

Technical facilitation of meeting dynamics and participant interaction : 3

Introduction

The first two parts of this paper (Part I, January 1976, pp. 34-37, Part II, this issue, pp. 88-90) dealt with the absence of adequate inter-participant communication and contact and attempted to clarify in which types of meeting this might prove critical. In this part, a series of examples of facilitative techniques are given which might lead to the emergence of a new improved style of meeting. It should be stressed that these are only examples and their main purpose is to suggest an area of meeting organization which deserves more imaginative and innovative attention.

Possibilities for technical support of improved meeting dynamics

Participant consensus expression

A simple device can be developed and distributed to participants, in the same way as earphone devices are currently made available, which would permit

each participant to indicate any or all of the following :

- (1) agreement or disagreement with the speaker
- (2) agreement or disagreement with the proposal under discussion
- (3) desire to move onto the next point on the agenda
- (4) desire for clarification of the point being made
- (5) desire to adjourn the session
- (6) desire to break into small group discussion sessions or similar points.

The device given to each participant would consist of a set of 6 (or more) switches corresponding to each of the above points. The switches would be linked to a counting device such that when 27 participants pressed the first switch a counter visible to all participants (including the speaker and the chairman) would indicate « 27 ». The total for each other point would also be indicated at the same time. In this way, at a glance, all participants in the meeting session could determine with greater accuracy the sense of the meeting and how it should be continued. This would help to avoid meandering

sessions which tend to make conferences a disappointment and a waste of time.

The device as described could be put together from simple items already marketed. A similar device technically is already used in some special classrooms to enable the teacher to obtain feedback from pupils. A simplified device would in fact be particularly useful in lecture-type situations whether in classrooms or in conferences. The great advantage of the device is that it help to change the pattern of communication. Instead of all communications being mediated by the chairman or speaker, participants are able to indicate to one another their assessment of the meeting in a way which prevents the chairman from manipulating the meeting on the basis of his own interpretation of the desires of participants. The use of such a device would introduce much more immediacy into debates since at every moment, in effect, a continuing vote is being made on a number of features of the meeting. (If recorded, as is technically feasible, this would be extremely valuable data for the evaluation of meeting effectiveness, particu-

lady if a normal voice recording was also available in parallel). A future development, less easy to implement, is the possibility of arranging for participant-to-participant information (flows so that sub-group formation could be facilitated as opposition or support for a particular issue crystallized during the course of a meeting session.

Travelling microphone

It frequently happens that a meeting room has no facility for equipping individual participants with a microphone, or that this is considered economically unjustified. Either the session is then conducted (a) without participation from the floor, or (b) participants come to a microphone at the front, or (c) a microphone on a long lead is taken to them by a hostess. These techniques are extremely crude in practice and seriously inhibit involvement of participants — they destroy the dynamics of a meeting, particularly when the microphone is necessary for the interpretation.

It is not difficult to envisage a simple piece of equipment that could be permanent, or installed if required prior to a meeting, or possibly in a few minutes prior to a discussion period. This could consist of parallel wires or rails, running the length of the room some three metres above the ground, and supported in tension by vertical posts. The microphone would move over the width of the room, between the parallel rails, on a wire. The connection to the parallel rails could be so arranged that the microphone could be moved the length of the room, or across the room, and then lowered to the person desiring to speak. This movement could be done electrically or simply by a hostess at the side of the hall. Several microphones could be available on the same set of parallel rails.

An even simpler approach to this problem would be to make use of directional microphones operated from one or more strategic positions in the meeting hall. (Whether these devices are as suitable to meetings as they are reported to be for various forms of espionage remains to be seen).

Meeting consultants

The concept of a consultant to advise on the organization of a conference is well-accepted, as is the concept of a public relations expert to assist in the smooth running of the conference in order to create the right impression. It would seem that other types of consultant could also be usefully considered in order to facilitate the meeting dy-

The following, for example, could assist:

- (a) in an advisory capacity, for the conference dynamics as a whole, or
 - (b) in an advisory capacity during a particular meeting session or
 - (c) by intervening in pre-determined ways in order to improve the dynamics.
- (1) Meeting dynamics consultant : concerned primarily with : the general pattern and intensity of communications flow; the diminution of bottlenecks and sterile patches and abusive manipulation of communication opportunities; and attempting to promote the emergence of synergism from the totality of isolated contacts and group interaction.
 - (2) Inter-cultural consultant : concerned primarily with bridging cultural gaps and creating an awareness of cultural sensibilities which might otherwise be ignored creating offence or otherwise hindering the establishment of good communications between participants.
 - (3) Inter-disciplinary consultant : concerned primarily, in the case of interdisciplinary meetings, with bridging the gaps in the communication between people with different disciplinary backgrounds.

With the progressive increase in specialization, the future may see the emergence of a new type of conference professional, namely the interterminology interpreter as contrasted with the present inter-language interpreter. Interdisciplinary interpretation could now be said to be achieved in the same way as interlanguage conference interpretation fifty years ago.

Graphic mapping of discussion points and issues

- (1) It is possible to produce one or more maps showing the relationships between the issues which are the concern of the conference as a whole or of a particular meeting session. These serve to sharpen the focus of debate and are a basis for contact between similarly concerned participants. Clearly such maps may be modified during the course of meeting sessions.
- (2) The future may well see the emergence of a new type of conference professional in contrast to the present stenographer or minute writer. This would be a person able to isolate, display and interrelate, on a large-screen graphic display device, the points and relationships as they are made and recognized by a speaker, as well as those attacked by him, or by his opponents in debate,

or reinforced by his supporters. Such a display, and its reproduction as a map or series of maps at the adjournment of each session would considerably sharpen the focus of debate and give precision to the pattern of contacts sought and made between participants and opposing groups.

Multi-meetings

There is increasing use of parallel or concurrent group and commission meetings during a conference. At present each such meeting session is part of one programme established by a single organizing committee. However, participants often have interests in a number of related organizations which each hold conferences. Occasionally several such bodies agree to hold their meetings concurrently, or with a partial overlap, to permit participants to attend sessions within both programme frameworks. This « multi-meeting » technique could be developed, particularly with adequate technical support, to permit a variety of organizations to hold their conference simultaneously, with overlap and joint sessions wherever feasible.

Costing formal meeting sessions

A special type of clock has been developed in Denmark to time meetings of corporate executives. Before the meeting the salaries per minute of each executive present is fed into the clock. As each minute of the meeting passes the clock then also shows the total cost of the meeting up to that time. An alternative for international meetings would be to show the cost per minute in relation to the travel expenses of participants, or in terms of an appropriate portion of the conference budget.

Participant communications unit

Individuals can already obtain briefcase size portable communication terminals which can be used to interface with a telephone system or a computer system. Just as conference participants are issued (possibly on payment of a deposit) with multi-channel earphone systems for use during a conference, so it would be possible to issue them with communications units for use anywhere in the conference complex or in their hotel rooms. This would be an ideal means for storing and transferring messages and other information (1) from the organizers to all (or selected) participants or (2) between participants as desired.

Computer-assisted voting

1. Mechanical voting : The concept of a voting board whereby each participant can indicate, using a button on his desk, his vote on a particular issue is now well-understood. This technique is however only used for format voting and not for the expression of participant opinion during the course of a debate (as suggested in point A above). Future developments of this technique will require that participants first identify themselves in some way (by inserting a card or a special number) before their votes are accepted.

2. Weighted voting systems :

(1) Card assisted : By extending the use of the electronic voting system noted in the previous paragraph, it will become possible to allocate a definite number of votes to each participant according to some agreed criteria. Once he identifies himself, he is then able to allocate however many votes he has either for (or against) a particular issue, or else to some other participant whom he allows to vote for him.

(2) Consensor : A device, known as the « Consensor », already marketed in the United States (by Applied Futures Inc., Connecticut), is a quantifying voting device which can be used by participants to explore and clarify attitudes and judgments concerning the questions and problems that a meeting has set out to discuss. As currently marketed, it is suitable for meetings of 5 to 16 participants.

The hand-held unit enables each participant to express his views by means of two switches : one to select between the alternatives being voted upon; a second to indicate the intensity with which the participant is in agreement or disagreement. The results are indicated on a visual display unit visible to all participants.

(3) Complex voting : By using a computer to calculate and interrelate votes, there is virtually no limit to the complexity and subtlety permissible in a meeting voting system. Beyond the one-participant-one-vote system, and the simple weighted voting systems lie many possibilities for interrelating and weighting votes. These have not been explored. They are particularly significant because it may well be that only in a meeting environment equipped to facilitate such complex decision-making will it be possible to establish the very delicate coalitions (conditional and temporary) of partially opposing groups which may be the only degree of consensus

which can emerge. The technology and software capability is available. The cost of the necessary electronic calculators now brings them within the reach of every conference-goer's pocket. Such calculators could be specially programmed or designed for conference-goers (as they are for other specialized tasks).

Computer-assisted contact formation

The use of computers to assist in the organization of conferences, particularly the administrative problems of mailing and registration, is now becoming accepted. Software packages are being developed. This use of the computer does indeed assist the conference organizer but it does not help the conference participant - it may even give him a heightened impression of being a numbered body in a participant processing machine. Computer software packages can also be developed to move the dynamics of a conference onto a new level in order to facilitate the kinds of communication noted in the checklist. The technique could work as follows, for example:

1. Individual registration cards: These would be an extension of the existing registration document. Different cards would be required for : (a) non-specialist visitor; (b) specialist visitor; (c) ordinary participant; (d) eminent participant (specialist); (e) eminent participant (non-specialist), etc. On these cards the participants would indicate (if they wished to benefit from contact assistance) :

1.1 Profile

- Topics of special interest
- Preferred method of treating such subjects.

The participants would be able to modify any such profile during the course of the conference as new issues emerged or alternative contact opportunities become evident.

1.2 Availability

- Which categories of participant should be informed in the case of complementarity of interest and commitment,
- Context preferred for exploring the topic (e.g. individual contact, small group, large group, guided tours, etc.).
- For what maximum period,
- What he is prepared to contribute to a group session on the topic,
- etc.

The participants would be able to modify any such profile during the course of the conference as the characteristics of the partici-

part categories became clearer and as his available time was reduced.

2. Event registration card : These would be prepared for each :

- an exhibition stand; (b) planned meeting session; (c) planned informal session; (d) audio-visual display; (e) guided tour; (f) etc.
- On these cards would be indicated :

2.1 Profile

- Topics emphasized,
- Method of treating the topic,
- Preferred range of participant types,
- etc.

The responsible officials would be able to modify any such profile during the course of the conference if the range of topics included, or the nature of the meeting, was changed in the light of preceding events.

2.2 Restriction on participation

- Which categories of participant should be informed in the case of complementarity of interest,
- Maximum number of participants,
- Ability of the responsible body to supply further information, if requested,
- etc.

As before, these restrictions could be changed during the course of the conference in the light of participant reaction to the planned event within the conference framework.

3. Computer-matching : The information on all the cards would be sorted by computer in order to supply periodically (e.g. 2 to 5 times per day) :

- To each participant : a personalized list of people with complementary professional interests or commitments.
- To each organizer of a planned event : a list of people who have indicated an interest in that event as described.
- To each organizer of a proposed event : a list of people who have indicated an interest in that event as described.
- To all concerned : a revised allocation of meeting rooms and meeting times, in the light of the interest manifested for particular events and the physical and technical constraints.

4. Dynamics: By responding to the information received, all concerned can modify their actions within the conference environment according to their best advantage and in the light of the possibilities which emerge from each new contact made. Such a system lends itself to many other possibilities, including integration with conventional administration of the conference, or

with the computer conferencing technique described in the next section.

Computer conferencing

The computer conference is a new communication technique which is already in use in a number of situations in the United States. Further developments are envisaged but basically it is a means of enabling many people to « attend » invisible meetings that run continuously 24 hours a day for as long as the participants want. At its simplest level, it is a written form of a conference telephone call. A participant can communicate with a group of people by typing messages and reading, on a display screen or a printout, what the other people are saying. The computer automatically informs the group when someone leaves the discussion, permitting him to continue once again when he rejoins the group.

Major advantages over verbal communication are :

- participants can be both geographically and chronologically dispersed; many people can talk and listen simultaneously;
- participants can contribute at their own convenience, rather than having to wait until other speakers have finished, or being obliged to speak quickly with inadequate time for reflection;
- all messages for him are stored until he wants to reply to them in the order he chooses;
- participant contributions can be anonymous or identified by a number, leading to more uninhibited discussions;
- results of votes are presented only as distributions and are therefore adequately secret;
- during the conference, participants may communicate privately with one or more other selected participants, leading to more rapid resolution of important issues; -
- a permanent record may be kept, and possibly indexed for selective retrieval.

Long-distance computer conferencing

This « glamorous » form of computer-conferencing is unpopular with the organizers of conventional meetings because it may lead to fewer international meetings being held. In particular it offers a means of linking by satellite contiguous regions between which travel is difficult (e.g. the West African countries). These possibilities are currently being explored for some developing regions.

Computer conferencing during large conferences at one location

The techniques being developed for long-distance computer-conferencing can be used at much lower cost during the course of a large conference. Because of the scepticism of conventional conference organizers, this possibility has not been considered. There is however no reason why participants should not have access to terminals, whether in the meeting rooms, in special rooms, or in their hotel rooms (or with the use of the Participant Communications Device described under point G above). This technique could provide the basis for fulfilling all the requirements noted in the participant communication checklist, including :

- ability of a key person to respond selectively to questions addressed to him.
- facilitation of interest group formation in the light of emergent issues.
- ability of all participants to exchange and channel messages in parallel with any formal meeting sessions.
- ability of organizers to contact any groups of participants.
- ability to reschedule meeting sessions and individual contact.
- ability to build up select lists of participants with particular interests.
- ability to use computer analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the communication patterns during a particular period.

- ability to arrange for the accurate invoicing of the communications sent and received, with the ability to subsidize (completely or partially) some kinds of communication.
- etc.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that there is a whole range of meeting techniques requiring new kinds of technical equipment and support. These may not be necessary for many conventional conferences but unless they are available for some kinds of conference, the cost of such occasions will be recognized as increasingly unjustified. Experience with such techniques and their technical support could prove a determining factor in attracting conferences to particular conference centres.

Clearly once a particular international organization, conference organization, or conference centre becomes known for the manner in which it guarantees a quantum jump in participant interaction and sense of satisfaction, the meetings it organizes will become worth the extra expenditure to get to wherever the meeting is held and benefit from the use of such facilities.

Pour Faciliter la Dynamique des Conférences et les Interactions des Participants

On trouvera ci-dessous un résumé en langue française des trois parties (dont deux se trouvent aux pages précédentes, et dont la première est parue dans le numéro de janvier d' « Associations Internationales ») de l'article de A.J.N. Judge, Secrétaire-Général Adjoint de l'UAI.

Malgré la compétence des organisateurs, la conception judicieuse des programmes de travail, la qualité des participants, bien des conférences sont considérées par ceux-ci comme des échecs. Surtout parce que, le plus souvent, ils éprouvent beaucoup de difficultés à établir les contacts intéressants et à tirer tout le profit intellectuel qu'ils en escomptaient. Qu'il s'agisse de vastes congrès, de conférences, de symposia ou de jour-

nées d'études à participation restreinte. la question est de savoir si les participants doivent perdre temps et argent sans être assurés d'y rencontrer ceux qui ont précisément les mêmes sujets d'intérêt qu'eux et avec lesquels ils pourraient nouer les contacts les plus utiles et les plus enrichissants pour améliorer leur propre action, soit à travers leurs organisations, soit de leur propre initiative.

1. - Quels peuvent être les besoins de communication des participants ?
- 1.1 - Lors d'une séance dans le cadre d'une conférence, ils peuvent désirer manifester leur approbation ou leur désaccord avec les orateurs, les thèmes de discussion, le déroulement des travaux, nouer des contacts en cours de session avec d'autres participants, être informés rapidement de ce qui a été évoqué au cours de la session, si pour une raison ou pour une autre, ils n'ont pu assister à la totalité des travaux.
- 1.2 - Dans le cadre d'une conférence (composée d'une série de séances), ils peuvent désirer communiquer avec :
- les organisateurs pour faire passer ou recevoir des messages, pour être instantanément informés des éventuelles modifications de programmes;
 - d'autres participants; ils doivent évidemment disposer non seulement de la liste de ceux-ci mais aussi des sujets d'intérêt susceptibles de rejoindre les leurs propres ainsi que des moyens d'établir rapidement les contacts nécessaires avec eux. Ils désirent également pouvoir les informer de leurs propres suggestions concernant les diverses manifestations envisagées (nouveaux thèmes de discussion, nouvelles résolutions, nouveaux candidats pour la composition du bureau, etc...).
- Or, dans la plupart des conférences, si bien organisées soient elles, les gens se plaignent de n'avoir pu prendre la parole, de n'avoir pu approcher des orateurs trop entourés, de ne pouvoir disposer en temps voulu des papiers distribués par les orateurs ou les organisateurs, etc... Et selon une étude de l'UNESCO, la plupart des gens ayant l'habitude de ces réunions ne suivent pas les conférences ou les sessions mais « font les couloirs » ou organisent leurs propres réunions au hasard des rencontres, etc., etc... Finalement, on ignore la valeur des contacts établis et le nombre des occasions de contacts manqués, faute de temps ou d'organisation adéquate.
- Or une rencontre réussie se mesure :
- au nombre des contacts utiles établis entre participants,
 - aux possibilités offertes ou suscitées d'amorcer de nouvelles activités ou de créer de nouveaux groupes de travail.
 - à la souplesse de son organisation.
2. - Quels sont les outils techniques qui peuvent améliorer la dynamique des conférences ?
- 2.1 - L'opinion des participants peut être connue en temps réel : Un petit appareil distribué à chaque participant pourrait lui permettre, en appuyant sur une touche de manifester son opinion sur l'orateur ou sur le sujet de discussion, son désir de passer au sujet suivant, de modifier l'ordre du jour, d'ajourner le débat, etc... L'appareil serait relié à un ordinateur qui comptabiliserait les propositions de l'auditoire et ferait apparaître immédiatement sur un écran le nombre de personnes manifestant ainsi leur opinion. Un tel appareil n'existe pas encore mais est techniquement réalisable.
- 2.2 - Une profession nouvelle, celle de conseiller en organisation de conférences pourrait être d'un grand secours pour améliorer la dynamique de leurs sessions particulières ainsi que pour établir les liaisons entre participants de cultures ou de disciplines différentes. Ce pourrait être un interprète « inter terminologie » comme nous connaissons aujourd'hui les interprètes inter-langues.
- 2.3 - On pourrait établir des graphiques reflétant l'évolution conceptuelle de la conférence ou des discussions; ce qui présenterait l'avantage de préciser les objectifs et la nature des contacts recherchés par les participants pendant le déroulement de la conférence.
- 2.4 - Pour réduire frais de déplacements et pertes de temps, il serait souhaitable que les organisations dont les thèmes et sujets d'intérêt sont similaires s'entendent pour préparer leurs réunions à peu près en même temps et dans les mêmes lieux avec un programme qui permet aux participants, selon leurs intérêts, de choisir entre les séances des différentes réunions.
- 2.5 - Il pourrait être utile, d'ailleurs, de chiffrer minute par minute le coût de la conférence, mesuré en fonction du temps consacré par chacun des participants (et éventuellement de leurs frais de voyage). Ce coût pourrait être affiché dans chacune des salles de conférence.
- 2.6 - Tout comme on distribue des écouteurs dans les salles de conférences, on pourrait aussi distribuer, moyennant une caution, des terminaux portatifs reliés aux systèmes de téléphone ou d'ordinateur, permettant à chaque participant de prendre connaissance à tout moment des messages le concernant.
- 2.7 - De nombreux systèmes de vote électronique existent déjà sur le marché; on peut envisager de les raffiner de façon à pondérer ou à nuancer les réponses et à les afficher pour les faire connaître de tous les participants.
- 2.8 - L'ordinateur, largement utilisé pour la préparation et l'organisation des conférences, pourrait être mis à contribution pour établir des contacts entre participants. Ainsi pourrait-on demander aux participants, au moment de leur inscription, de préciser leurs sujets d'intérêt et leurs suggestions sur la manière d'en discuter, quelles catégories de personnes ils désirent rencontrer, comment ils entendent intervenir dans les discussions, etc... toutes ces indications étant susceptibles d'être modifiées au cours de la conférence, seraient tenues à jour par l'ordinateur et permettraient de communiquer en temps réel.
- On remettrait :
- à chaque participant, la liste des autres participants que le même sujet intéresse;
 - à chaque organisateur, la liste des participants désireux d'assister à la manifestation prévue ou à organiser;
 - à tous, l'organisation matérielle des nouvelles manifestations prévues, leur localisation, en fonction des désirs exprimés.
- 2.9 - Les conférences sur ordinateur commencent à être mises en pratique aux Etats-Unis : c'est, en fait la version écrite d'une conversation téléphonique; chacun peut communiquer avec le groupe par l'intermédiaire d'un écran de T.V. ou d'un télécopieur. Ce qui permet de faire communiquer entre elles un très grand nombre de personnes même si elles ne peuvent se libérer à heure fixe, puisque le système garde en mémoire toutes les interventions. Cette technique est applicable non seulement pour des conférences réunissant des participants dans différents régions d'accès difficile mais aussi dans le cadre de très vastes conférences internationales : bien souvent plusieurs sessions intéressantes se déroulent simultanément. Un tel système permettrait aux participants d'établir et de maintenir des contacts entre eux dans le cadre de la conférence mais en parallèle avec le déroulement des séances. Il permettrait aussi de faciliter la formation des groupes ayant des nouvelles propositions à formuler ou ayant des intérêts en commun dont l'expression n'est pas prévue dans le programme de la conférence.

A.J.N.J.