BECOMING ENGAGED WITH CONFERENCES: REPUTATIONS AND NETWORKS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to encourage members of the IS community to participate in Information Systems conferences. For lecturers and research students participation includes such academic roles of presenter, discussant, panel member, and PhD Consortium student or faculty member. For people further along in their careers, participation includes the leading roles of program chair, track chair, and associate editor. Key administrative roles such as organizing chair, publicity chair, and secretary are also described. Without these roles being fulfilled enthusiastically and effectively, conferences cannot be successful and the discipline is thereby impoverished.

Keywords: conferences, presenter, discussant, panel member, program chair, track chair, associate editor, publicity chair, secretary, and organizing chair

I. INTRODUCTION

For many researchers, conferences are seen as opportunities for presenting their research and for interacting with fellow researchers. Undertaking conference officer roles with leading conferences can also be seen as an important measure of esteem for academics. Furthermore, it can assist them in their career development and provide useful opportunities for raising their profile within the international research community.

However, it is often not clear how individuals can become involved and engaged with conferences and what is expected of them in various conference roles, such as conference officers, track chairs, associate editors and reviewers. Participation in conferences may also be limited because of concerns about what the reviewers are looking for with non–traditional tracks like panels, case studies, and the doctoral consortium.

As a result of these uncertainties, many academics may limit their participation in conferences to submitting and presenting papers or acting as a discussant or session chair. In an attempt to shed light on this issue, ECIS[1] 2005 conducted a 'professional panel' on this topic (Whitley, Avison et al. 2005). Many of the issues raised at that panel, in the presentations themselves, and responses to questions from the audience, are of general applicability for faculty and research students alike. In this paper we present the key issues from these presentations and develop them. The paper discusses what is usually involved in carrying out these roles and gives guidance on how you might get involved.

This paper draws on the experiences of each of the paper's authors. We deliberately use the first person throughout this paper, though who the 'I' refers to changes both between and within sections. We describe each of the many roles very quickly, but look later at some in more detail. We suggest what benefits can arise from contributing to conferences in these roles.

We start by looking at the various research roles and then the more administrative ones. We look at the roles of the track chair and doctoral consortium chair in particular, as they are good exemplars of the potential involvement that more experienced colleagues might consider.

II. BECOMING ENGAGED WITH CONFERENCES: RESEARCH ROLES

Delegate: I attended my first conference as a mere delegate. It was my first year as a lecturer. Some 'big names' were present and I was in awe. I was impressed by the keynote speaker and enjoyed the panels particularly. They provide an overview of the different research ideas around a topic (I could always read the research papers afterwards). I also summoned up some courage and asked a question which was taken seriously. I gave my name and university, so people could see who I was (badges always seem to be too small to be read discreetly). I also talked to people outside the conference hall. They seemed to be quite friendly even though I did not know anyone previously.

Presenter: The next time I came, I was a presenter. Again, I was terribly nervous, even more so, and my presentation was not good. I was nervous before the talk as well as during it and I felt terrible afterwards. But the people in the audience were supportive. I realized later that people want to hear what you say, and do not come to attack you (or at least rarely!). Having presented over two hundred conference papers since, I am now 'at home', but I am aware that it is never easy for newcomers. So it is always important to welcome people and put them at their ease.

Session Chair. A session chair for a conference (a session of one and a half hours might well consist of two or three papers, including discussion) can help to ensure presenters are as much at their ease as possible. The session chair may meet with presenters and discussants beforehand, and ensure that all are familiar with the presentation equipment. The chair also needs to ensure good timekeeping, so that everyone receives a fair share.

Discussant: The role of the discussant is to raise a few debating points about the paper to get the discussion started. The discussant's role is not to hammer a paper nor is it to overly praise a paper (nor give 'their' paper that was rejected in the reviewing process!). Davison [2003] discusses the role in more depth.

Panel Chair and Panel Members. Panels should be well planned. Unfortunately, frequently they

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[1] ECIS is the acronym of the annual European Conference on Information Systems.

are not. A panel member needs to put one perspective on a topic. The panel as a whole should provide a good overview of the research topic. The panel chair has an important job, therefore, to plan who will present the perspectives, in what sequence, and ensure there is plenty of time left (I think around half the total allotted time) for a debate with the audience. Too often, panels are simply lectures. They should be informative, but also inspire a great discussion afterwards. All too often, because they are poorly prepared, they are more a chat between friends. This is OK in the coffee room, but not adequate as a panel presentation at a conference. Good panel debates can be electric and fun.

Keynote Speaker. A keynote speaker should be inspiring, perhaps set the scene for the conference topic or provide a particular perspective to the conference theme. The keynote's role might also be seen as one to attract delegates to the conference or sometimes, for those from business, to provide money to support the conference. Much is expected of the keynote speaker, who is often the topic of conversation throughout the conference (sometimes not in the most flattering of terms). The **chair** of the keynote session should introduce the speaker and ensure time is left for questions. I have been introduced in many ways, including being introduced as a 'very funny speaker'. This particular audience was treated to a most somber and unfunny presentation. My sense of humor apparently deserted me.

PROGRAM PLANNING

But this paper is mainly about putting a conference together, which means ensuring all the academic things discussed above are well arranged, speakers well chosen, and all the roles defined with appropriate people fulfilling them. These roles are normally carried out voluntarily as an additional burden on the academic's workload. Even so, they can be very rewarding in other respects. With so many things going on to be concerned about, with delegates numbering anywhere from 25 to 1500 in information systems conferences, there is a lot of work to do. Of course, each conference is different. Here we present general advice, which can vary according to the particular conference. Planning may start many years beforehand, and even the smallest conferences will normally require a year or two of preparation.

Program Chair. From the academic program point of view, the program chairs are given overall responsibility. The program chairs will usually choose the overall theme of the conference, though this choice may be with the organizing and general chairs and perhaps with a *standing committee* (ECIS) or *executive committee* (ICIS). These committees consist of the main officers for the conference, and some experienced people who ensure continuity and provide advice to the conference chairs.

While chairing a track (see below) depends on publication record and network size within a specific thematic area, chairing a program committee requires even more experience and acceptance in the community. For broadly themed conferences the program chair usually requires recognition beyond your own specialist area of expertise. A strong record of track chair experience in different contexts is very helpful. Although an invitation to be program chair is a great honor, such service requires significant work and usually a financial commitment, for example, to attend meetings.

 Track Chair. Most large conferences are organized into streams or tracks, which represent general topic areas within the overall theme. The program chairs appoint track chairs to be responsible for each track. You need to be fairly experienced and well known to be appointed as track chair. The choice is governed by many factors, including experience as a delegate and presenter at the conference previously, but most notably in most cases, having been an associate editor and/or referee before in the topic area of the track.

The track chair takes an overall view of all the papers in the track and provides the final recommendations to the program chairs and standing committee. The track chair may have a 'ball park figure' as to the percentage of papers that can be accepted in the program from those submitted in the track. This percentage can be as low as 12 to 15 per cent, but is more frequently

40 per cent or more at conferences. Because the job of track chair is crucial, in that it liaises with the program chair on one side and with the referees and authors on the other, we look at this role in more detail in a separate section below.

Associate Editors. Some conferences appoint a number of associate editors (AE) for each track to handle the refereeing of a number of papers. The Associate Editor chooses two or three referees for each paper, ensures that referees' reports come in on time, and thinks about the reports to make an overall recommendation about each paper to the track chair.

Referee. The referee needs to assess the paper carefully, providing a full report for the AE and also the authors. It is not the job of the referee to tear a paper apart, but to make a recommendation as to whether the paper is acceptable in principle and whether changes are necessary before final acceptance. The referee also needs to remember that the timescales for conferences are short (much reduced when compared to journals), thus corrections and improvements cannot be too demanding. Even where a paper is rejected, help should be given so that the author can improve the paper (and his or her research). Frequently the referee is given a form to complete which will guide you, but you should provide a page or so of comments to help both the track chair and the author. Even if the paper is rejected, the author should feel that he or she has received fair and helpful comments from the reviewing process. Remember that rejected authors may be conference delegates, and later, hopefully, conference authors.

If you have not played any roles in a conference before, being a referee is a good place to start. Conferences need referees and you are unlikely to be turned down if you offer to be a referee, as there are so many conferences. It is also good experience for you. Providing a critique of another's research papers will help you to improve your own papers. You will begin to know what referees assessing your paper are looking for.

An aspect that might not be appreciated by everybody is that the quality of reviews that you submit (to conferences and journals) can be important for building up (or destroying) reputations in the community. Many conferences and journals now use electronic databases to store their reviews. At program committee meetings, reviews of marginal papers are often displayed to the entire committee in order to support final decisions on acceptance or rejection, especially if the range of recommendations from the reviewers is diverse. Reviewers as well as authors are being assessed at this time. Some conferences make a point of honoring good reviewers, an appropriate measure given that reviewing quality is essential and that reviewing service is an important aspect of academic excellence. But the opposite is also true. You can damage your reputation by submitting poor reviews.

Some reviewers ask their research students to help them review. This arrangement is fine if the inexperienced reviewer is supported by his or her more senior colleague. However, it is advisable that all reports should be checked carefully. The research student may not be aware of what is expected. The research student should also be acknowledged as a reviewer (although not all review systems allow this to be done easily).

Authors. Authors need also to be reminded that submitting a paper to a conference involves a lot of work from a largely (if not completely) unpaid team. Therefore submission should indicate a commitment to register, attend, and present at the conference should the paper be eventually accepted.

Once the papers are accepted, the program chairs need to put the program together. They try to ensure that papers in a session contain at least some linking attribute, be it subject matter, research approach, or something else. Linkage helps prevent too many transfers between parallel tracks, although some movement is inevitable in the larger conferences.

One other broad area concerning research is the doctoral consortium**.** We discuss the consortium separately in Section V. We discuss the role of the track chair in Section IV. But we now turn to the more administrative tasks and emphasize the role of the organizing chair.

III. BECOMING ENGAGED WITH CONFERENCES: ADMINISTRATIVE ROLES

Organizing Chair. The organizing chair (called conference chair at ICIS) is responsible for the non-academic side of the conference. Although every conference is normally expected to break even, profits may be expected, or even required, by the sponsoring organization. Sometimes losses are incurred. Major problems may occur after a human or natural disaster[2], although it may be possible to take out insurance for such calamities. The organizing chair needs to be aware of the risks involved and who is bearing them. It could well be that their university or society bears the risk. On some few occasions, it is the organizing chair! Accounting skills are required, therefore, but some risks are difficult to estimate, such as the impact of changing political situations in the country of the host site.

Organizing Chair is the most demanding level of involvement. While reputation in a thematic area is required for chairing a track, community experience and acceptance are crucial for heading a committee. In addition to that, chairing a major conference requires access to significant human and financial resources. Although every conference expects at least to break even, significant financial risks need to be taken, and a lot of unpaid work is necessary. The amount of work requires a sustainable, committed team and appropriate resources. The soundness of this foundation must be proved in the conference proposal process. In my case, chairing ECIS 2007 would not have been possible without the support of my colleagues at the Institute, the presidents of my University, a large number of colleagues across Europe (who are willing to serve as officers or track chairs) and my own research team.

The conference chair needs a workforce with a variety of skills. Together with accounting, the jobs include arranging appropriate hotel space, and allocating rooms for the large keynote presentations through to the smallest paper presentation (giving a paper to a group of five people in a room built for 150 is embarrassing, and yes, that has happened to me).

In the bigger conferences, such roles may be undertaken by more than one person, with vice chair positions allocated. Similarly, people may be appointed to more specialist positions, such as finance officer, accountant, and webmaster, and responsibilities for job placement, exhibits, internet access, awards, publicity, sponsorships, proceedings and the like. These jobs also need also to be assigned. Putting together a conference is both a logistical and an intellectual challenge, though usually very enjoyable, in particular, at times when things go well. Sometimes (inevitably in a complex and time demanding exercise like this) things will go less well on occasion and the organizing chair may need to spend time appeasing academics who can sometimes act like *prima donnas.*

Publicity Chair. The publicity chair, to pick on only one of these roles, can impact greatly on the success or otherwise of the conference. The number of delegates, and their registration fees, largely pays for the costs of the conference, though business and other sponsorships can help reduce the fee. The conference needs to sound attractive because of its intellectual content (the program) and the conference site. The publicity chair needs to make the information systems community aware. There might be other attractions, such as the hotel, exhibitions, trips, and other social events. Again these benefits will take time to arrange and sell to prospective delegates. The *ISWorld* list serve and web pages have proved to be excellent in informing us of conference opportunities (www.aisworld.org).

Standing Committee. The organizing chair is normally assisted in this task by the standing or executive committee. This body, which typically consists of organizers of previous and future conferences, seeks to assist the conference organizers by drawing on their experience of previous conferences (for example, how many papers should we expect to be submitted a week

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[2] An example is the INFORMS meeting which was scheduled for two months after Hurricane Katrina. It needed to be moved from New Orleans to San Francisco. INFORMS is the U.S. based society for operational research.

before the deadline?, a day before the deadline?, and how does the conference handle questions of copyright on the papers?).

The ECIS standing committee typically meets twice a year, once at the conference and once when the program committee meets to make the final decision on accepting papers. During the program committee meeting, the standing committee will also do such things as visit the various conference locations, offer advice on potential rooms for sessions, and try out the catering. Experience of organizing previous conferences is invaluable in giving advice on such issues as signage around the conference site and providing support for people arriving at the conference from abroad.

Secretary. As secretary to the standing committee I find that I am often called upon to give advice to the organizers who may not have attended many previous conferences. It can often be a delicate task, balancing the need for careful, rigorous reviewing processes (which help maintain the quality and status of the conference over time) with the desire for the local organizers to attract enough attendees and ensure a break even or better financial outcome.

Occasionally, the standing committee is asked to address important questions of long term policy for the conference (for example, how should the relationship with international bodies such as the AIS be addressed?, should membership of such professional bodies be compulsory for delegates or should it be optional?).   At times, these debates can become quite heated (although immediately after the meetings everyone is normally friendly once again) and I have often had to rely on all my diplomatic skills to present the minutes of the meeting in a form that is acceptable to all.

IV. LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH CONFERENCES: TRACK CHAIR

In this section we look in more detail at the role of the track chair and the interaction between the track chair and others. As a researcher's career develops over the years, their personal network grows. With some quality publications and a growing network of colleagues in a specific thematic area, you may receive an invitation to put forward a track proposal for a conference. For me, this was the case with ECIS 2003—nine years after submitting (and being accepted) for my first ECIS. Although the invitational model dominates, some conferences accept proposals for tracks (and mini-tracks).

Like many conferences, the structure of ECIS is based around tracks that focus on specific issues and topics. Conference tracks may be related to part of the field, for example 'economics of IS' and 'strategic management of IS', to particular operational aspects of information systems, such as, 'new technologies, innovation and infrastructure development' or to an application area, for example 'IS in the financial sector' or 'eGovernment'. As a result, the structure allows conference participants to focus on the latest trends and developments in particular areas or appreciate a broad overview of the current topics being addressed by the community. Focusing on tracks means that researchers and authors are able to receive constructive feedback on their studies from their peers in the specific area and they may also gain recognition in their chosen specialty.

New tracks are introduced to a conference for many reasons. I proposed this one on IT in tourism and travel because:

- Travel and tourism is a dynamic developing industry, incorporating many sectors, including transportation, cultural and heritage operators, hotels, foodservice operators, destination development companies and conference organizers. It therefore includes several IS application areas. Moreover, as information is the lifeblood of tourism and travel, IS applications and development is a major aspect of research in the tourism field.
- IT in tourism and travel is developing as a separate and important research area within the tourism community. Several tourism researchers focus their research on the role of IT. This focus is reflected in the development of specialized academic journals in the field and conferences dedicated to IT and tourism.

- As a result, I believed a critical mass of researchers would contribute to the development of a successful track at ECIS. I could draw upon a network of authors and reviewers. However, to achieve this goal, I needed to draw on my personal and professional networks to promote the track to this audience of people who did not normally attend ECIS.

Fifteen papers were submitted to the track in 2005, which matched the submission rate of several other more well–established conference tracks. This new track at ECIS indeed enabled the exchange of ideas, knowledge and experience between the IS and travel and tourism, developing synergies that were not feasible before.

V. LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH CONFERENCES: DOCTORAL CONSORTIUM CHAIR

A Doctoral Consortium provides PhD students studying information systems with the opportunity of receiving feedback about their academic work. At the consortium, faculty members mentor small groups of students, review their proposals and facilitate discussions about issues related both to the individual student's PhD work and to PhD research in more general terms. The consortium usually takes place before the conference and is often held at a remote location. As a result, it is easy for faculty to mingle with the students for 2 or 3 days, and for students to approach senior colleagues in a less intimidating environment. The engagement in the Doctoral Consortium can take several forms. You can get involved as a student, as a member of faculty nominating a student for participation, or as a member of faculty at the consortium.

I have been involved in all these roles at various times, but here I will stress the role of doctoral consortium chair. The chair is responsible both for the organizational and academic side of the consortium. The chair is usually supported by a local organizer, who provides invaluable help with the more practical matters. Beyond co-operating with the local organizers, the chair's tasks are to organize a call for nominations and to solicit as many nominations as possible. The chair also organizes the evaluation of the nominations and communicates the final decisions about who is accepted for the consortium. The organizing chair does these tasks with the support of a number of highly qualified faculty members (6 to 8 in the case of ECIS).

Thus another of the chair's tasks is to put together a group of faculty who complement each other in terms of research approaches and fields of competence. The chair also organizes the program for the actual consortium and usually participates as a faculty member.

Doctoral Consortium Faculty Member. The work in the Doctoral Consortium relies on the quality of all faculty members. Faculty members are usually appointed through invitation from the Consortium chair, frequently in conjunction with the conference organizers. Sometimes colleagues approach the chair and offer their services. In any case, academic merit and standing play an important role in the selection of faculty. For mainstream conferences like ICIS and ECIS the consortium should represent the breadth of the field both with regard to topic and with respect to research approach and methods. However, other factors such as geography, culture, and gender can also play an important role. For example, when I was ECIS consortium chair, I invited colleagues from Southern, Northern and Middle European academic communities, who also represented the spectrum of research from design-oriented to business-oriented and social-oriented topics. They covered areas such as e-government and democracy, m- and e-commerce, security, virtual communities, information systems design and development, distributed systems, and infrastructures. They also covered the spectrum of research approaches. My consortium consisted of an equal representation of male and female faculty members.

I found the faculty largely within my personal network, but I also invited colleagues who were well established in the larger IS research community. I used the opportunity to involve colleagues who would normally not attend the conference to introduce them to the community and the community to them.

Much of the faculty's work supports that of the chair. They are expected to solicit nominations, evaluate the incoming nominations, facilitate the student presentations (usually in teams of two

faculty per group) and give feedback to the students both in their working group and beyond. They also share their experiences and expertise with the students through formal presentations and panels and in more informal times, during breaks for example. A recent tradition is to end the consortium with student skits and sketches which often satirize the behaviors of the faculty who participated. A good sense of humor is therefore also helpful!

Doctoral Consortium PhD Student. Students need to be nominated by a supporting faculty member, their supervisor, or head of the PhD school from their home institution. Usually only one student per university can be nominated and is done so by a simple letter confirming the student's selection and recommending their participation on behalf of the institution giving reasons. The nomination letter is accompanied by the student's PhD project proposal containing a description of the research question, the research approach and design, and results achieved already. As the length and the process of PhD studies vary from institution to institution, advice on the best stage of a student's PhD is not easy to give. As a rule of thumb, however, proposals with the best chance of selection describe a project with a defined research question, but which are not yet in the final dissertation draft stage. As places at the consortium are normally limited, participants are selected based on a relative evaluation of the strength, conviction, and potential of the student's argument of the project idea and field of investigation, the research question, the research design, and the stage of the project.

Proposals need not be perfect. After all, the idea of the doctoral consortium is to provide help and support for improvement: it is potential and commitment that count most. To be nominated as a PhD student you should not hesitate to approach your supervisor and ask to take part in your institution's internal selection process. The potential rewards are many. With high probability, you will end up with a much improved dissertation. But there is more: you will receive critical, yet constructive feedback on your research, which will most probably accelerate your professional development. A doctoral consortium also provides a shared experience both with your peers and with faculty. Former participants of consortia talk about the strong sense of communal well-being they felt after participating in such an event and ICIS now includes regular reunions over lunch for participants in its consortia. Finally, a doctoral consortium gives a kick-start to an academic network. You now know some people you can relate to at big conferences and whom you can ask for help and advice and may lead to a group of friends and colleagues for life. From these beginnings, you may start contributing to conferences in the many ways described in this paper.

VI. SUMMARY

In the above discussion we described the various roles you might play in conferences in information systems. We looked at the various administrative and research roles. We hope this paper inspires you to become more involved in conferences. Without this contribution, they will not be successful.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Avison has played many different roles in the ECIS, ICIS, IFIP and other conferences. He is also concerned with developing the professional skills of academic researchers and students [see Avison and Pries-Heje 2004].
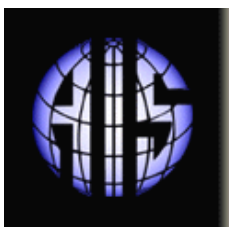
Karlheinz Kautz has played various roles in ECIS. In 2005 he was in charge of the Doctoral Consortium. He used this opportunity both to confirm and to extend his own personal networks of academic contacts.

Marianna Sigala, began presenting her research at ECIS in 2003. She introduced a successful new track to the conference, based on her research community.

Edgar Whitley is secretary to the ECIS standing committee.

Robert Winter has been involved in the ECIS conference in a variety of roles since 1994. He was recently appointed the conference chair for ECIS 2007 which will be held at his university, St Gallen in Switzerland.