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Shiplt Day FAQ

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Introduction

Many people have asked questions about how Atlassian runs its innovative Shiplt Days. This page collates that information into a number of frequently asked questions.

- What is the timeline for a typical Shiplt Day?
- Is participation voluntary or required? If voluntary, do you ever run into the issue of no one volunteering for a specific Shiplt Day?
- What do you do about meetings? Do managers ever disrupt the day or prevent people taking part?
- If employees can't participate at a Shiplt Day for whatever reason, do you give them another time at their choosing?
- What's your criteria for selecting a winner?
- How does the voting process work?
- Are you required to implement the ideas of all winners? What do you do about ideas that are not practical?
- What does the company provide during Shiplt Day?
- How does Shiplt work with global development teams?
- Who is responsible for organising Shiplt Day at Atlassian?
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Atlassian Shiplt Trophy

What is the timeline for a typical Shiplt Day?

Preparation normally starts three or four weeks before we want to hold a Shiplt Day. An organiser is appointed (more on that below) and picks a date after consulting with the engineering managers. From there, the process in our head office in Sydney looks like something this:

- *Two weeks prior to Shiplt Day* - First "brown bag" (lunchtime) meeting to brainstorm and discuss ideas. Ideas get written up in the wiki.
- *One week prior* - Second "brown bag" meeting.
- *Some time prior* - Participants are expected to write up their "shipment orders" – a short document describing their project, the reason they're doing it, and how much they expect to achieve in a day.
- *2pm Thursday* - Shiplt Day kicks off. When we were smaller, everyone used to get together for a quick kick-off announcement. In the Sydney office now, the organiser usually just sends an email.
- *6-7pm Thursday* - Dinner is provided by the company for those who are working late. Usually this is just pizza and drinks. There's a great buzz in the office when everyone gets together to discuss their projects and how far they've come in the first five or six hours.
- *Overnight Thursday* - A few dedicated participants sometimes keep working on their projects overnight. The majority, more sensible people, go home to get some rest.
- *10am Friday* - Organiser reminds everyone to take screenshots or videos of their work in progress, in case it breaks at the last minute.
- *12pm Friday* - Organiser and a couple of helpers start to arrange voting sheets and presentation areas.
- *2pm Friday* - Presentations start in a number of locations. Everyone gets three minutes to present their project.
- *3.30pm Friday* - Everyone votes to select the best project. More information about the voting process is below.
- *4pm Friday* - The top three projects from each location become the finalists and get to present their projects again to a combined audience. The combined audience votes to select the Shiplt champion.
- *4.30-5pm Friday* - Shiplt Day is finished and everyone who took part hangs around the office for a while to have some drinks and a chat.

Is participation voluntary or required? If voluntary, do you ever run into the issue of no one volunteering

for a specific ShipIt Day?

Participation is highly recommended, but still voluntary. With an engineering department of now 120 in Sydney, we have 90-100 participants on average.

We encourage everyone to present their work, even if it didn't result in anything useful. However, a few people still drop out who don't think they have anything worthwhile to present. We normally get about 60-70 presentations.

What do you do about meetings? Do managers ever disrupt the day or prevent people taking part?

Occasionally, certain people can't take part because of their ongoing projects. However, the ShipIt Day program at Atlassian has support from Atlassian's CEOs and VP Engineering, so there is an expectation that all teams will take part.

Prior to the day, the organiser consults with the engineering managers to pick a date that won't conflict with any significant deadlines. Meetings are usually rescheduled or cancelled to make room for ShipIt Day.

If employees can't participate at a ShipIt Day for whatever reason, do you give them another time at their choosing?

No, it only takes place on that one day per quarter. It isn't an entitlement like our 20% Time program, which does accrue over time.

Other offices with development staff, like San Francisco and Brazil, schedule it on a different day. The SF ShipIt Day is often held earlier than in Sydney so a video of the winner from SF can be shown at the Sydney presentations.

What's your criteria for selecting a winner?

The audience, which includes members of all departments, decides the winner by voting. There are currently no formal criteria; it is up to each audience member to choose which project they think is best.

For ShipIt 12, online voting was used, and the following criteria were included on the voting form:

When voting, you might want to consider the following criteria:

- usefulness – how much value does this project provide to the customer or to Atlassian?
- "shippability" – can we ship this or start using it next week? how much work remains to be done?
- technical accomplishment – did the work address any significant technical problems?
- flair – does the project stand out due to its user experience? was it presented well?

This reflects what most developers are looking for in a good ShipIt project.

How does the voting process work?

It varies from office to office based on the number of presentations. The following description covers the current process in the Sydney office, which has the most presenters.

On Friday afternoon at 3pm, after everyone has been coding for 24 hours, each person taking part presents their project for three minutes. Because we have 60-70 presentations, we split this up in two different presentation rooms. We will probably have to split it up further in the future, if the company continues growing.

In each presentation room, the audience votes for the project they think is best. Traditionally, each audience member got three sticky dots to vote on a piece of paper for their favourites. The voting criteria hasn't really been formalised. That means it is up to each person present to decide on their own criteria for their votes. The audience includes most of the office, not just the developers.

The three top projects from each room become finalists and get a chance to present their project again to the combined audience. The audience again votes for the winner, with each person getting one sticky dot to pick their favourite project.

Some of the recent ShipIt Days have used different voting mechanisms, with online forms, SMS and iPad voting apps. These have proved useful and fun, but rely on the organiser spending the time to set them up. Our default voting system is still sticky dots and paper.

Are you required to implement the ideas of all winners? What do you do about ideas that are not practical?

The ShipIt page on our Extranet says the following:

Unless your ShipIt project blows everyone away, *it's up to you* to champion getting your work into a shipping product. You'll need to have a clear estimate of how much effort remains to turn your two-day spike into a tested, fully realised feature.

It's understood by the participants that there's no obligation on the company to ship any of the projects. However, it's a way of generating ideas that our product management team can use for planning future work on the products. Several developers use their 20% time to do further work on their projects and get them ready for inclusion with the products or ship them as an optional plugin.

What does the company provide during ShipIt Day?

Atlassian provides free snacks and drinks for staff in our offices all the time. So these are still available on ShipIt Day. In addition, the company buys pizza and some extra drinks for dinner for those who work late on the Thursday.

Employees buy their own lunch, although many are too busy putting the finishing touches on their project to remember to eat lunch on Friday.

How does ShipIt work with global development teams?

Typically, each location which has engineering staff holds its own ShipIt Day. Between the San Francisco and Sydney offices, there is a bit of competitive rivalry. So the SF teams will hold their ShipIt Day prior to the Sydney one, then submit the winner of their contest into the finals of the Sydney competition. Sydney staff can vote for the SF team as one of the finalists.

We're yet to see a team from another office take the original and prestigious Sydney trophy, although I'm sure that day isn't far off.

Who is responsible for organising ShipIt Day at Atlassian?

We have a different organiser for each ShipIt Day. The head of the Engineering department appoints an organiser to pick a day and kick the process off. This is usually a developer or other team member who has taken part in at least a couple of ShipIt Days before.

The organiser selects a tentative date and clears it with the managers of each development team. The organiser then schedules two or three "brown bag" lunch meetings where the people taking part can brainstorm ideas. We usually capture the ideas in the wiki for reference of people who couldn't attend or want ideas in the future. The organiser takes care of organising the presentation areas and voting on the day. He'll usually recruit two or three other helpers to set up the seating, projectors, etc. and time the presentations.

Can I use the name 'ShipIt' for my own innovation days?

Sure, go ahead. If you're publishing something and feel like linking to us and mentioning how Atlassian inspired you, that would be great but it's not required.

Who can I contact for more information?

There is a **LinkedIn Group** for ShipIt Days which you can join and add discussion points. The group has more than a hundred members and a number of useful archived discussions. If you have a LinkedIn account, you can view and join the group here:

- <http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=3170998>

If you have some suggested additions to the FAQ, I'm happy to take them via email:

Matt Ryall, matt@atlassian.com
Team Lead, Confluence Development

If I receive any questions or see posts on the group which are generally useful to people, I'll continue to update this page.

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