

Scientific conferences: organisation, participation and their future

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Introduction

Scientific conferences are an important part of the activities of majority of researchers. These are venues for presenting new research, receiving intermediate feedback and very importantly for networking with the other researchers. The conferences have been growing in importance as knowledge dissemination channels.

There have been a number of traditionally organised conferences for a number of years. There have been some traditional forums for meetings of professional societies, e.g. American Institution of Chemical Engineers (AIChE), founded in 1909, and UK Institution of Chemical Engineers (IChemE) in 1923. The growth in the numbers of professional meetings and conferences started with the development of the industry and travel facilities, especially after the Second World War. In the present century, we have been witnessing a significant escalation in the growth of conferences caused by the globalisation of research and supported by travel opportunities. With the availability of e-communication, questions are being raised about the future of the research meetings: are there still needed and what is the benefit of traditional conferences where hundreds of delegates are travelling frequently thousands kilometres for a few days meeting? Are such need and benefit expected to be present in the future?

A short retrospective

Let us consider as an example the profession of chemical engineering, which is globally networked and with which the author is most familiar. The AIChE Annual Meeting has been introduced as the premier research and educational forum for Chemical Engineers interested in innovation and professional growth. Academic and industry experts at the meetings usually cover a wide range of topics relevant to cutting-edge research, new technologies and emerging growth areas in Chemical Engineering (www.aiche.org/conferences/aiche-annual-meeting/2015).

IChemE—traditionally based in the UK and in a number of Commonwealth countries (thecommonwealth.org/), reports that they stage successful international conferences all over the world, disseminating latest thinking and best practices throughout the chemical and process industries. These events also provide excellent networking opportunities and can offer to the researchers targeted platforms for raising the profile of the researchers and their organisations, as well as can help in promoting products and services to industry decision makers (www.icheme.org/conferences). Other traditional Chemical Engineering societies are DECHEMA from Germany, Société Française de Génie des Procédés from France and Associazione Italiana Di Ingegneria Chimica (AIDIC), to mention at least a few. The European Federation of Chemical Engineering (EFCE) also known as Fédération Européenne du Génie Chimique and Europäische Föderation für Chemie-Ingenieur-Wesen was formed in Paris on 20 June 1953. There are also similar professional institutions in Asia, which are fast gaining importance in step with their countries' accelerating development and also reaching out to other parts of the world.

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Organising conferences

Organising a successful international conference is a demanding task. There are many issues to be dealt with and neglecting or not paying enough attention to each of them can lower the venue success or even ruin it completely. The scientific organisers are bidding for their successful future or failure. The organisers of the conference logistics can finish with profit or loss for their institution.

Organising a conference is a task many researchers face at different stages in their careers. PhD students and young researchers are often involved as supporting staff. Experienced researchers are involved in reviewing papers, chairing sessions and handling invitations of speakers. Finally, the leading management staff chair the conferences, serve as members of the scientific committees and also get involved in the venue planning, management and decision making. All those roles demand, beside the high dedication, also scientific know-how and experience.

The main issues are as follows: where and when to organise the conference, targeting the right audience, appointing the International Scientific Committee, Plenary Speakers, promotion of and attracting both key advanced scientists as well as providing provisions for participation of young promising researchers. Appropriate decisions should be made on Oral/Poster selections, the number and structure of the parallel sessions, proceedings and follow-up Special issues in journals with Impact Factors.

Other issues to be covered include finalising planning, organising a sufficient number of Committee Meetings, personal responsibilities/minutes, checking and familiarising with the venue. Before final booking, an exploratory visit is usually the best practice. It is especially beneficial to see the venue during another conference. Organising a small Pilot conference can also be a good step, especially for training new staff. The conference size is also important. Would the current conference be held in just a small part of a large building? Would there be other potential venues?

The list of more critical issues includes the following:

- Negotiating the Financial, Logistics and Managerial Issues.
- Organising and Scientific Committees, professional and support staff.
- Dates for submissions.
- Registration, Payments?
- Scheduling—too early/too late for reviewing, etc.

This list can be extended further to prove that the organisation is a serious business. Besides, newer organisers in this business space create additional complexity. Obviously, the demand is growing and a successful

conference can bring a substantial profit, because of which professional organisers have emerged: they run conferences as their main business.

Delegates' position

It is a tradition already to organise conferences in many touristic places. This has become a double-edged sword. On one hand, an attractive place is likely to bring more delegates. However, on the other hand, it creates a danger that delegates with weaker dedication might neglect some sessions in favour of tourism. This also can cause the university administrators to conclude that such participation is a waste of money and time, mainly covering a pleasure trip.

Many conferences, especially from the time when a substantial VAT was imposed in some countries, demand considerably high participation fee. It has been reported in some lucrative professions as chemical engineering that conference participation is subsidised by corporations expecting some favours in return.

So why are the numbers of conferences and delegates growing so fast in last few years? Of course, the attractiveness of the place plays its role. However, there are cases when the conference is traditionally organised in the same place for years and it is still highly attended. By author's personal experience, frequent travel becomes tedious and demanding. However, the major attraction is to listen and meet key leaders in the field and have a chance for networking. This is also very important for researchers to make contacts and be seen.

What is going to be the future of conferences?

There have been forecasts that the traditional conferences with hundreds of delegates travelling to one place (and contributing by this to the rise of greenhouse gases) seem to decline soon. Yes, the technology is ripe for tele/Skype or other communication media to electronically facilitate web-based or videoconferencing meetings. In some cases, the new technology has already taken hold. However, this has been the case so far mainly for intra-corporation communication, where the main target is to solve specific problem. A corporation has the power to acquire employees to electronically run meetings even when the timing is grossly inconvenient for them due to time differences.

In the author's evaluation, it will not be very popular in the foreseeable future for research conferences and meetings to be organised by electronic connections. The delegates who are mainly academics would like to exchange

their research results, which can be made by web conferences; however, they also put a strong emphasis on networking. Remote communication in many cases makes the remote participants feel left out of the discussions and therefore lowers the efficiency of the discussions or eliminates them completely.

The rapidly growing number of new emerging conferences and the growing number of delegates for traditional

conferences support this evaluation. The human contact with mutual confidence and deep collaboration makes successful networking, at least for the present generations. The situation may change when young generations using the social media rather than personal contacts would take over. However, if and when this is going to happen is more a field for social scientists, rather than for engineers.