

ORGANIZATION OF CONFERENCES, SEMINARS AND MEETINGS

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Introduction

Scientific conferences, seminars, symposia, and colloquia are becoming more and more common, but there is rarely any continuity of organizational experience among those who become involved in their arrangement. More often than not, the job of organizing falls on a willing amateur - willing at the outset, at least. If he is fortunate, he may find a colleague who has handled a comparable event and who remembers enough about it to pass on useful information.

When a conference is over, the organizer is glad to forget all about it and will gladly return to his normal work as soon as possible. Consequently, this sort of experience is rarely written up and made more generally available.

No two conferences are the same, each having their special circumstances and problems. There are however several matters common to all meetings, and a check list and time schedule of preparatory events can be drawn up.

Fixing the date and venue must be the first decision:

- Will the desired audience be able to attend?
- Is there a clash with other events?
- Will it be convenient for dignitaries to open and attend?

Committees are essential if the conference is large, residential, extending over several days, and to which international delegates are expected to attend.

Sometimes it is appropriate to set up a prestige group, called 'Conference Council', 'Patrons' etc. of influential people. They should be invited to lend their names in good time for inclusion in any brochure announcing the conference.

Under the main Organizing Committee, there should be a series of Task Forces or sub-committees to be delegated with responsibility to deal with the detailed planning of aspects of the conference:

Finance

- to ensure sufficient funds either by donations, subventions or other subsidies, and by conference fees
- to budget for the various items of expenditure
 - printing and postage (stationery, advance documentation, proceedings)
 - hire of hall and conference accessories
 - accommodation for visitors
 - hospitality, social functions, refreshments
 - travel, visits, excursions
- to decide on disbursement of funds
- to account for expenditure

Accommodation and hospitality

- Conference accommodation
 - size of hall (number of delegates to be decided by Organizing Committee)
 - additional rooms for syndicate and group meetings
 - reception room and delegates lounge
 - secretariat offices
 - press and publicity office
 - catering facilities and bar
 - Chairman's office
- Delegates' accommodation and hospitality
 - proximity to conference hall (if close, may save on transport costs)
 - single and double accommodation
 - arrangement for meals, including dietary requirements
 - arrangements for settling bills
 - preparation of delegates lists indicating where accommodated and how to contact (Room number, telephone number)
 - arrangements for meeting delegates at airports etc.
 - transport arrangements for delegates
 - local private hospitality
 - special arrangements for accompanying spouses
 - visits to local places of interest
 - programme of local events, local places of worship

Documentation - Administrative

- Headed notepaper
- Notices and brochures announcing the conference
- Invitations to contribute paper
- Tickets, lapel badges
- Detailed information on travel, accommodation, programme
- Conference folders or briefcases

In drawing up the timetable for pre-conference despatches, aim at spacing them to maintain continuing interest.

Notices and brochures should be truly informative, explaining why the conference is being convened, the background to the theme of the conference, expected outcome, expected attendance, and the benefit envisaged to delegates. It should be remembered that documents sent to potential contributors and visitors may have to be used by them in making a case to their organizations to justify their attendance.

When designing application or registration forms, careful consideration should be given to the information sought from those who will attend, by what date the completed forms are required, and how this information will be handled by the conference office. If different information is to be processed by more than one person (e.g. accommodation, transport, attendance at social functions) it may be advisable to have separate forms for each category, but provision must be made for delegates to enter their names on each form.

Documentation - Conference contributions

- Abstracts
- Full papers
- Proceedings

For a large conference, papers are usually pre-printed and distributed in advance. Amendments to papers after submission should not be encouraged, but reasonable requests should be considered sympathetically. In any case, amendments and updating can be done before submission of the proceedings to the printer.

It may sometimes be appropriate to request synopses or abstracts of proposed papers some time in advance of the papers themselves. This may help the convenors to tailor the programme either by persuading contributors to design their papers differently or by inviting further contributions to fill gaps.

Contributors should be sent notes for guidance in the preparation of papers. Sometimes it is possible for contributors to prepare sufficient copies along a defined format for distribution, but freight charges often preclude this course. The papers should however be in a form that would not require

editing, even to the extent of supplying 'camera-ready' copy for offset printing. Some provision should however be made for transcription, including re-drawing of illustrations.

Full particulars should be obtained of any demonstration, film or slides with which contributors propose to illustrate their presentation, to ensure that appropriate equipment can be made available at the conference hall.

Publishing of proceedings can be a problem. Careful thought should be given to the value of this course, as it may be sufficient to have more important papers published in appropriate journals after the conference. If the discussion is to be printed, it will save much time and trouble if contributions can be written down by those contributing them, or else can be typed quickly and shown to the speakers before they disperse at the end of the conference. Recorded tapes are not the answer; floor contributions are often indistinct and the play-back takes as long as the original contribution !

Conference procedure

Most of the arrangements for looking after people and ensuring the smooth running of the conference may best be regarded as a continuation of all that has been done before the event. All those who have assisted with the preliminaries should be present in force: they will already be in the picture, familiar with names, and so on. More helpers than these will be needed, of course, and it is vital to hold a comprehensive and unhurried briefing session with all helpers present. Each should know his own job, and should also know who are responsible for other jobs. All stewards should wear badges indicating their function.

Amplification systems and other services should be tested before the proceedings commence. It is necessary to ensure that there is adequate liaison with contractors' staff and/or the maintenance staff of the premises. Provision should also be made to amplify contributions from the body of the hall.

Speakers who intend to show films or slides should meet their projectionists before the session, to go over the material and agree on signals. Ensure disciplined control over blackout and/or lights. Check the ventilation.

It is tiresome to have to hunt for small change for interval refreshments. They should be free (the cost can be included in the conference fee), and so arranged that nobody has to spend most of the interval queuing for them.

The stewards' briefing might include some reference to general security of property, especially if valuable equipment is in use or on display.

Conference office

A conference office should be established at or near the main meeting place. For a residential conference, it may be necessary to have this manned without break for 16 hours a day. Arrange reliefs, so that those manning it do not starve.

The office equipment should include a typewriter, and perhaps a duplicator, with stocks of appropriate stationery; also

- Spares of pre-prints and other documents;
- Receipt books;
- Travel timetables;
- Details of parking spaces and service garages;
- Maps and location diagrams;
- First-aid kit;
- Telephones (perhaps provision for visitors as well as staff);
- Information on places of worship, theatres, cinemas and other local facilities.

It is also as well to consider security for valuables, including portable equipment.

Ensure that all telephone numbers likely to be needed in an emergency are readily available.

Registration of delegates

The Registration desk should be in a central and prominent position, adjacent to the Conference office. Registration gives the opportunity not only to be informed of the delegates' arrival, but also to distribute the delegates kits which should contain:

- Additional information on the Conference arrangements
- Lapel badge
- Extra Conference papers
- Invitations to receptions
- Questionnaires on local visits, excursions, return journey

Receptions

It may be appropriate to hold some reception function on the eve of the main proceedings or on the first working day.

If the occasion warrants official hospitality, a Minister or senior government official may offer cocktails. If this kind of function seems appropriate, check up well in advance on protocol.

Otherwise, or in addition to this, one of the organizations sponsoring the conference may agree to put on a reception, with or without a meal. This will help to distribute the work, but it is important to ensure that liaison arrangements are adequate.

Chairman

If the chairman of the various sessions have to be selected according to status, rather than special knowledge of the business of the conference, it is all the more vital to ensure that they are adequately briefed. Each should be provided with appropriate notes, which may cover any of the following:

- Welcoming remarks;
- Background to subject-matter of the session;
- Notes on speakers;
- Suggestions for remarks to open discussion, to guide this in useful directions;
- First few named contributors to discussion, if known;
- Time limits, etc. (most important!)
- Summing-up remarks.

It may be appropriate to have a secretary for each session, to sit with the chairman and help him run the meeting. This secretary might well be someone who will ultimately be responsible for getting the proceedings into shape for printing - or at least someone who will have that requirement in mind, and who will therefore see that speakers are identified and that an adequate record can be made.

If a lot of people wish to speak, and a selection has to be made, forms handed in before the session will help the chairman and secretary to arrange the appropriate order. Some degree of spontaneity has inevitably to be sacrificed in a large conference, but try not to exclude it altogether. It is always possible that someone present may be stimulated to original, valuable and articulate thought in the course of the session itself.

If the conference splits into smaller groups for part of the proceedings, the chairmen of these groups can perhaps be selected primarily for their ability to direct discussions, resolve conflict and so on. If so, they will need little guidance, but they should be provided with lists of group members, timetables, etc. and adequate briefing on any form of group report to the plenary session.

Announcements from the chair should be made, as far as possible, at the opening of a session. They should be kept to an absolute minimum.

Clearing up

It is advisable to appoint someone to look after the return of all equipment, etc., at the end of the conference; this includes the return of slides, etc., to speakers. Things do tend to 'disappear' when conferences break up.

After-conference staff meeting

A meeting of all helpers should be held after the conference has dispersed. This is useful partly as a means of collecting experience and views on how to do better next time, but it is far more important as an opportunity to thank explicitly all who have helped.

A conference is usually the occasion for a remarkable degree of enthusiasm on the part of all sorts of people. Members of the staff whose routine work may be quite unspectacular suddenly appear as models of social resourcefulness, work all hours, weigh in with hospitality and transport, and generally make a very big contribution to the 'image' of the organization. This should be acknowledged, handsomely.

These helpers often find themselves out of pocket in all sorts of little ways that are not normally covered by any of the official arrangements for meeting expenses, and it may not occur to them to claim for these expenses. The organizer should be alive to this matter and should do whatever is appropriate to arrange reimbursement.

Phasing of planning activities

Pre-12 months	Organizing Committee Funding and budget Banking arrangements
12 months	Draft outline of conference programme - theme, size, duration, invited contributions - attendance charges
11 months	Settle on date and venue - book conference centre - book delegates accommodation
10 months	Despatch of invitations and information on conference Conference Council Task Forces begin work in earnest
6 months	Receipt of abstracts Catering arrangements
4 months	Receipt of full papers Press announcements Arrangements for official reception
2 months	Badges Signposts and location diagrams Notice boards Car parking arrangements

Check-list

Conference office

- Staff roster
- Telephone numbers
- Information sources
- First aid
- Lock-up arrangements

Registration

- Staff
- Tables
- Badges
- Receipts
- Other documents

Equipment

- Projectors and operators
- Demonstrations
- Amplification
- Black-out, ventilation, lighting control
- Platform furniture