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Creating Great Teams

How Self-Selection Lets People Excel

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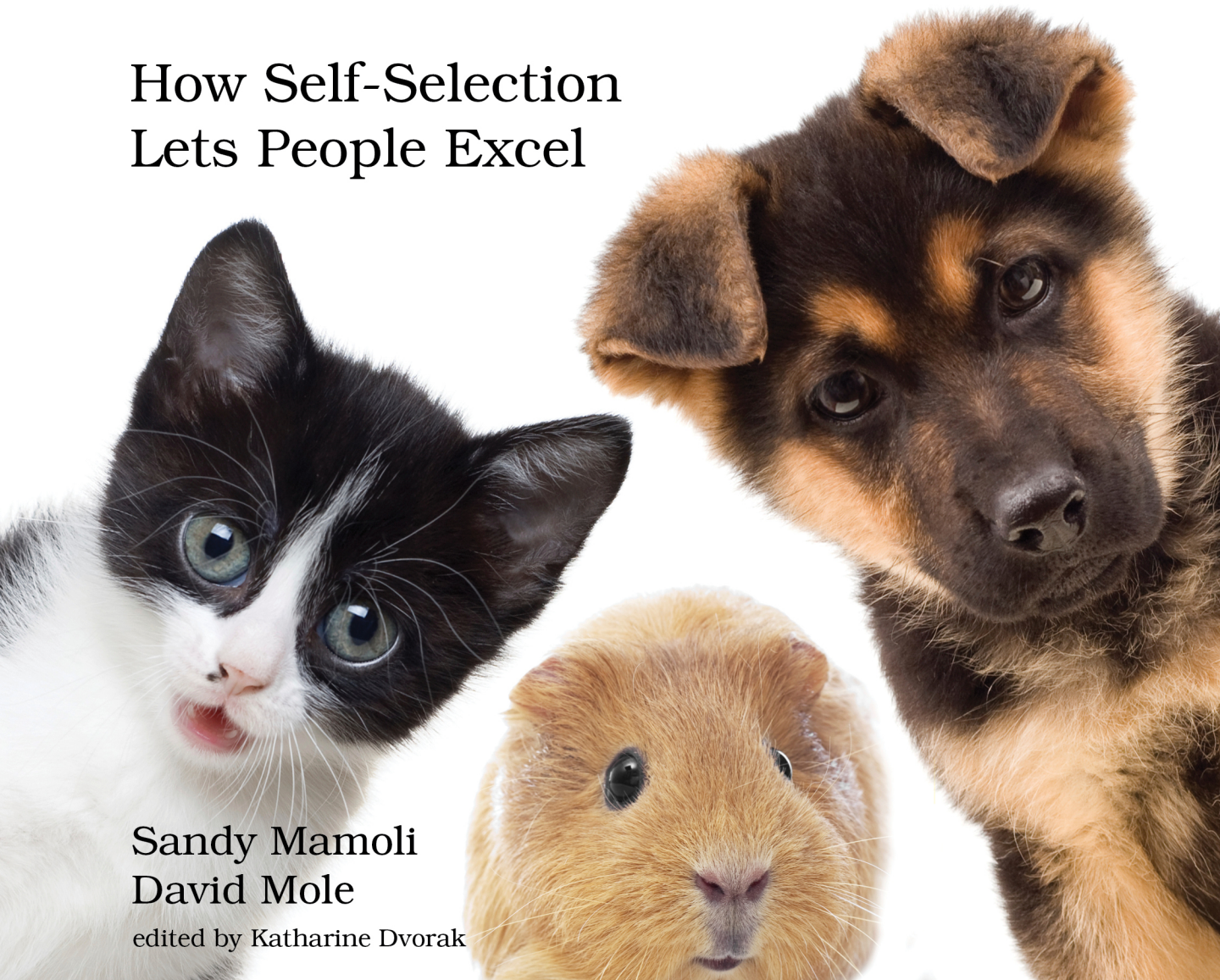
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Creating Great Teams

How Self-Selection
Lets People Excel



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In the following two chapters we outline everything you need to know to prepare for a successful self-selection event, from checking that you're ready to getting the materials in place for the event itself. We explain why this level of preparation is important and discuss some of the challenges you can expect along the way.

In this chapter we guide you through the things you need to think about and prepare weeks or months in advance. How much time you need before your self-selection event depends on the scale. As a rule of thumb, if your event involves more than sixty people, you'll need to start planning at least six weeks in advance.

We also guide you through how to conduct a readiness check, get permission to run the event, communicate the concepts and plan, coordinate the logistics, as well as under which circumstances to run a trial event.

Preparation is vital!

Before we start on the initial steps, it's important to emphasize how vital it is to prepare well in advance. In fact, we suggest erring on the side of overpreparation, mainly because it will give you the best chance of success, and also because it will put your mind at ease and make you a more relaxed facilitator.

Self-Selection at Scale

The most immediate question we faced at Trade Me was how we could facilitate a self-selection event at scale. Should we follow the Lancaster bombers' lead to get everyone into a giant hall and simply tell them to get on with it? Or was there a more structured way that would make the people involved more comfortable?

We tried researching the concept, but it appeared that either no one had carried out a self-selection event at this scale before or, if they had, they hadn't published the process or results. This meant we had to design and develop our own self-selection process from scratch.

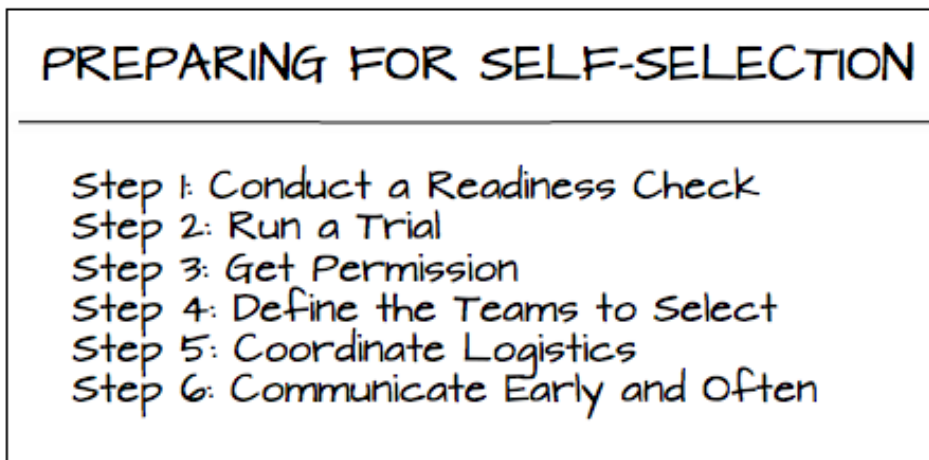
We spent months planning our first squadification and put an incredible amount of thought into the details.

Sandy describes what was involved in those early stages:

After we had made the decision to run a self-selection event, we spent months planning it. We had to come up with ideas for how to facilitate it, so we ran a trial in one of our satellite businesses. In the end we spent a full day just preparing the office materials we would need—cutting out photos of more than 150 people, making templates, and creating visual signals for ready/non-ready squads.

We spent a lot of time setting up and creating the environment. Even though we didn't control what was happening during the day, we put a lot of time and effort into creating an environment that would be as conducive as possible to a successful event.

Now that you understand that you're going to have to roll up your sleeves to start planning your event, we'll explain the steps in detail to ensure that you're ready to conduct your own self-selection event. The following graphic shows the first six steps of the process:



We start with how you can identify whether you're ready to run an event and what you'll need to have in place up front.

Step 1: Conduct a Readiness Check

We believe that any company could run a self-selection event, or at the very least be able to actively demonstrate the principle of giving people autonomy to choose whom they work with. To get started, you'll need to ask yourself a series of questions in order to understand whether you have everything in place to be successful. The following checklist outlines the considerations you should make before you embark on self-selection:

ARE YOU READY FOR SELF-SELECTION CHECKLIST

- ☐ Do you have, or can you get, support from senior management?
- ☐ Are people open to trying self-selection?
- ☐ Is this the right time to self-select?
- ☐ Do you or can you have stable cross-functional teams?
- ☐ Do you feel personally ready to try this?
- ☐ Are you confident that this can work in your organization?
- ☐ Are you ready to answer people's questions?
- ☐ Have you considered a trial or a twenty-four-hour hackathon?

If you answer no to any of these questions, that's okay. Don't give up! It just means you might have slightly more groundwork to do. It's important to know your starting point, and we'll talk you through some of the ways to make progress in each of these areas.

In some cases you may need to tackle other problems in the run up. For example, if you're still discussing whether people can work in stable, cross-functional teams, you may struggle to get employees to choose a new home. In that case you may want to dedicate some time to researching, experimenting, and problem solving first. In our case, before embarking on self-selection we certainly had to identify and work through a number of problems, including staff members working on too many projects and having ad hoc project teams formed and disbanded according to whichever project was highest priority at the time. By the time we self-selected, we had tested and demonstrated why small, stable, cross-functional teams were the way forward.

While the previous questions are aimed at the company, it's also important to consider if you yourself are fully prepared. It's likely that people will have lots of questions and probably some criticisms, so it's important you be ready for lots of upcoming conversations and persuasion.

We would be lying if we told you we weren't nervous about embarking on our first self-selection event. We were acutely aware that we were reorganizing one of New Zealand's most iconic businesses using a process that was unproven at the time. We honestly had no idea whether it was going to work! By the time you finish this book, you should be confident that the process will work and feel reassured by the case study, but you should still be prepared to be challenged and questioned as you suggest something that may be radically different from what your organization has done in the past.

Managers and coworkers are likely to ask you questions and voice concerns; it could be to test your ability to persevere or to discuss genuine concerns about the event itself. The most frequently asked questions before a self-selection event are usually these:

- What if a fight breaks out as people argue over joining one squad?
- What if someone gets picked on and pushed around by others?
- What if one person ends up standing in the corner on his own like the last kid chosen for sports at school?
- What if people want to join a squad they are totally unskilled and inappropriate for?
- What if one particular squad or area is very popular?
- What if no one wants to work in a particular area?
- What if no one turns up, out of fear or because they don't like the idea of self-selection?

The questions you will be asked could be somewhere along those lines, and you should expect to be asked lots of questions. You will know the people involved and how best to handle your responses, but it may also be helpful to refer to responses like these:

- We have an expectation that employees will behave like trusted adults and resolve their problems themselves.
- We have confidence in the process; it has been tested it and it works.

Only after we had proven the success of working in small, cross-functional teams in one part of the organization did we look into scaling the approach elsewhere.

- When we choose teams by managerial selection we often get things wrong.
- It's worth a try.
- Even if it doesn't fully work, we will learn a lot about the staff, their preferences, and their relations, which will be useful for whichever direction we choose to take.

Self-selection can be a scary concept. There's no certainty that self-selection will work for you, but thorough preparation will help reduce the uncertainty as much as possible and increase the likelihood of success.

If you're still debating whether to go ahead at this point, one way to get an insight into the potential outcome is to consider running your own ShipIt Day and ask people to self-select into teams for the day. This will allow you to see how they react to self-selection in a safe environment. If they can figure out how to self-select for a twenty-four-hour hackathon, there's a good chance they'll figure it out in real life, too. It will also make employees feel more confident when you can point to a real and recent example they've been part of. (You can read more about [ShipIt Day on page ?.](#))