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A tale of two conferences

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A somewhat hectic June concluded with my second trip of the month to California. Whilst the first excursion led to [Santa Clara](#) and [an interesting insight](#) into attempts by [Hitachi Data Systems](#) to reinvent its relationship with the wider community, the second journey took me to [San Francisco](#) and a pair of events that lie at the heart of the advances that underpin much of my current work.




The [Semantic Technology Conference](#) celebrated its sixth year in 2010, moving from San Jose to the Hilton Union Square in Downtown San Francisco. This was my fourth (I think!) year, and alongside the ["30% increase in attendance"](#) to around 1,200, I noticed a refreshing realism amongst presenters, exhibitors and attendees; the hyperbole and inflated expectations of the "Google killers" thankfully seemed *mostly* to have been replaced by good ideas, sound business models, and steadily growing customer bases. [Richard MacManus](#) has been doing a good job of distilling some of the news from the event, and [pushing it out on ReadWriteWeb](#).

Across town at UCSF's Mission Bay Campus, [GigaOM](#)'s smaller and younger [Structure Conference](#) broke out of its previous 1-day format to pack two days with various insights into the shifting Cloud Computing landscape; insights that were [reported as they happened on GigaOM](#) and elsewhere, and preserved [on video](#) for you to watch at your leisure.


Both events were smoothly run (at least one even brings in the same professional A/V team every year, don't they Curtiss?), buzzing, and well worth attending. Unfortunately, for me at least, 'attendance' meant a near-unending stream of meetings and briefings in and around the venues, rather than much time spent listening to either carefully orchestrated programme. Lining up briefings, meetings and the rest seemed like such a good idea as this trip was planned. Participating in two events simultaneously, I persuaded myself, would be fine. And it mostly was, even though there were definitely times that I couldn't quite remember where I was. Sitting down with [John Hagel](#), looking blank, then saying "Hmm... so tell me about the Cloud," was probably *not* the best way to get started with someone I'd been looking forward to meeting for a very long time. Delayed jetlag from the week before? Jetlag from the outbound flight earlier that same week? [MUNI](#)-lag from crossing back and forth between venues? Too much coffee? Not having quite got around to eating that day? Too many appointments in rapid succession? Or just impending senility? Whatever the reason, Hagel coped admirably with his pathetic interviewer's opening gambit, and we went on to have a great conversation. More on that, [his latest book](#), and his team's [Cloud Computing: Storms on the Horizon](#) paper in due course, I suspect.

Despite starting from very different places (a sizeable chunk of the SemTech audience would not be out of place at an academic conference, whilst most of Structure's attendees probably stalked the halls of Tim O'Reilly's earliest Web 2.0 events), the perceived gulf between the real worlds of Cloud Computing and the Semantic Web grows narrower all the time. Companies like [Facebook](#) attend one to [talk about the Open Graph protocol](#), and address [issues of scale](#) at the other. With Cloud infrastructures' (yes, that apostrophe is correctly placed) capabilities ever-more commoditised by the day, value and differentiation move toward putting those assets to work in tackling real business challenges; challenges that require data, challenges that depend upon business buy-in, and challenges that benefit from lessons the Semantic Web community has learned in grappling with its

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transition toward a range of (hopefully) sustainable data businesses.

I have long believed in the fusion of the two ('Cloud of Data,' after all), but it was both refreshing and reassuring to observe the growing convergence in hallway conversation at each event. At SemTech, many were reaching toward 'the Cloud' (mostly, they meant 'using Amazon') in its simplest, purest, form. At Structure, many of those with whom I spoke were reaching for Semantic Technologies and some of Linked Data's promise, without initially recognising that for which they sought. The Semantic Web, to them, was all too often just a discredited pipe dream from the Web's distant past. The Semantic Web community of today is a very different place, and one with which Structure's attendees might find much in common. The danger for the Semantic Web community, of course, is that they once more become absorbed in internal debate or the purity of the model. They may have powerful ideas and technologies to offer, but they need to reach out and describe those in ways that resonate with an industry that is ripe for hearing these messages. Delay too long, or descend too far into re-imagining technical underpinnings, and this fleeting opportunity will be lost; the bright young things of Silicon Valley will just develop something else that does the job almost as well, then iterate rapidly as they mine the flow to observe what works, and what doesn't.

Personally, I am still absorbing the cacophony of ideas, contacts and opportunities arising from my week in San Francisco, but I am sure that there are plenty of [projects](#), stories, [podcasts](#) and other follow-ups to appear here and elsewhere over the next few months.

And finally, an appeal to the organisers; can you locate these events a little closer together next year, please?!

Disclosures: Costs for my trip to Santa Clara were met in full by HDS. Both the Semantic Technology Conference and GigaOM's Structure Conference supplied Analyst Passes for admission to their events.

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(Cross-posted @ [Cloud of Data](#))

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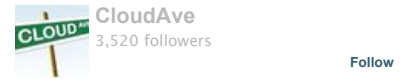
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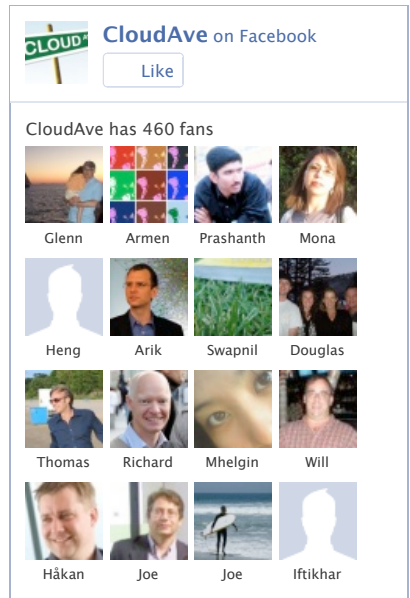
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





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