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 that 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 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 a “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 during the course of the conference. Yet it is precisely the emergence of these requirements which shows that the conference is an occasion on which something new is occurring. Because all significant interaction is supposed to take place within the planned sessions, mediated by the speaker and chairman, no attention is normally given to the problems of the interaction between participants independently of such sessions. Other than during the formal social occasions facilitated solely by receptions, parties and banquets, no serious attempt is therefore made to establish contact between participants on the basis of their professional interests or commitments.

Such contacts may of course occur as a result of chance introductions during social occasions.

Conclusion
It is at least worthwhile investigating how some technical assistance can be given to improving the meeting dynamics when such improvement is considered desirable by in a particular setting. Part III of this paper suggests a number of possibilities. The interesting question is what new types of meeting would emerge through use of such possibilities.
lady if a normal voice recording was also available (in parallel). A future development, less easy to implement, is the possibility of arm- ing for participant-to-participant infor-

mation (hence so that sub-group forma-
tion could be facilitated as opposition or support for a particular issue crystal-
lized during the course of a meeting session.

Travelling microphone

It frequently happens that a meeting room has no facility for equipping in-
dividual participants with a microphone, or that this is considered economically unprofitable. 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 mi-
crophone on a long lead is taken to them by a hostess. These techniques are extremely crude in practice and seriously inhibit involvement of parti-
cipants — they destroy the dynamics of a meeting, particularly when the microphone is necessary for the inter-
pretation.

It is not difficult to envisage a simple piece of equipment that could be per-
manent, or installed or supplied if required prior to a meeting, or possibly in a few minutes prior to a discussion period. This could consist of parallel rails or rails, run-
ing the length of the room some three metres above the ground, and supplic-
ted in tension by vertical posts. The microphones could be hung on the parallel rails so that they may be moved the length of the room, or across the room, and then lowered to the person desiring to speak. 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 pro-
blem would be to make use of direc-
tional (unidirectional) microphones supplied from one or more strategic positions in the mee-
ting hall. Whether these devices are as suitable to meetings as they are repor-
ted 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 the role 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 confer-
ence dynamic as a whole or
(b) in an advisory capacity during a partic-
ular meeting session or
(c) by intervening in pre-determined ways in order to improve the dynamics.

(1) Meeting dynamics consultant : con-
cerned primarily with the general pattern and intensity of communica-
tions flow; the diminution of bottle-
necks and sterile patches and abu-
sive manipulation of communication opportuni-
ties, and attempting to promo-
te the emergence of synergism from the totality of isolated contacts and group interaction.

(2) Inter-cultural consultant : concen-
trated primarily with bridging cultural gaps and creating an awareness of cultural sensibilities which might otherwise be ignored creating off-
ence or otherwise hindering the estab-
ishment of good communica-
tions between participants.

(3) Inter-disciplinary consultant : concen-
trated primarily, in the case of in-
terdisciplinary meetings, with brid-
ging the gaps in the communication between people with different dis-
ciplinary backgrounds.

With the progressive increase in speci-
fication, the future may see the emer-
gence of a new type of conference pro-

fessional, namely the interterminology interpreter as contrasted with the pre-

sent inter-language interpreter. Inter-

disciplinary interpretation could now be said to be achieved in the same way as interlanguage conference interpre-
tation 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. Such maps can sharpen the focus of debate and are a basis for contact between similarly concern-
ed participants. Clearly such maps may be modified during the course of meeting sessions.

(2) The future may well see the emer-
gence of a new type of conference professional in contrast to the pre-

sent stenographer or minute writer. This would be a person able to iso-
late, display and interact with a large-screen graphic display device, the points and relationships as they are made and recognized by a spea-
kier, as well as those attacked by him, or by his opponents in debate, or reinforced by his supporters. Such a display, and if reproduction as a map or series of maps at the end-

nominations of each session would consid-
erably 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 mee-
tings during a conference. At present each such meeting season is part of one programme established by a single or-

gizing committee. However, parti-
cipants often have interests in a num-
ber of related organizations which each hold conferences. Occasionally several such bodies agree to hold their mee-
tings concurrently, or with a partial overlap, to permit participants to attend sessions within both programme frame-
works. This x multi-meeting technique could be developed, particularly with adequate technical support, to permit a variety of organizations to hold the conference simultaneously, with over-

lap and joint sessions wherever feasible.

Costing formal meeting sessions

A special type of clock has been de-
veloped in Denmark to time meetings of corporate executives. Before the meet-
ing the salaries per minute of each executive present is led 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 is to show the cost per minute in relation to the travel expenses of participants, or in terms of an appro-

priate portion of the conference budget.

Participant communications unit

Individuals can already obtain brief-
case size portable communication ter-

minals 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) par-
ticipants or (2) between participants as desired.
Computer-assisted voting

1. Mechanical voting : The concept of a voting board whereby each particip-
ant card indicates, using a button on his deck, his vote on a particular issue is now well-understood. This technique is frequently used for formal 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 sys-
tem 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 mark-
ten in the United States (by App-
led 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 pro-lems that a meeting has set out to discuss. It is suitable for meetings of 5 to 16 par-
ticipants.
   The hand-held unit enables each participant to express his views in terms of two switches - one to se-
tect between the alternatives being voted upon, a second to indicate the intensity with which the particip-
ant is in agreement or disagree-
ment. The results are indicated on a visual display unit visible to all participants.
   (3) Complex voting : By using a computer to calculate and interna-
tiate votes, there is virtually no limit to the complexity and subtlety permis-
able in a meeting voting system. Beyond the one-participant-one-vote system, the electronic voting systems offer many possibil-
ties for interpreting and weighting votes. These have not been explored. They are particularly significant be-
cause they may well be the only way in which a meeting environment equipped to facilitate such complex decision-
making will it be possible to es-
blish the very delicate coalitions (conditional and temporary) of par-
tially 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, particu-
larly the administrative problems of mailing and registration, is now be-
coming accepted. Software packages are being developed. This use of the computer does indeed assist the con-
ference 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, (b) specialist visitor; (c) ord-

inary participant; (d) eminently partici-
pant (specialist); (e) eminent participant (non-specialist), etc. On these cards the participants would indicate (if they wished to benefit from contact assist-
tance):

   a. Topics of special interest.
   b. 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 alternat-
ive contact opportunities be-
come evident.

1.2 Availability
   a. Which categories of partici-
pant should be informed in the case of complementarity of in-

terest.
   b. Context preferred for explo-

ing the topic (e.g. individual contact, small group, large group, guided tours, etc.).
   c. For what maximum period.
   d. If what he is prepared to con-

tribute to a group session on the topic.
   e. etc.
   The participants would be able to modify any such profile during the course of the conference as the characteristics of the partic-

ant categories became clearer and as his available time was re-
duced.

2. Event registration card : These would be prepared for each:
   (a) exhibition stand, (b) planned mea-

inning session; (c) planned informa-

tion session; (d) audio-visual display; (e) guided tour (f) etc.

On these cards would be indicated:

2.1 Profile
   a. Topics emphasized.
   b. Method of treating the topic.
   c. Preferred range of participant types.
   d. etc.
   e. etc.

The responsible officials would be able to modify any such pro-
files if the range of top-
ics included, or the nature of the mea-
ing, was changed in the light of proceeding events.

2.2 Restriction on participation
   a. Which categories of partici-
pant should be informed in the case of complementarity of in-

terest.
   b. Maximum number of partici-
pants.
   c. Ability of the responsible body to supply further information, if requested.
   d. 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 con-
ference framework.

3. Computer-matching : The informa-
tion on all the cards would be sorted by computer in order to supply to partici-

pant categories became cleaner and as his available time was re-
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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 around the clock as the participants want. At its simplest it is a means of communicating with someone by telephone call. A participant can communicate with a group of people by typing messages and reading, on a display screen or a printed copy, 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 new form of computer conferencing is unpropitious for 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 to contiguous regions between which travel is difficult (as in 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 skepticism 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 group or 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 recording 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.

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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 > General Adjout de l’UAI). 

Malgré la compétence des organisateurs, la conception judicieuse des programmee de travail, la qualité des participants, bien des conférences sont considérées par ceux-ci comme des échecs. Surtout parce que, le plus souvent, ils imprévoient beaucoup de difficultés à élaborer des contacts intéressants et à faire en sorte que les discussions soient vives et en escomptent. 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’ils 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 créateurs, les thèmes de discussion, le déroulement des travaux, moter des commentaires ou manifester volontariat. Les besoins en contacts établis et nouveaux des autres participants, sont informes répétitifs de la façon d'avoir été évoqués 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 immédiatement informés des éventuelles modifications de programmes ;
• d'autres participants : ils doivent évidemment disposer non seulement de la liste de ceux qui ont aussi des sujets d'intérêt susceptibles de rejoindre leurs propres s, mais que des moyens d'établir rapide- ment 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 le temps de se connaître (trop de débats, de ne pas pouvoir disposer en temps voulu des papiers distribués par les créateurs ou les organisateurs, etc...). Et selon une étude de l'UNESCO, la plupart des gens ayant l'habitude de ces réunions collectives, si bien organisées soient elles, ne sont pas les conférences ou les séances mais le fort des chance- lors " qui organisent leurs propres réunions au hasard des rencontres, 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 mérite :

• au nombre des contacts utiles établis entre participants,
• aux possibilités offertes ou suscités d'acquisir, de nouvelles acquis- sions ou de créer de nouveaux partis,
• à la souvinité de son organisa- tion.

2. - Quels sont les outils techniques qui peuvent améliorer le dynamisme 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'intervenant ou sur le sujet de discussion, son désir de passer au sujet suivant, de modifier l'ordre du jour, d'ajouter le début, etc... L'appareil serait relié à un calculateur qui complèterait et ferait apparaître immédiatement sur un écran le nombre de personnes manifestant ainsi leur opinion. Un tel appareil n'est pas encore mais est techniquement réalisable.

2.2 - Une profession nouvelle, celle de conseiller en organisation de conférences pourrait être un grand secours pour améliorer la dynamique de l'ensemble des conférences ou de leurs séquences, à la souplesse de son organisation, etc... etc... etc... etc... ou organisent leurs propres manifestations, etc... et selon une étude de l'UNESCO, la plupart des gens ayant l'habitude de ces réunions collectives, si bien organisées soient elles, ne sont pas les conférences ou les séances mais le fort des chance- lors " qui organisent leurs propres réunions au hasard des rencontres, etc..."

2.3 - On pourrait établir des graphiques reflétant l'évolution conceptuelle de la conférence ou des discussions ; ce qui présenterait l'envergure de préciser les objectifs et le nature des contacts recherchés par les participants pendant le déroulement de la conférence.

2.4 - Pour réduire frais de déplacement et pertes de temps, il serait souhaitable, que les organisations dont les thèmes et sujets d'intérêt sont seminaires s'entendent pour préparer leurs réunions à peu près en même temps et dans les mêmes lieux, avec un programme qui mettra les participants, selon leurs intérêts, de choisir entre les séances des différentes réunions.

2.5 - Il pourrait être utile, d'ailleurs, de chiffrer minuté 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 chaque 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 portables reliés aux systèmes de téléphone ou d'ordinateur, permettant à chaque participant de prendre connaissance à tout mo- ment des messages le concernant.

2.7 - De nombreux systèmes de vote électronique existent déjà sur le marché, on peut envisager de les réserver de façon à profiter 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 élaborer 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 désa- gent, comment ils entendent intervenir dans les discours, etc... Toutes ces indications sont susceptibles d'êtres modifiées au cours de la conférence, seront tenues à jour par l'ordinateur et permettraient de communiquer en temps réel.

2.9 - Les conférences sur ordinateur commencent à être mises en pra- tique aux Etats-Unis : c'est, en fait la version écrite d'une conversation téléphonique ; chaque peut commu- nier avec le groupe par l'intermé- diaire d'un écran de T.V. ou d'un télexécrivain. Ce qui permet de faire communiquer entre elles un très grand nombre de personnes même si elles ne peuvent se libérer à heure fixe. C'est la version écrite d'une conversation téléphonique ; chacun peut 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 conférencestu- nissant des participants dans dif- férantes régions d'accès difficile mais aussi dans le cadre de très grandes conférences internationales ; bien souvent plusieurs sessions intéressantes se déroulent simultane- ment. Un tel système permettrait aux participants d'établir et de manie- rier des contacts entre eux dans le cadre de la conférence mais en parallèle avec le déroulement des séances. Il permettrait aussi de faciliter les groupes de sujets ayant des nouvelles proposa- tions à formuler ou ayant des inté- rêts en commun dont l'expression n'est pas prévue dans le programme de la conférence.

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