers did have a few complaints about the Meetup.com site:

- Some organizers mentioned the monthly fee as a downside.
- Some organizers have problems coming up with content for their group page.
- Some organizers do not know how to use some of the functions of the site.

By far the biggest unknown regarding Meetup.com is how well it works for attracting new members. Awareness and use of the site for organizing groups of all kinds varies by area. In areas where Meetup.com is not that popular, we cannot expect it to be a good source of new membership as it is in places like the Bay Area and New York. It is the smaller groups that are in places where Meetup.com is not well known that have problems growing their membership. A couple of these smaller groups have experimented with organizing in other ways, like

People may be interested in self-tracking, but not looking on Meetup.com for a QS Meetup. Try to find popular ways people spread the word about tech related events in your area.

also creating a Google Group, but not with much success. The organizers in this position may have to put a little more effort into outreach and advertising.

Advertisizing

Organizers have mixed attitudes toward advertising for meetings and their meetup.

- Some groups are advertising.
- Other groups would like to but do not.
- Some organizers feel like they do not need to advertise.
- Others commented that it does not seem like their responsibility to advertise.

The most active advertising was from one organizer that put up flyers around her college campus advertising for a meeting. Similarly, one other organizer posted information about his meetup at the different hacker spaces in his city. Most organizers use social media (especially Twitter) to spread the word about meetings through their extended networks. Several organizers mentioned about their meetup or a

meeting to local tech related or hacker list serves. The organizers that said they would like to advertise more but have not, mentioned things like tech list serves or online event boards, but did not know any in their area. The organizers that felt advertising is unnecessary have been successful in gaining membership simply through the Meetup.com group page.

If you are going to advertize for the meeting, try not to use too much QS jargon, use a more general vocabulary, and try to describe self-tracking in a way that promotes positive interest

Presenters

For the most part, organizers find it difficult to line up presenters for meetings. This is viewed as a challenge for organizing. Only the larger groups seem to have success lining up a full program of presenters. Some of the mid-size groups try to get a couple of presenters to commit beforehand, but still have to hope some attendees come to the meeting intending to present. For the groups that do not line up talks beforehand, at times they have felt like meetings needed more presentations.

For the groups that do line up presenters, giving enough notification is essential so people have time to prepare and feel confident about presenting. Giving a four to five week notice for a meeting seems to be sufficient lead-time to make sure people have time to finish their self-tracking project and develop a presentation.

The organizer for one group (Boston) has consistently been setting a theme for meetings, and he finds this approach extremely effective. He decided on setting themes because he felt like the group could run into a problem where different people end up presenting essentially the same talk; someone using the same app to do the same thing with the same results. He thought setting a theme might be a better way to sample the variety of projects people are doing in one area. An added benefit to this approach is when different people are using the same technology, you do not have to explain what it is for each presentation. For

example, one meeting focused on sleep projects, and for almost all of the projects people used a Zeo device. The first presenter talked about what the Zeo is and how it works. This became a common knowledge base and all of the following presenters could just jump right into their project. The organizer mentioned this meeting went very well, and even though almost every presenter was using a Zeo, all of the projects were very different.

Food and Refreshments

Another area where organizers are split is on the topic of providing snacks and refreshments at meetings. Some organizers think it is a really good idea and provide at least basic refreshments at each meeting. Other organizers have tried it, but were not certain if it made a difference. A couple of organizers did not think having refreshments matters, and do not ever plan on providing any. The groups that do bring refreshments say it is nice to have them, especially for the groups that have an informal social hour before the presentations.

One group (Pittsburgh) has an interesting approach to the food issue which works extremely well because the group is small. After their meetings, nearly all of the attendees go out of dinner together. However, at one meeting the presentations near the end were rushed because some of the attendees were getting hungry.

Involve food in some way, either providing refreshments, or going out afterwards. It provides a good social lubricant and an incentive for people to attend your meetings. Experiment with having a donation bucket to cover refreshment costs.

Section 4: VENUE

If someone wants to start a QS Meetup group they will inevitably run into the question of how to find venues.

This section explores...

- The problem of not having reliable venues
- Opinions on what makes a good space for a meeting
- Some of the different kinds of spaces organizers have used for meetings
- Insights on the dilemma of having a consistent meeting space or moving around for each meeting

Finding & Choosing Venues

For some organizers, finding venues for meetings is incredibly difficult. In fact, finding venues either was or continues to be a problem for almost all organizers interviewed for this report. Finding venues will likely be the task organizers spend the most time on, especially early on. The model that works in the Bay Area and New York meetups, soliciting attendees for spaces, works great because of the large member base to draw upon. However, for smaller groups and especially brand new groups still planning their first meeting, it is up to the organizer to find a venue. Finding a venue so that the meetings can happen is probably the most important factor for how successful any particular meetup will be, because it is the first one or two meetings that inspire organizers to continue organizing the meetup.

If there is a university in or near your city, look for the niches in departments on campus that might be interested in QS, and willing to host a meeting. Technology or health related departments, especially in research universities, might be really interested in hearing more about self-tracking.

How do smaller groups find venues?

Quite often organizers already had a space they could use for meetings when they started their meetup. For some organizers, it was their office. They either manage their own start-up or work at a place that has a meeting room or other space that works for meetings. Other organizers are connected into the hacker spaces in their local community, and can readily use those as venues for meetings. Every organizer that lives in a city with a hacker community mentioned hacker spaces as valuable resources for venues. Other organizers are affiliated with universities and take advantage of classroom space for their meetings. Any organizer that did not already have any one of these options already available to them when starting the meetup, stated that finding venues is a major problem.

Another issue regarding venues is that several organizers feel they do not know their own area and city as well as they would like, to know what venues might be out there. Although the main barrier, lack of time, prevents them from finding out what their city has to offer. The time commitment along with the amount of initiative and self-motivation necessary to go out

and look for venues can seem like a lot of work. However not all organizers spoke of finding venues this way. For some, finding out what is going on in their local community and what venues are out there is part of their personal interest, the interest that got them turned onto QS in the first place. This is one area where the decision to start a meetup for professional interest more than personal interest can put a group at a disadvantage. In the spirit of trying to make organizing not feel like “work,” people that come to the meetup from a business interest may be more likely to see certain tasks as extra work, whereas someone coming at this from personal interests may enjoy these tasks.

Once the task of finding some venues is over, the next step is to get your foot in the door. When trying to make a contact with someone at a venue, it can be helpful to refrain from using too much QS jargon in describing the meetup, unless the host is already familiar with QS. If the host seems interested in offering a meeting space, it may also be important to clearly outline what the meeting will look like; start and end time, how many people, if there will be food, if there will be audio or video recording, et cetera, in case there are some restrictions at the venue. Demonstrating that you take any concerns the host may have seriously will help give the host a good impression of your group.

Try to get some venues that are well known in your area, which can be a draw for people to attend a meeting.

After finding the venues, and getting your foot in the door, the most important part of getting new venues is following up. Two different organizers, both of whom are having trouble finding venues, said that lack of follow up probably prevented them from getting venues that they otherwise would be using.

How to pick a space?

There are several factors that can make for a nice venue:

- A good venue is a place that gets people to think and interact differently.
- Spaces that are inspirational, or have an artsy or DIY feel, like design spaces.
- If the space is comfortable or has a nice view.
- When the venue itself provides attendees with a new experience; this becomes another incentive for people to attend a meeting.

Operationally, it is helpful if the venue...

- Is easy to get to, near public transportation, or has available parking.
- Is near restaurants, bars or coffee shops, so after the meeting there are places people can go to continue their conversations.
- Has projectors for presentations, or even marker boards.

*Types of venues to look for:
Design spaces, hacker spaces, college or university campuses, community centers, restaurants, bars or coffee houses, non-profits, start-ups, co-working offices.*

The size of the space is something that some organizers may also want to take into consideration. Size mainly becomes an issue when meetings begin to get larger. Some organizers have no problem finding one or more small venues to hold meeting of 15-30 people, but anticipate needing to find new venues if their group continues to grow.

Moving the meetup vs. single location

Leadership at QS Labs suggests to organizers that it is better to move the meetings to different locations than to have one consistent location. This approach seems to work well for the larger groups, but some of the smaller groups tend to meet in a consistent space. While these groups might benefit from having different venues, it is the trend to have a consistent space when first starting out.

Using a consistent space has the advantage of stability; people know what to expect each time they attend a meeting. One of the most successful meetups in terms of meeting consistently and having new members at each meeting (Toronto), has been using a consistent space for several of their last meetings, a free for use community center.

Try to find the spots in your local area that you do not know, but would like to know better; discover the strengths in your community.

However, keeping a consistent venue is not without disadvantages. Potentially a feeling of “ownership” can grow if the meetings always happen in the same place. This is especially so when the venue is the office of an organizer, or some other space they are affiliated with. In addition, not moving to different venues deprives the group of the benefits many organizers see resulting from moving meetings. Organizers mentioned that moving the meetings is a great way to explore and discover the community, almost like using the city as a laboratory. Moving the meetings can also help catch different people and get some new members at the meetings.

Section 5: FORMAT

There does not seem to be a “best” size when it comes to a meeting, but in some ways, size dictates the style of the group.

This section explores...

- The style of different sized groups
- The social hour either before or after the presentations
- The content of the talks at meetings
- Facilitation for meetings and Q & A sessions after each presentation

Size & Style

The format for meetings generally depends on the size of the group. In small to medium size meetings, it is possible to have more of a conversational feel. Everyone attending is able at least to introduce themselves to the group, if not have a chance to talk about their self-tracking projects. For larger meetings, the number of presenters limits the amount of time for presentations and Q & A.

It is a good idea to set an agenda for the evening, to help avoid breaks in the flow of a meeting. Come prepared with ways to keep the conversation going

Most of the organizers like the informality of the smaller meetings. They like that you can go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves. At the very first meeting of many groups, all the attendees took turns talking about what they were working on at the time, either their personal self-tracking project or a tool they were developing. Organizers mentioned liking this format, and feel that everyone who is coming to the meetings probably has something interesting to share.

Once the size of a group grows and meetings happen more frequently, the format usually shifts to being less interactive and the presentations become more formal. For the most part, people prepare a talk of a certain length, often between five and ten minutes. Some organizers from the more established groups see the need to curate talks, and try to bring in if not more polished, at least more directed talks. Limiting talks to five minutes seems to be the standard for groups that have moved onto more presentation-based meetings. This gives enough time to present a project, and if any attendees would like to get more details, they can always talk to the presenter directly. Some organizers encourage presenters to stick around after the meeting in case people would like to talk to them.

Go to some QS meetings in other cities if you can. Seeing how other groups do it can be the best help for organizing your own meetup.

Presentation Content

Presentations tend to fall on one of two sides, either strongly focused on a personal self-tracking project, or more focused on a tool for self-tracking. Leadership at QS Labs tries to

encourage that the presentation space at meetings is for personal self-tracking projects. Toolmakers are free to present personal projects they have done with tools they developed, but making a “sales pitch” for the tools is generally discouraged. Organizers from other meetups more or less feel the same way about the content of meetings. The “Three Prime Questions” (What did you do? How did you do it? What did you learn?), generally guide personal project presentations at most of the meetings.

Depending on the size of the group, and if the venue has the capabilities, presenters use slides with their presentation. Many groups do not set the expectation for presenters to prepare slides for their talks. Some presenters simply show the display on their notebook or tablet computer to show data visualizations, or applications or programs they are using for their projects.

For presentations without slides, if you have a projector and a computer with internet, bring up some of the homepages of the websites or apps people are talking about in their presentations to provide some basic visual context. You can also do this during introductions.

For tool talks, some organizers said they do not mind having people present on tools they have developed, as long as they present it in the context of a personal narrative, showing how they were inspired to develop the tool and how they have been using it. The format that the Bay Area group has, of providing demo tables for people to display tools during the pre-presentation social hour, might not work for other groups. Some organizers feel that there probably are not enough projects going on in their area to have demo tables. This is why they do not mind having people talk about their tools in presentations.

A few groups have been allowing a different kind of toolmaker talk where people present on their works in progress. Again, organizers try to encourage presentations to be about how the tools arrived from their own personal experience, but the purpose of these talks is more to get feedback from the community. The tools in these presentations are in early of stages of development, so there is no worry that they will seem like product pitches. The toolmakers here are hoping to find ways to improve their tool. The organizers that are having these kinds of talks do not mind having the group help support the development of new tools, and would like to see toolmakers succeed in bringing new innovative self-tracking tools to market.

At the meetings, be social, and get people talking. Shake hands with people, show them that you are genuinely glad to have them come to the meeting.

Social Hour

Once meetings reach a certain size, having a social hour either before or after the presentations becomes a good idea. The open time to meet new people and have discussions greatly helps the community feeling of a meeting. Having the social before the presentations has an added benefit, by making a flexible time frame for people to arrive. Smaller groups may even delay the start of the presentations if some good discussion develops in its own, or if not many people have showed up yet for the meeting.

Some organizers have a social hour at the venue after the presentations. After the presentations, all attendees have some common ground to connect on, simply by having the shared experience of being at the meeting together. Organizers that have tried incorporating a social hour both before and after the presentations at different meetings, said they notice conversations are more interesting when they have the social hour after the meetings. The best format seems to be when meetings have a little bit of both; 30 minutes to one hour before the presentations, and an hour of time open at the venue for people to stay and socialize.

Facilitation and Q & A

To some extent, all organizers help facilitate the meetings and Q & A sessions that follow presentations. Several organizers said they have tried being more and less active in moderating at different meetings, and felt there were occasions when they should have stepped in and changed the direction or stopped a discussion or presentation, but did not. One situation organizers mentioned where they intervene is when discussions get too technical, to where it may exclude a good portion of the group. Organizers will step in and suggest that the discussion would be better reserved until the end of the meeting, when the interested parties can talk about the finer details among themselves.

For smaller groups especially, Q & A sessions naturally develop into discussions, and sometimes these discussions can expand into a wider range of topics. Because of the smaller size, these groups have more freedom to explore different topics. Inspired by these discussions, some organizers mentioned that they might experiment with brainstorming sessions along these lines, as a productive use of the group.

If you know you are not the kind of person that can make things up on the spot and throw ideas out on your feet, preparation is key

Section 6: SUPPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

For the most part, meetup organizers really enjoy taking on the leadership role, and feel that QS Labs has been extremely supportive in helping them start their local self-tracking community.

This section explores...

- Some of the ways organizers already feel supported by QS Labs
- Some recommendations for further support and ideas for meetups

Support

Everyone feels that QS Labs has been as supportive as possible and most organizers could not think of any other form of support QS Labs could offer.

Among the things organizers mentioned regarding support...

- How friendly everyone is, and the genuine feeling that QS Labs wants to provide support to new groups.
- That borrowing and sharing content for the group pages on Meetup.com was helpful.
- Being offered time to talk on the phone with leadership at QS Labs meant a lot for one organizer.
- QS Labs providing contacts in their city early on was extremely helpful for some organizers.
- The FAQ for starting a QS Meetup was very helpful for some organizers.
- Having group meetings announced on the QS blog and Facebook page is a great support.

Several organizers mentioned that QS Labs offers to pay for a videographer for groups that want to record their meetings. Some groups that have not yet used this offer mentioned that they would like to in the future. The groups that are using the videographer said that the best part is seeing the videos up on the blog. They mentioned that the presentations have been well received, and the positive feedback on the videos is very encouraging.

One organizer mentioned the best support he received was not direct support, but just the spirit of non-ownership which QS Labs promotes, that individual organizers are not restricted to run their meetup a certain way. In this comment, the organizer referred to the meetup group Habit Design, which has much more restricted guidelines for anyone that wants to start a Habit Design meetup. This organizer really appreciates the open feeling, that he cannot “mess up” what he does with his QS Meetup; it really takes some of the pressure off organizing.

Recommendations

The goal of this report was to show the range and complexity of the situations of different meetup groups. While there are some common hurdles, overall there are not always common solutions. Based on organizer feedback, it is clear that QS Labs is already doing a good job at providing support, and with this report as a roadmap for some the terrain of the meetups, hopefully QS Labs will be able to identify new ways in which they can assist meetup groups.

In addition to continuing the support efforts that QS Labs is already doing, there are some recommendations and ideas for groups coming from organizer feedback.

Create open channels for communication and feedback

As far as leadership goes, organizers mentioned that they would like to have ways to communicate ideas across the organization. As the group of organizers grow worldwide, this will potentially become great creative source for ideas, but only if there are ways to channel that feedback.

As far as individual groups go, we do not need to assume that organizers are the only ones with good ideas. As the global QS community grows, this pool of members will become a great creative resource. Again, creating channels of communication is necessary in order to crowd source ideas. On one level, this could be done within groups, by simply having a comment and suggestion box at meetings where any attendee can offer ideas. Globally it may take some more planning to figure out the best way to have open channels for feedback.

Create stronger connections across leadership

No matter how big their group is, or what city they are in, organizers feel that they have something in common and would like to connect with each other on that level. Organizers would like to interact with other organizers, either virtually or in person. A simple way to assist organizers that want to take the initiative to connect with other organizers is to compile a list of contact information that organizers are willing to share with each other. If organizers create connections across groups and provide support for one another, it may lessen the load of support QS Labs has to provide.

Encourage groups to have several co-organizers

The organizers that have several co-organizers for their group seem to enjoy their leadership role the most, while organizing is often more stressful for organizers that do not have co-organizers. Having a team of several co-organizers reduces the load on any particular person. The rapid growth of QS shows that interest in self-tracking will likely not fade out anytime soon. Having a leadership team, will help ensure that groups will endure, as over time some organizers may eventually want to step out of their leadership position.

Encourage organizers to make planning more open

In addition to having a team of co-organizers, the event planning process should be open such that anyone from the community can offer an idea or help plan a meeting or other event. Some members may not be able to commit to becoming a co-organizer, but have a great idea for a onetime event or some other activity.

Find ways to supplement for presentations

Some organizers feel substantial pressure to make sure that there are enough presentations to make organizing a meeting feel worth the effort. It may help some organizers to find ways they can compensate if they want to meet more frequently but do not have enough people to provide presentation content. One idea is that groups could try having a meeting where they watch some video presentations on the QS website as a group and discuss them, or have people do distance presentations over Skype.