Eur. J. Inf. Systs. (1995) 4, 1-2

Editorial

Too Many Conferences?

Turn to the back pages of any issue of **EJIS** and you will find notice of over one hundred conferences, working group meetings, specialist seminars and other gatherings of academics and those academically inclined. In order to meet constraints of space and to reduce the information overload for readers, we try to focus on European activities, but many North American, and increasingly Asian, gatherings are clearly relevant to information systems researchers in Europe. Our perception, albeit without empirical support, is that the number of conferences is increasing year by year and it is timely to ask whether this is beneficial to the discipline of information systems.

It could be argued that this proliferation of meetings is a healthy sign of vitality and diversity, reflecting an increasing will to communicate and a growing sense of social cohesion within the field. Alternatively, the myriad of sponsors can be seen as a fragmentation of the discipline, both in its intellectual content and its institutional structure. Is this 'Big Bang' indicative of a growing recognition of the relevance of information systems research across many fields of endeavour or does it portend a growing vacuum at the centre?

Sidestepping this issue concerning the future of the discipline, let us return to the pragmatic consequences of trying to hold and support an increasing number of conferences. On the positive side, more conferences imply increasing opportunities for young researchers to interact with a wider audience and for researchers of all ages to present partly-formed ideas to their peers for discussion. However, across the world, academics are under increasing pressure to carry out more research, more teaching and more administrative duties and with fewer resources. Time pressures and constraints on travel budgets mean that few of us can attend every event that is relevant to our field of interest. In this context, there is the danger of more, but more sparsely attended, conferences with a consequent increase in registration fees, especially where costly social events are provided in an effort to increase attendance.

Another consequence can be a reduction in the quality or originality of the papers presented. We have all suffered the frustration and embarrassment of sitting through the equivalent of Masters-level student presentations or presentations that are virtually repeats from other conferences. On the other hand, many would argue that the content of the papers is secondary and that the primary purpose of such gatherings is the opportunity for informal meetings and interaction. This is where the 'real' business is done and where ideas are exchanged and collaborations forged.

Nevertheless, most institutions still allocate travel funding based on the acceptance of conference papers, which further encourages a proliferation of lower-quality or duplicated papers. In other words, to attract a large number of attendees, conference organizers must accept large numbers of (often mediocre) papers and then puzzle out how to fit them into the time allocated, without too many parallel streams and without exhausting or alienating the audience.

An increasingly popular alternative to formal papers is the use of panel sessions, whereby panellists can still obtain funding from their institutions but without the burden of producing (unwanted) papers. Panels can provide stimulating discussion and interaction between experts in a particular topic area, resulting in an increased insight that is difficult to achieve through the medium of journal articles. However, the down side of panels can be seen where the panellists are poorly prepared (a few jottings made on an envelope over lunch) and where the panel's topic is poorly formulated. The end result is then typically an hour's embarrassment while respected academics flounder around to little avail. Sometimes panels pit people of opposing views against each other in the hope of producing some intellectual fireworks. Although this raises the possibility of verbal fisticuffs akin to parliamentary debate, our experience is that more often the 'opponents' fall over themselves to be polite and to respect the other's point of view, resulting in a tame consensus that there are in fact two 'highly laudable' views, each beyond reproach.

Another danger concerns working conferences supporting particularly specialised groups of researchers. Frequently set up in an early burst of enthusiasm, when the topic first becomes fashionable, such groups typically use their early conferences to lay down the foundations of the topic area, partly for their own benefit and partly to present the area to the rest of the discipline. The output of these early conferences is often valuable for all parties. However, as the years (and the conferences) trundle by, the spotlight shifts elsewhere and the group becomes increasingly introverted and the conferences increasingly predictable and incestuous.

In the face of all these problems and opportunities, it

could be argued that the discipline of information systems would benefit from some form of coordinating body that would, in some way, justify, legitimise and differentiate between the various conferences. This body would then provide the rest of us with an integrated menu from which to choose events. This might seem attractive in superficial terms but is likely to stifle and constrain creativity rather than create order. Such a body would certainly provide a tempting target for vested interests to capture in their search for prestige and control. No, we would argue that is not the route to travel. While the profusion of conferences has certain disadvantages, these are a small price to pay for the freedom to organize. It should be remembered that, in most cases, it is the 'rank and file' of the information systems community who both organize and attend such conferences. We are the ones who determine their success through our contributions and our participation and we are normally able to 'vote with our feet'.

In our experience, 'great' conferences (e.g. the IFIP WG 8.2 Conference in Manchester in 1984 – Mumford *et al.*, 1985) occur because the 'right' people happen to be gathered together to discuss the 'right' issue at the 'right' time, rather than being pre-planned by some higher authority. Such conferences are few and far between but the informal network is surprisingly effective in promoting tolerable (if not great) conferences. Too many conferences? Yes, but nonetheless a sign of health.

Reference

MUMFORD E, HIRSCHHEIM R, FITZGERALD G and WOOD-HARPER A T (1985) *Research Methods in Information Systems*. North-Holland, Amsterdam.