Chapter 15
Virtual Research Conferences:
A Case Based Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Research conferences provide an important platform for idea exchange and validation as well as for social networking and talent hunt. Online social networks and collaborative web tools can make conferences budget friendly for sponsors, flexible for attendees, and environment friendly for the society without loss of effectiveness. While many conferences have adopted such tools during pre and post conferencing stages, their use during actual meeting hours is very limited. This paper deliberates on the current and potential use of such technologies on various stages of a conference. It then presents the case of a pure virtual conference in comparison with a face to face conference with an aim to analyze the immediate benefits that virtual conferencing brings for organizers and participants. Perceived deterrents and potential benefits for various stakeholders are discussed. Suggestions are made for educational institutions to review their norms for conference sponsorships.

INTRODUCTION

The IEEE Engineering Management Conference (IEMC), 2001 was all set to go, when the devastating 9/11 happened and the conference got cancelled (Bellefeuille, 2010) as a follow up security measure. Not many minds may have actually registered this negligible fall out of the tragedy that disrupted many lives and large scale business operations. But think of it, if IEMC was planned as a geographically dispersed or a truly space independent event, the conference might have still continued amidst the odds.

A space independent, albeit virtual, event may have been impractical a decade ago, but today it is feasible to organize a virtual conference in much lesser a time and at much lower a cost. In recent years, organizations have adopted virtual conferences, events and meetings to save time and cost and also to reach out to audience in different

geographies (King, 2008; Woolard, 2011). In research conferences also, now one can find online presentation option being offered as an alternate to onsite physical presentation. There has been some visible adoption of collaborative web tools (web based applications that allow two/multi way interaction among participants) for many more activities in research conferences. Use of social networks to handle conference queries and pre-conference publicity are also now practiced. However, the adoption of such tools during conference meeting hours is still in limited pockets and is not an integrated main stream manner of conducting conferences. Literature also does not adequately cover the current and potential application of such tools in the mega events of academic community i.e., research conferences.

This paper aims to emphasize the opportunities that collaborative web tools hold for research conferences. It begins with a brief about the purpose and organization of a typical research conference. It then explores the changing forms of conferences in the wake of recent technological advances and lists out suitable web tools that can be applied at various stages to improve the effectiveness of a conference. The case of a virtual conference is presented and compared with a physical conference having common environmental variables. The case analysis suggests immediate impact of collaborative web tools on the productivity of conference team as well as on time and cost savings. Opportunities as well as challenges involved in the tool adoption are discussed for various stakeholders, such as conference organizers, speakers, attendees, sponsors and technology solution providers of conference management systems.

RESEARCH CONFERENCES: PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION

Research conferences are the life line of academic activity, a forum for new learning, incubator for idea generation, a testing ground for research proposals as well as a platform for visibility and social networking (Garcia, 2000; Hildreth & Woodrum, 2009; Kaser, 2008). Garcia (2000) views a conference as an opportunity to gain "valuable input and constructive criticism before submitting manuscripts to journals, book publishers, or grantors." He also equates a conference with a library and a place where "unexpected things can and do happen." Kaser (2008) describes conference as a place where you can actually get away from the constant distraction of electronic messaging and switch mental gears to take the time to think and reflect." The follow up of a conference paper is usually expected to be a journal publication. But, this does not always happen (Hildreth & Woodrum, 2009). One school of thought is to prefer conferences over journal publications owing to the speedy review process and faster dissemination often facilitated by a conference (Patterson, 2004; Vardi, 2009) but many scholars have also raised the concern about the quality of review of conference submissions (Al-Fedaghi, 2007; Patterson, 2004; Vardi, 2009).

Though most of the academic promotion committees still do not consider conference publications at par with journal publications (Truman, 2007; Vardi, 2009), fact of the matter remains that conferences are an integral part of scholarship and growth of the academic world as well as a necessary part of research budgets. Schroeder, O'Leary, Jones, and Poocharoen (2004), based on the findings of their study recommend that public administration scholars (including PhD students) participate and present research findings at professional conferences for scholarly success. McCormick and Pinderhughes (2009) suggest attending at least two conferences each year. Today, IEEE, the largest professional association for technological innovation, alone sponsors over 1,100 conferences and meetings a year, as claimed on their home page (http://www.ieee.org/conferences_events/index.html). As per the search results obtained from year-wise announcements made on an online portal, Academic Conferences Worldwide (http://www.conferencealerts.com), 52 conferences were announced for the year 2008, 74 for 2009, 104 for

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