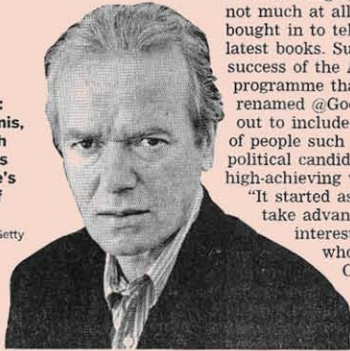


# Look who's talking to your colleagues

## Business or Pleasure LECTURE PROGRAMMES

Inviting interesting speakers into the workplace can keep staff engaged, says Rhymer Rigby

Book talk: Martin Amis, the British novelist, is on Google's roll call of speakers



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Josh Mendelsohn is a programme manager in online sales at Google. But in his spare time he, along with a team of dozens of volunteers, helps bring in speakers to talk to his fellow Googlers. So far, the roll call of people who have addressed the company is a pretty stellar one: it includes Senator Hillary Clinton, Martin Amis, the novelist, and Joseph Stiglitz, the economist.

One might reasonably wonder what the likes of Mr Amis have to do with Google, and the answer is not much at all. Rather, they are bought in to tell staff about their latest books. Such was the success of the Authors@Google programme that it has now been renamed @Google and broadened out to include other categories of people such as filmmakers, political candidates and high-achieving women.

"It started as a programme to take advantage of the interesting individuals who stopped by at Google HQ," Mr Mendelsohn explains.

The lectures take place during

work hours and the programme has the support of Google's senior management.

It operates in eight offices worldwide and employees who are not lucky enough to attend the lectures in the auditorium can watch them live online.

There are a few stipulations. Speakers must agree to their talk being put on YouTube and they must allow an audience question-and-answer session afterwards. Mr Mendelsohn says this is to ensure Google does not get US political style stock speeches with tame audiences. "John Edwards [the former US senator] was recently asked a question which he refused to answer. We want a lecture series that puts folks on the spot," he says.

Law firm Clifford Chance runs a similar programme under the name Clifford Chance Conversations. Stuart Popham, senior partner, says some speakers are work related, while others, such as Sir Christopher Meyer, the former UK ambassador to Washington, are not. The company has even hosted Peter Blake, the man behind the *Sgt Pepper* album cover, talking about pop art and culture. On average,

Clifford Chance has a speaker every two weeks and Mr Popham says it is always well received. The talks are advertised on the intranet and open to all. Indeed, sometimes the firm opens them to neighbouring companies based in London's Canary Wharf.

Jeremy Lee, founder of the speaker bureau Jeremy Lee Associates, says that in many ways this is simply an extension of the older convention of having conference speakers who provide a "general interest" speech. "We have six to seven hundred live enquiries at any given time and a sizeable minority of them are from people who've heard someone speak on, say [BBC] Radio 4, and thought: 'They're interesting. Let's get them in.'"

This type of thing, Mr Lee adds, tends to be more prevalent in City of London firms than areas such as manufacturing. He suspects this may simply be because financial institutions are more likely to have in-house auditoriums - which tend to get people thinking about how nice it might be to have a lecture series.

According to organisers of these events, the benefits go beyond the warm and fuzzy feeling one gets

from exposing one's employees to the great and the good.

"The greatest benefit is for our staff to have major intellectual leaders engage with them," Mr Mendelsohn says. "It's part of continuing education. It makes people think and extends their boundaries and keeps them engaged."

He also views the online lecture archive as a public resource. In fact, the company is looking for a broadcast partner.

"A 25-year-old won't normally get a chance to meet Peter Blake or listen to an ambassador," says Mr Popham. "In some ways it's an extension of sponsoring art galleries and museums. Also, there's been such a blurring of the work/life boundary that employers have a responsibility to provide these sort of opportunities - because people no longer have the time to pursue them."

Mr Lee buys into this idea, although he warns that it needs to avoid becoming a PR exercise. "For employees to really benefit from it, you do need to see someone live and feel the energy in the room. If you watch it online or on television, the impact is greatly diluted."