How to Organize Conferences: Systems Approach

Olga Kosheleva and Vladik Kreinovich
University of Texas at El Paso
El Paso, Texas 79968, USA
olgak@utep.edu, vladik@utep.edu

Abstract

Research conferences are often organized by volunteers, namely, by people who are specialists in research but not in conference organization. As a result, some conferences are very successful, while some are not very successful. It is therefore desirable to provide newbie conference organizers with helpful recommendations. In this article, based on the experience of a successful recent conference, we provide the corresponding basic recommendations – as well as their general-system explanation.

1 Formulation of the Problem

Need for general advice. Research conferences are an important part of academic life.

- Some of them are more successful, with many interesting speakers and a large number of attendees.
- On the other hand, others are less successful, with fewer speakers and fewer participants.

How can we make our conferences more successful?

One of the challenges is that conferences are usually organized by researchers themselves. Researchers are specialists in research, but not in conference organization. As a result, conference organizers need some help.

Let us use the experience of successful conferences. A natural way to help future conference organizers is by using experience of successful past conferences. It is especially important to use of experience of conferences whose organizers are willing to describe what techniques they used to make their conferences successful.

We attended one such conference in May 2019 – the International Forum on Teacher Education IFTE'19 in Kazan, Russia, a very successful event with many renowned international speakers and active local participation. In one of the plenary talks at this conference, Roza Valeeva, Conference Chair, described what the organizers did to make this conference a success.

What we do in this paper. Some of the corresponding techniques were specific to the conference topic and conference location. However, many other recommendations were very general, and can be thus summarized in general system terms.

Such a summarization is presented in this article.

Warning. Successful conference organizers probably know (and follow) most of these recommendation – or even all of them. However, we believe that to not-so-experienced conference organizers, these recommendations can be very useful – especially since we could not find a single place where all such recommendations are listed from the general systems viewpoint.

2 Conference Organization: General Advice

Stages. Recommendations related to conference organization can be naturally divided into pre-conference, during-conference, and post-conference recommendations. In this paper, we will mostly follow this chronological order of describing recommendations.

Pre-conference stage: advertisement. One of the most important things is spreading information about the conference.

How we get information? In general, there are three main channels:

- we get some information orally, from other people;
- we get some information via a computer, i.e., by email and via social media; and
- we get some information in hardcopy, via snail mail and by reading announcements posted on physical notice boards or in actual magazines.

To enhance the conference success, it is desirable to use all these channels – the larger the number of times a person receives this information, the larger the chance that this information will be remembered and acted upon (and not simply drown in the nowadays flood of information).

Orally informing colleagues, sending emails, posting on social networks, sending fliers by snail mail, posting on one's own notice boards, submitting ads to magazines – many conference organizers are doing it. Some parts of this activity – namely, oral information and posting fliers on non-virtual notice board – target only colleagues from the same institution as the person who distributes this information. From this viewpoint, it is desirable to have as many active people from different institutions in the organizing committee as possible.

However, no matter how many different institutions we cover, most potential participants will not be covered by these communications. It is therefore desirable to extend the list of people who get oral information to potential participants other than same-institution colleagues of members of the organizing committee. For this, we can use the occasions when a member of the organizing committee travels away from his/her institutions. We all travel:

- usually to conferences,
- sometimes to participate in joint research.

Thus, it is desirable that at each conference which each member of the organizing committee attends, he/she should distribute the fliers and, if possible, make a short oral presentation about the forthcoming meeting.

Why would other conferences be willing to give space for fliers and time for oral presentations? Because that conference – and conferences are usually organized on a regular basis – is also interested in spreading the word about corresponding future meetings, so these announcements can be made on a reciprocal basis.

This was about researchers going to conferences. For researchers involved in joint research projects with other institutions:

- not only should researchers from the conference-organizing institution use their trips to a collaborating institution to promote the conference,
- they should also try to coordinate the timing of the reciprocal visit with the conference time, so that visiting collaborators will be able to participate in the conference – thus promoting the joint research.

In general, it is very important to coordinate these efforts, to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts by different members of the organizing committee (and thus, give the members more time to perform other advertising activity).

Pre-conference stage: pre-conference publications. In many research areas – e.g., in computer science – conference proceedings are refereed and published before the conference. The main advantage of this practice is that conference participants have access to the detailed information about the corresponding talks.

Thus, for conferences that include representatives of such areas, it is desirable to have such proceedings – if needed, also with other means of publication traditional for researchers from other research areas.

During-conference stage: invited talks. One of the main attraction of a conference is invited talks by renowned speakers. There are two factors limiting the ability of a conference to have more invited talks:

- time limitations: the conference is usually reasonably short, so it is not easy to fit many usually-hour-long plenary invited talks into the schedule, and
- financial limitations: financing invited speakers, especially those brought from all over the world, is a significant part of the conference budget; as a result, it is not possible to invite too many speakers.

In regards to time limitations, some conferences place invited speakers in parallel with other talks, but this limits the ability of interested participants to attend all the interesting talks. The organizers of the Kazan forum, instead of trying some ideas of their own, asked participants of the previous conferences what, in their opinion, would be the best solution to this problem.

Most of these participants answered that an hour-long talk is probably too long for most participants, but they all complained that after a talk, there is usually a very short time for asking questions, not giving most interested folks the opportunity to ask their own questions. As a result, the conference organizers limited invited talks to 30 minutes each, with only a few short clarifying questions allowed, but allocated a longer question time after the talks. Since usually, a participant has questions not to all invited talks, they arranged talks in blocks of two, without a space between them, and with a 20-30 minute break after the block – allowing all interested participants to ask a question to the corresponding invited speaker.

To decrease the effect of financial restrictions, the organizers took into account that:

- while some invited speakers need full financing,
- other renowned scientists have some funding of their own that enables them to fully or partially cover the costs.

As a result, based on asking potential speakers, they:

- fully supported several of them – those who needed full support,
- partly supported some speakers – e.g., by taking full care of their local expenses, and
- provided only a token support to those speakers who have funds of their own.

During-conference stage: other technical activities. People go to the conference:

- to learn about the state-of-the-art latest results *and*
- to learn about open problems that need solving and that would allow other researchers to join the important part of the state-of-the-art research activity.

Many speakers include some open problems in their presentations, but, due to time limitations, these open problems are either skipped, or mentioned only briefly and in passing – especially since reviewers usually encourage and support presentation of new results. Hence open problems are not adequately treated in most conferences.

To avoid this problem, the organizers of the Kazan forum allocated a large amount of plenary time – almost as much as time for plenary speakers – to panels in which, first, renowned panel members presented open problems, and then the audience could join in the discussion. With enough time, it is possible to describe each open problem in detail: what are the motivations, what is known about this problem, what are the promising ideas.

During-conference stage: how to make sure that participants – and especially invited speakers – are happy. Every location, every city has interesting features. It is definitely easier to the participants if, instead of organizing sightseeing on their own, they can participate in conference-organized tours – and have an option to come a few days earlier or leave a few days later to take a longer tour. Such tourist activity is valuable not only for the conference, it is also valuable for the city – since the good word spreads, and it will bring more tourists to the city. Because of this, it is usually possible to get some discounts or other financial support from the city's tourist department. Similarly, a tour to a local university – which often includes many interesting objects – can also bring some support from the local university.

Cultural entertainment, e.g., during the banquet, is also an easy way to make participants happy and also to show how attractive is the corresponding area.

As for invited speakers, an easy way to make their life easier and happier is to allocate individual student helpers to each speaker.

Post-conference stage: publications. In many areas, publications are usually post-conference.

- In some areas, publication in conference proceedings is most valuable.
- In other areas, only journal publications are of value.

In conferences involving researchers from different disciplines – which often happens when the conference includes applications to many areas – it is therefore important to arrange both conference proceedings and a special issue of an appropriate journal (or journals), so that the authors will be able to choose the most adequate venue.

It is also important to makes sure that authors have publication options most convenient for them – e.g., allow submissions both:

- in LaTeX (for those who use it professionally) and
- in MS Word (for areas where Word is normally used).

Post-conference stage: feedback. Happiness is subjective. Without explicitly asking the participants, it is difficult to gauge what was good and what needs to be improved. So, we need to ask for participants' feedback.

Many conferences now ask for participants' feedback, but often, this is done to please the granting agency that supported the conference: participants are asked to evaluate different parts of the conference on a scale. Such a feedback does not help much with a future organization – unless one of the parts was really bad. A much more efficient way is to also ask for good and not so good features of the conference – e.g.:

- ask for the three best things (so that we will keep it for the next conference) and

- ask for the three things that need improvement (and how exactly).

Best wishes. We hope that this advice was helpful. Good luck with your future meetings!

Acknowledgments

This work was supported in part by the National Science Foundation via grants 1623190 (A Model of Change for Preparing a New Generation for Professional Practice in Computer Science) and HRD-1242122 (Cyber-ShARE Center of Excellence).

The authors are greatly thankful to Roza Valeeva and Aydar Kalimullin, main organizers of the Kazan education forum, for valuable suggestions.

References

[1] Program of the International Forum on Teacher Edication, Kazan, Russian, May 28–31, 2019