6th International Congress on Congress Organization
Meeting Failure and Participant Frustration
Technical facilitation of meeting dynamics
and participant interaction: 1
- from conference organization for well-behaved
participants to conference organization
for the satisfaction of participants

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This is the first of three articles based
on a presentation to the session on
Technical Equipment at the 6th Inter-
national Congress on Congress Or-
ganization. The second article will be
concerned with the types of meeting
for which these remarks are parti-
cularly relevant. The third article
will be concerned with specific
possibilities for the technical sup-
port of improved conference dyna-
metics.

Introduction

A significant number of conferences,
whether national or international, may
be judged a failure or a waste of res-
sources despite the fact that
(1) all conventional physical technical,
and administrative facilities and servi-
ces are used competently with the gui-
dance of experienced personnel;
(2) the programme of the conference
is well-planned and conforms to the
interests and priorities of the different
groups of participants;
(3) the meeting sessions and the social
sessions are well-organized and effic-
sently run.

A frequent source of participant frus-
tration within a well-organized meeting
is the lack of adequate contact between
participants in terms of their profes-
sional interests and commitments (na-
mely other than purely social contact).

Conference dynamics summarized

A conference is a dynamic communica-
tion environment. It is a concentration
and intensification of the pattern of on-
going interaction between participants
prior to and following any particular
conference. Both the organizers and
participants may meet once together
frequently in other conference settings
on related topics. The particular com-
munication pattern which is enhanced
in a given conference by the formal
meeting structure selected is a momentary
distortion in the general communica-
tion pattern. It is considered neces-
sary by the organizers in order to high-
light current issues and to provide a
means of supplying new information and
arriving at consensus. The programme
and meeting session structure represent
a momentary compromise between:

(1) the organizers’ understanding of what
participants really want or are willing
to pay to receive
(2) the organizers’ understanding of what
they themselves want and what partic-
ipants should want
(3) the organizers’ understanding of what
their sponsors want
(4) and constraints of time, resources,
and physical or technical facilities.

However whilst many conferences are
organized primarily in the light of in-
terests perceived by the organizer,
increasingly conferences must respond
to a greater degree to the real needs of
the participant as expressed during the
conference. Participants do not want to
be only consumers of what speakers
produce. Conferences are for the bene-
fit of participants, not just for the bene-
fit of speakers and organizing bodies.
Conference participants are increasingly
critical and less passive in their respon-
ses to sterile meeting environments and
to seemingly arbitrary imposition and
manipulation of particular communica-
tion patterns during the course of a
conference. Experienced participants

Little attention has been devoted to
the technical support of contact forma-
tion and the facilitation of the associat-
ed meeting dynamics, and specifically
by
1) facilitating contact between partici-
pants within the conference as a whole
who do not realize that they have com-
mitments or professional interests in
common;
(2) increasing the quantity and the qual-
ity of communication between indivi-
dual participants and / or with the chair-
man or speaker during a particular
meeting session.

This is particularly serious when the ob-
jective of the conference is primarily
the clarification of issues and the for-
mation of consensus rather than the
reporting of substantive information
or the satisfaction of protocol require-
ments.
have a number of reasons for attending a given conference. They have their own private agendas. For them the travel expenses are in large part justified by the opportunity of meeting colleagues with similar interests with which they may (or may not yet) have long-stan-
ing working relationships.

Objectives of fruitful meetings include:
(1) maximization of beneficial contact between participants with complement-
ary interests and commitments
(2) maximization of participant ability to
— initiate new action
— elicit and involve other interested participants
— form groups and formalize group action (to the degree necessary)
(3) maximization of flexibility of pro-
grame structure informal meetings and associated meeting room allocation between participants with incommingle interests and aspirations while retaining the conference as a credible selling capable of attracting key resource people and sponsors

Some indicators that current conference organization is inadequate

The following phenomena may be ob-
served in an ‘efficiently’ run conven-
tional conference:
(1) During a sessions some participants wish to question the speaker but cannot
because of time limitations. The selec-
tion of those that do speak is arbitrary even when based on a process of selec-
tion and screened written questions
(2) After a session in a group of partici-
pants (whether or not they are speakers) it
all cannot make adequate contact and
frequently cannot even speak to their
colleagues from other parts of the
world as they are only restricted to the
conference sessions.
(3) Where the speakers permit and
facilitate the use of a message notice
board, it is covered in a multitude of
messages of great interest but which do
not necessarily reach the (busy) persons
whom they are addressed.
(4) During meeting sessions, a disco-
tented crowd may form around the
coffee pot.
(5) According to a Unesco study, it is
— only the novice conference goers who attend the meeting sessions as laid down in
the programme. More experienced participants select sessions and parts of
sessions and spend the remainder of
their time in the hallways talking to the eminent people seated at strategic
spots to receive them. However the
most eminent people, according to the
Unesco study, are to be found outside
the conference centre in a bar arran-
ging the next conference, or other
conferences with which they are associated.
(6) After a session, if the speaker has
copies of his paper available, there
is a scramble to obtain one. If not, par-
cipants must wait patiently to give their
names and addresses to the speaker to
receive a copy by mail.
(7) The distribution of documents by
the organizers permit and disorganized process dependent upon the whim of
the organizers and the aggressivity of
participants with the supply of documents perceived as of relatively little
use. A key question to a participant
might be: how many of the new con-
tacts made after the first day of the con-
ference could have beneficially been
made on the first day? And: how
many contacts were made too late to
be beneficially explored on that occa-
sion?

Participant communication checklist

To clarify these matters it is useful to
look at a checklist of participant com-
munication desires (see pages ...). It
should be noted that this is quite distinct
from a code of conduct for meeting
participants, namely how they should
behave in order that the meeting should
function according to the desires of
the organizers (1). In this case, it is
rather that the meeting should be organized
in such a way that the participant should be
satisfied. The distinction is between the
codes of conduct as perceived by the
organizers and the assumptions
related to participate in the conference
and the rights of the participant having
paid to be there.

Extracts from a letter from a group
of disenchanted conference participants

Dear Sir,

I am writing to you on behalf of a group
of international NGO executives who have just returned from a meeting of
hundred persons from all parts of
the world. I hope that you can help
us sort out our frustrations.

We have been to so many conferences that
people would be embarrassed to
state the number we have been to in
four years. Each person has been to
3-4 conferences a year since con-
ference travel and fees are tax deductible
and one finds oneself involun-

tarily travelling all the way
without the needs and ideas. The more
governmental bodies are now
requiring that meetings be
mechanically planned. As the
meeting might however establish the
approximate number of new and
useful contacts made per participant,
our embracing maximization of
beneficial contact would result
in a scramble to obtain one. If not, par-
cipants must wait patiently to give their
names and addresses to the speaker to
receive a copy by mail.

The key question is: Should partici-
pants travel long distances; in many
cases thousands of miles at great
cost, in the hopes that by chance they
might establish contact with just those people having the same or complementary
professional interests and commit-
ments? Should they be expected to
accept features of the programme which
do not correspond to the interests of a
significant number of participants pre-
vent, thus wasting their time and the
opportunity for the more beneficial
interaction which may well have been
the factor originally motivating them
to attend the conference in the first
place?

Index of inter-participant
communication effectiveness

Such an index does not exist. Opinion
surveys of participants during and after
the meeting might however establish
the approximate number of new and
useful contacts made per participant,
the number of new and useful
contacts perceived as of relatively little
use. A key question to a participant
might be: how many of the new con-
tacts made after the first day of the con-
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Checklist of possible participant communication requirements (tentative)

A participant may well be prepared to pay whatever reasonable cost it is necessary in order to have good communication guaranteed by technical support and thus ensure significant benefit from his investment in the (usually considerable) cost of travel, hotel and other such arrangements. To this end, it is essential to want the following communication problems to be resolved for him during an ideal conference. The following list does not take into account the conventional problems of sound amplification, interpretation, audio-visual assistance and other facilities increasingly considered as normal.

1. Communication by a participant within a particular session
   a. Ability of a participant to inform (a) the speaker, and/or (b) the chairman, and/or (c) all participants, and/or (d) a selected group of participants of points such as:
      (1) his agreement or disagreement with the speaker
      (2) his agreement or disagreement with a proposal under discussion
      (3) his desire to move onto the next agenda item
      (4) his desire for clarification of the point being made
      (5) his desire for the speaker to make his point more rapidly
      (6) his desire to adjourn the session
      (7) his desire to break into small group discussion sessions.
   b. Ability of a participant to participate in electronically-assisted weighted voting on issues in order to arrive at consensus without polarization and oversimplification of the issues under discussion.
   c. Ability to receive an extensive summary of a session into which he has come late, or a brief summary of the past 5-10 minutes of the session if he has been otherwise temporarily occupied.
   d. Ability to convey a message to any other participant he can identify during the course of a meeting session (e.g. to the last speaker from the floor to several speakers from the floor with whom he is in agreement).
   e. Ability to exchange messages with one or more known people during a session to determine a common course of action (e.g. on leaving for a discussion over coffee, or discussion on how to vote).
   f. Ability to acquire a mailing list of participants having certain types of interest in order that he may send to them (1) during the conference, or (2) after the conference, a copy of some text/report/brochure/meeting invitation, etc.
   g. Ability to indicate to a selected eminent person his participation interest and reason for a private discussion, given that such persons are usually faced with the need to reduce the number of people with whom they interact on such occasions.
   h. Ability to specify his interests and communication preferences as new issues emerge during the conference or as more desirable communication possibilities become evident.
   i. Ability to acquire a mailing list of participants having certain types of interest in order that he may send to them (1) during the conference, or (2) after the conference, a copy of some text/report/brochure/meeting invitation, etc.
   j. Ability to indicate the specific areas of activity in which he has engaged in the past, possibly with an indication of the resulting reports (or articles), so that other participants can leave messages indicating that they would like to be sent copies (or receive further details) after the conference.

2. Communication by a participant within the conference framework
   a. Ability of a participant to inform (a) the speaker, and/or (b) the chairman, and/or (c) all participants, and/or (d) a selected group of participants of points such as:
      (1) the conference programme amendments
      (2) the reallocation of rooms for meeting sessions
      (3) the announcement of a briefing session or audio-visual event
      (4) his proposal for a new resolution
      (5) names proposed for election and to receive the names of the persons interested.
      d. Ability of a participant to participate in electronically-assisted weighted voting on issues in order to arrive at consensus without polarization and oversimplification of the issues under discussion.
      e. Ability to have a series of contact meetings (two or more persons) scheduled and re-scheduled according to the changing availability of his prospective contacts, the respective priorities he attaches to them, and his and their respective fixed commitments.
      f. Ability to specify which portions of his time are
         (1) definitely committed to particular sessions
         (2) definitely committed to his own private schedule
         (3) definitely committed to particular contact meetings, however the other person may want them re-scheduled
         (4) currently available for automatic scheduling and re-scheduling of proposed contact meetings.
      g. Ability to re-specify his interests and communication preferences as new issues emerge during the conference or as more desirable communication possibilities become evident.
      h. Ability to acquire a mailing list of participants having certain types of interest in order that he may send to them (1) during the conference, or (2) after the conference, a copy of some text/report/brochure/meeting invitation, etc.
      i. Ability to indicate the specific areas of activity in which he has engaged in the past, possibly with an indication of the resulting reports (or articles), so that other participants can leave messages indicating that they would like to be sent copies (or receive further details) after the conference.

2.3 With much-solicited key persons (in the case of a non-key person)
   a. Ability to inform all (interested) participants of:
      (1) a proposal for a new issue for discussion or action.
      (2) a proposal for the organization of a new working group
      (3) the announcement of a briefing session or audio-visual event
      (4) a proposal for a new resolution
      (5) names proposed for election and to receive the names of the persons interested.
      d. Ability of a participant to participate in electronically-assisted weighted voting on issues in order to arrive at consensus without polarization and oversimplification of the issues under discussion.
      e. Ability to have a series of contact meetings (two or more persons) scheduled and re-scheduled according to the changing availability of his prospective contacts, the respective priorities he attaches to them, and his and their respective fixed commitments.
      f. Ability to specify which portions of his time are
         (1) definitely committed to particular sessions
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         (3) definitely committed to particular contact meetings, however the other person may want them re-scheduled
         (4) currently available for automatic scheduling and re-scheduling of proposed contact meetings.
      g. Ability to re-specify his interests and communication preferences as new issues emerge during the conference or as more desirable communication possibilities become evident.
      h. Ability to acquire a mailing list of participants having certain types of interest in order that he may send to them (1) during the conference, or (2) after the conference, a copy of some text/report/brochure/meeting invitation, etc.
      i. Ability to indicate the specific areas of activity in which he has engaged in the past, possibly with an indication of the resulting reports (or articles), so that other participants can leave messages indicating that they would like to be sent copies (or receive further details) after the conference.

2.4 With non-key persons (in the case of a non-key person)
   a. Ability to indicate to a selected eminent person his particular interest and reason for a private discussion, given that such persons are usually faced with the need to reduce the number of people with whom they interact on such occasions.
   b. Ability to acquire a mailing list of participants having certain types of interest in order that he may send to them (1) during the conference, or (2) after the conference, a copy of some text/report/brochure/meeting invitation, etc.
   c. Ability to indicate the specific areas of activity in which he has engaged in the past, possibly with an indication of the resulting reports (or articles), so that other participants can leave messages indicating that they would like to be sent copies (or receive further details) after the conference.

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2. In what sort of context he is prepared to make contact (private meeting, coffee sessions, interaction with a group, talk to a small meeting, or prepared conference, etc.)

3. What maximum period he is prepared to allocate to such a contact

4. What he is prepared to do in any session specifically arranged for his participation.

C. Ability to exchange messages with (possibly unknown) participants to ensure, if necessary, that they define precisely the purpose of any proposed contact meeting.

D. Ability to specify

1. Which people should be able to leave priority messages for his attention
2. Which people should only be able to leave non-priority messages for his attention.
3. Ability to specify which people should be informed, but not consulted, about his re-scheduling of his contacts with them.
4. Ability not to have his name listed in the general lists of participants and their interests as distributed to certain categories of participants, but only a contact number.

D. Communication by a participant with the outside world

a. Ability to receive messages from his home office and send messages to his home office.

b. Ability to communicate (i.e. leave and receive messages) with other individuals unable to attend the conference physically because of commitments elsewhere, such that for many purposes they may be considered to be present at the conference.

E. Implication of augmented meeting dynamics for conference organization

1. Necessity for organizers to be able to re-schedule, during the course of the conference, on the basis of information received at that time:

   a. The allocation of pre-planned sessions to particular rooms, according to the number of persons who indicate they will attend. This might include the cancellation of some sessions to give places to others.

   b. The allocation of rooms to sessions proposed at the last minute on the basis of interests that have emerged during the course of a particular session.

   c. The allocation of audio-visual equipment and simultaneous interpretation facilities to meeting rooms according to revised requirements.

2. Necessity for organizers to be able to exert the optimum degree of control over the flow of communications in order to maximize interparticipant contact and formulation of new activity without completely disrupting the conference or exceeding the possibilities of the available facilities.

   a. In order that he can assess the quality of the proposed contact before responding.

   b. With key persons (in the case of another key person)

   The following measures are required in order to facilitate communications between key persons present at a conference:

   a. Ability to specify which people should be able to contact him immediately and directly, without the necessity of leaving messages, or by leaving priority messages.

   b. Ability to specify

      1. Which (even more eminent) people have the right to re-schedule their planned contacts with him, without consultation.

      2. Which people he must consult before re-scheduling his contacts with them.

3. Communication by a participant with the outside world

a. Ability to receive messages from his home office and send messages to his home office.

b. Ability to communicate (i.e. leave and receive messages) with other individuals unable to attend the conference physically because of commitments elsewhere, such that for many purposes they may be considered to be present at the conference.