A Review of the Conference and Session Chairpersons Functions

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Abstract—Researchers use conferences as a forum to disseminate the results of their research work. The success of the conference can be attributed to the conference proceedings, conference presentations and the competence of the session chairperson managing the session. This highlights the important role of the chairperson in ensuring the smooth functioning of the session. Inexperienced chairpersons could easily become overwhelmed thereby creating discomfort amongst the presenters resulting in potentially poor presentations and potentially unmanageable sessions. This demonstrates that the chairperson has the ability to tarnish their own and the presenters’ reputations. Based on the importance of this topic, it is expected that this important topic would receive considerable attention from researchers, which sadly is not the case. This study was thus prompted in part by the importance of the topic, the potentially detrimental effect it has on the chairperson and the presenters as well as the lack of published peer reviewed papers on the topic. The study therefore investigated the factors which could detrimentally affect the session and provide suggestions for correction. The author also suggests additional activities for the chairperson which could enhance the presenters’ presentation, thereby leading to more effective presentations and more successful conferences. The author hopes that novice as well as experienced chairpersons would find the paper useful in preparation to manage a session.

Index Terms—Conference chairpersons functions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Conference and session chairpersons (chairs) perform a crucial role in ensuring that conference sessions proceed smoothly [1], [2]. These sessions can therefore easily be reduced to a debacle without competent chairs to manage the required activities during the seminar. Therefore, the important role which these individuals perform cannot be overstated and should only be offered to senior delegates / researchers attending the conference. However, when examining undergraduate or graduate engineering course syllabi, it is noticed that no part of the curricula is devoted to this important topic. In addition, no special session is arranged prior to the conference to prepare delegates for this important task. Some conference organizers have recently provided chairs with a brief overview of their expected duties which are available on the conference website. This however is not sufficient to ensure competence. Other conference organizers simply assume that participants who accept the invitation as chairs are familiar with the required duties primarily due to their academic stature and number of conferences attended. This assumption has led to numerous sessions becoming unmanageable while the chair and presenters are caught in the middle [3]. This causes, especially novice presenters, to be nervous, which could result in an inferior presentation as a result of the disorder during the session. This emphasizes that an incompetent or inexperienced chair not only diminishes his / her image and reputation but also that of the presenters in their session.

At several international conferences, the author noticed several fundamental errors being repeated by experienced and inexperienced session chairs. This can mainly be attributed to the lack of information available to delegates on this topic, the lack of mentorship provided to younger researchers and the lack of a special session prior to the conference to acquaint new chairs with their responsibilities.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the important role of the chairs, their familiar and unfamiliar responsibilities and to introduce other imperative responsibilities for discussion. The paper is therefore written to assist conference delegates who have not previously chaired a session by providing these participants with valuable information regarding the pitfalls of being a session chair. This was achieved by taking into account the Pre, In and Post session events by considering activities within these events which has a detrimental effect on the session. Each activity’s (item) hazard is highlighted, where after suggestions are provided to eliminate the flaw.

II. FUNCTIONS OF THE SESSION CHAIRPERSON

Some books, several internet sites and wiki pages provide useful information on this topic [1], [4], [5], [6]. Besides the conference paper [2], the other information has however not been peer reviewed and is merely the opinions of
the authors. There is also little conformity with respect to the detailed functions of the session chair. The chairs’ functions are also expected to differ since conferences are also different, due to:

- Type of session being chaired (conference keynote, session keynote or ordinary session)
- The type of conference (national or international, new or established)
- Formality (region and cultural influences)

Obviously, these factors have a significant influence on how the session should be conducted and what liberties should be extended to various types of presenters.

The chair has important functions which need to be fulfilled in the following events:

- Pre-Session
- In-Session
- Post-Session

The most problematic aspect of each event will be highlighted while also providing suggestions for correction. It is also important to note that the functions in these events are inter-related and therefore overlap and cannot be seen in isolation.

III. PRE-SESSION EVENTS

The pre-session activities can be subdivided into the following categories:

- Presenters’ information
- Type of session
- Contacting presenters prior to the conference
- Importance of reading the presenters’ conference paper
- Session venue
- Hardware used in session venue

A. Presenters’ information

Although it sounds mundane, many people easily take offence if they are introduced incorrectly. This can occur when the chair incorrectly mispronounces the name, surname and/or affiliation of the presenter. This usually occurs when the chair is unfamiliar with the country the presenter is from. Another very sensitive issue is addressing the presenter using an incorrect title; i.e. as Mister instead of Doctor or Doctor instead of Professor. These two fundamental issues can be embarrassing when the presenter corrects the chair in the presence of the delegates [2].

Suggestion

The chair could review the presenters’ details on the internet or contact the presenters prior to the conference to obtain their correct title. The correct pronunciation of the presenters’ title, name, surname and institution could be verified prior to the commencement of the session if required.

B. Type of Session

The chair should also give special attention to the type of address the presenter is delivering; i.e. conference keynote speaker, session keynote speaker or ordinary speaker.

Suggestion

The allotted time and type of introduction required to introduce these presenters, varies. Based upon experience from other conferences, the following could be used as a guide:

- A more formal introduction which consists of a synopsis of the presenters’ experience is required for the conference keynote speaker(s). The introduction of the conference keynote speaker is usually between 1 and 2 minutes, i.e. 500 to 1000 words. This is usually conducted by the conference organiser and is very seldom left to a novice presenter or a stranger to the keynote speaker.
- For the session keynote speaker a formal introduction together with a synopsis of the presenters’ experience should be presented. The introduction of the session keynote speaker is usually between 30 to 60 seconds, i.e. 250 to 500 words.
For ordinary presenters, a less formal introduction is required consisting of: title, name and surname, affiliation and title of paper. This introduction is short and should be less than 30 seconds to afford the presenters the maximum time possible to conduct their presentations.

C. Contacting the presenters prior to the conference

It is always troublesome for the chair to identify the presenters in his / her session immediately before the session commences. This places additional unnecessary pressure on the chair and the presenters prior to the commencement of the session. It could easily result in the session starting late or missing a presenter.

**Suggestion**

To make the transition easier, the chair could contact the presenters prior to the conference, introduce him / her and ask for a short bibliography, which could also help with the introduction of the presenters. In addition, when they meet prior to the commencement of the session, the presenters and chair have informally met, thus putting them at ease. At this stage the chair could also remind the presenters that:

- Video clips may not always work on the organisers’ computers and to have different formats of the video clips available to avoid embarrassment / delays.
- Their presentations should be uploaded in the venue prior to the start of the session to avoid any unnecessary setting up delays.
- Presenters should check that the presentation works smoothly, especially when video clips are used.
- Presenters should also have a hardcopy of their presentations to guide them in the event that the hardware fails to work.
- This can also be used as an opportunity to determine whether there are any novice presenters in the session. An offer may also be extended to inform them of useful information which could help in preparing and delivering conference presentations. This is also a good platform to determine whether the presenters would like feedback on their presentations after the conference via email or personal interaction. The author believes that chairs and senior presenters have a duty to mentor novice presenters to improve their presentation skills and build their confidence to deliver better presentations at future conferences. This should however not be forced upon all presenters, but only to those who want this type of feedback. Chairs may see this as an additional burden, but the advantages of this mentorship significantly out ways the potential burden.

D. Importance of Reading the Presenters’ Conference Paper

Some chairs do not feel the need and importance to read through the presenters’ conference papers prior to the commencement of the session [2]. These chairs solely rely on the presentation to determine the significance of each paper and thus are unable to ask significant questions related to the research work. It is important for the chairs to realize that not all information described in the paper can be included in the presentation due to time constraints.

**Suggestion**

It is vital for the chair to read the papers which will be presented in the session, thus allowing an opportunity to view the scope and depth of each paper to formulate possible questions which could be asked during the question and answer session. The question(s) posed should be of such a nature that the presenter is able to answer the questions with ease. The type of questions could be used to break the ice and encourage other delegates to ask questions.

E. Session Venue

It is important for the chair to identify the venue prior to the session, as the size of the conference and number of concurrent multiple sessions could make locating the venue difficult. This is especially problematic if the session being chaired is immediately after the opening presentations. It is extremely unsettling to the presenters if the chair arrives late and can also lead to embarrassment for the chair.

**Suggestion**

Identify the session venue timeously; at least 2 hours prior to the start of your session. This will afford an opportunity to inspect the venue and ask for changes to be made, where required. Ensure that the podium is placed in a position which allows for the presenters’ uninhibited interaction between the projection screen, podium and the delegates. Some organizers place the podium in such obscure positions that it either hides the presenter; the
presenter is placed infront of the projection screen or limits the movement of the presenter. Cognizance should be taken that some presenters enjoy being able to move and not be inhibited by the position of the podium.

F. Hardware in session venue

Although conference organizers are in charge of setting up, it is the chairs responsibility to ensure that the relevant technical hardware required in the venue functions properly [2]. It is essential that the chair knows how the hardware in the session works. Being unfamiliar with the equipment can lead to loss of time which reduces the delegates’ presentation time. The hardware refers to computers, CD drive, USB drives, projector, microphone, laser pointer and slide presenter.

**Suggestion**
The chair should not rely on the conference organizers’ technical staff being available during the particular session. Therefore, prior to the session, the chair must ensure that all hardware functions correctly and that additional batteries are available for the remote controls of the projector and the slide presenter. It may also be a good idea to have an additional slide presenter as a backup. Although the medium of communication of the conference is English, it does not mean that the computer in the venue operates using English display icons and/or operating system. This can be very daunting to a novice chair and novice presenters thereby putting unnecessary pressure on themselves. Where possible, wireless microphones should be used to allow presenters freedom of movement while conducting their presentations.

IV. IN-SESSION EVENTS

The in-session events can be sub divided into the following categories:

- Arrival at venue prior to commencement of the session
- Informing presenters of time allocations
- How to deal with presenters who exceed time limitations
- Soliciting questions from delegates
- Question and answer session
- How to deal with no show presenters
- Evaluation of novice presenters

A. Arrival at venue prior to commencement of the session

At this stage it is assumed that the chair was at the venue and ensured that the necessary hardware functions correctly prior to the commencement of the session.

**Suggestion**
Arriving at the venue at least 15 to 20 minutes prior to the start of the session, allows the chair to meet with the presenters and make a formal introduction. If prior contact was made via email, as suggested in the pre-session activities, the introduction become less formal and makes the presenters feel comfortable. If all presentations are loaded and all presenters prepared, the chairs’ official activities commences, i.e. to ensure that the session functions smoothly.

B. Informing presenters of time allocations

Hopefully all delegates were informed by the conference organizers of the presentation time as well as the question and answer time limitations. Before the session commences it is the chairs responsibility to remind the presenters of the time limitations and how this will be enforced to allow all presenters the same time privileges [2].

**Suggestion**
At most established international conferences, presenters are allocated 12 minutes in which conduct their presentations while 3 minutes allowed for questions. The chair should inform the presenters that they will be notified when they have 5 and 2 minutes remaining, if the venue is not equipped with time management devices. Clear visible signals using flash cards works very well to display the remaining time. The presenters should also be informed that when the chair stands up, it serves as an indication that their time has elapsed indicating that the presentation must be concluded immediately. By setting the ground rules in advance, the presenters are aware of what is expected from them during their presentation and in the session.
C. How to deal with presenters who exceed time limitations

In some cases, presenters will ignore the chair and continue with the presentation even when they are politely informed that their time has lapsed [2]. Should this happen, the chair has the right to ask / demand that the presenter end the presentation. This can usually be an extremely difficult situation for the chair to deal with. However, if this is not done, the chair can easily lose control over the presenters in the session to the detriment of a successful session.

Suggestion

If the presenter fails to respond, the chair should be firm and with authority interrupt, however unpleasant, demanding the presentation be stopped. The chair should thank the presenter for presentation even though the time limitation was not adhered too. If time allows, the chair should open the floor to questions taking cognizance of the remaining time. If the question and answer time was also exceeded then chair should simply informs the delegates thereof and proceeds with the introduction of the next presenter.

D. Soliciting questions from the delegates

After each presentation, the chair thanks the presenter for the informative address where after questions are invited. Some delegates feel intimidated that the presenter is an expert on the subject or are inherently shy to ask questions. Most presenters appreciate feedback on their presentations and feel disappointed when no questions are posed [2].

Suggestion

If no questions are forthcoming, the chair should ask the presenter at least one question. Meaningful questions can only be asked if the chair is prepared if papers were read prior to the presentation. If a question is posed by the chair it usually encourages more questions from delegates. It is important to limit the number of questions to ensure that the other presenters’ time is not encroached upon.

E. During the question and answer session

During this period it is important that the chair keeps the following vital issues in mind:

- That the chair protects the presenter from abuse by delegates requiring answers to questions which the presenter cannot answer.
- That delegates are asked; to refrain from having conversations during the presentations, that cell phones are switched off and not to leave during a presentation as this negatively affects the presenter.
- It is vital that the chair remains impartial and does not agree with any statement made by the presenter or the delegate(s). This could easily lead to a fierce debate amongst experts having opposing views with the chair caught in the middle and unable to control the session.

F. How to deal with “no show” presenters

At most conferences there are usually “no show” presenters. Most chairs usually struggle to make a decision how to deal with this situation. It is common practice that if there is a “no show”, the chair usually asks the following presenter to proceed. This method of dealing with “no show” is incorrect if concurrent multiple sessions are being conducted.

Suggestion

Delegates usually spent a significant amount of time choosing which presentations they want to attend and usually move between session venues. Therefore, it would be unfair to these delegates to simply continue with the following presentation, if there is a “no show”. The best way to deal with a “no show” between presentations is to call for a break and resume when it is the following delegates’ turn or to continue with a question and answer session on one of the previous presenters’ work. If the “no show” is the last presentation of the session, then it is advisable to end the session early and thank all presenters for their time in preparing the presentations and other delegates for their attendance.

G. Evaluation of novice presenters

This is also an ideal opportunity for chairs and other senior delegates to help mentor novice presenters by evaluating their presentations where after critique can be delivered. The critique however, should not form part of the question and answer session as this could embarrass the presenter. Without feedback the novice presenter is
unsure whether the presentation was acceptable and which items requires improvement, if any. This type of mentorship is not currently being practiced and could significantly aid novice presenters in determining the deficiencies in their presentations. To some public speaking comes naturally, however for many non-native English speakers this is a formidable task which is extremely stressful [7].

V. POST SESSION EVENTS

This is probably the easiest and least stressful event which the chair has to perform. The chair should examine the activities during the session and determine whether there are any improvements which were required. If there were problems associated with the venue, hardware or any other element which detrimentally affected the outcome of the session, this should be communicated to the conference organizers. It is important to note that being a participant and arranging a conference are very different activities. Therefore conference organizers should be informed of any shortcomings which would allow them to improve future conferences.

VI. OTHER ISSUES NOT PREVIOUSLY COVERED

The author also needs to address some items not covered previously. The items are:

- A delegate should not accept to chair a session in which he/she is a presenter. This could only lead to possible repeating some of flaws discussed earlier. The presenter should inform the organiser of the reasons for declining and suggest chairing one of the other sessions instead.
- Chair’s arrogant attitude can make the presenters feel intimidated, resulting in them becoming nervous which could lead to an inferior presentation.
- Always be helpful and show interest in the presenters even if the presentations were inferior and / or unprofessional.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The author has attended several international conferences and found a need to address this important but yet silent topic. The success of conferences can in part be attributed to the smooth running of each session managed by the conference or session chair.

The paper therefore investigated the important role of the conference and session chairpersons. This was achieved by considering various factors which adversely affect the smooth running of the session and providing suggestions to rectify potential flaws. The study shows that the competence of the chair is important to ensure that the session runs smoothly. Incompetent or inexperienced chairs not only put their reputations at risk but could also leads to inferior quality presentations due to the unnecessary burden on them resulting from the mistakes made by chairs.

The paper also suggests new roles for the chair in which they contact presenters prior to the conference as well as mentor and evaluate novice presenters. The author believes that this additional responsibility will help novice presenters improve their presentation skills which will lead to more confident presenters, better presentations and ultimately better conferences.

The author hopes that the paper provides an invaluable source of information to novice as well as experienced chairs to perform their duties optimally.

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REFERENCES


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