Conferences as Organizations - Advising, Steering and Establishing Expectations

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This article is an editorial note submitted to CCR. It has NOT been peer reviewed. Authors take full responsibility for this article's technical content. Comments can be posted through CCR Online.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

A.m [General Literature]: Miscellaneous—*conferences, steering committees*

General Terms

Conferences in computer science, steering committees, conference organization

1. INTRODUCTION

While most of us are involved in organizing conferences in some way, we probably do not pay too much attention to the organizational model of these events. This is somewhat surprising, given that conferences are probably the most visible activity of most professional societies, and also entail significant expenditures of money and volunteer labor. While the local square dance club with a \$500 annual budget probably has bylaws and statutes, most conferences with hundred thousand dollar budgets operate more by oral tradition than by formal descriptions of responsibilities. In almost all cases, this works just fine, but this informality can lead to misunderstandings or problems when expectations differ among the volunteers or when there is a crisis. Thus, I believe that it is helpful to have clearer models, so that conferences and volunteers can reach a common understanding of what is expected of everybody that contributes their time to the conference, and also who is responsible when things go wrong.

For long-running conferences, the typical conference organization involves four major actors: the sponsoring professional organization, a steering committee, the general chairs and the technical program chairs. However, the roles and reporting relationships seem to differ rather dramatically between different conferences.

2. CONFERENCES AS FRANCHISES, FULLY-OWNED SUBSIDIARIES AND INDEPENDENT AGENTS

I believe that the variations in governance are partially explained by the fact that conferences differ in their relative independence in relationship to the related professional society, such as ACM, IEEE or Usenix. In some cases, the conference is just a part of the organization, and has really

no independent identity. As an example, the IEEE Communications Society “owns” IEEE Infocom, Globecom and ICC, and it seems highly unlikely that, say, the IEEE Infocom steering committee could just decide to move their conference to full ACM sponsorship. Similarly, the notion that ACM SIGGRAPH would suddenly decide to run its own show seems implausible. As a crude analogy, consider Walmart stores or the company-owned Starbucks outlets, while in the education realm, state universities are probably somewhat similar. In the end, the state government calls the shots and sets the tuition, even if the university president has a fair amount of latitude in running the daily campus affairs.

On the other hand, there are conferences that are much more independent, even if they have been affiliated with the same professional society for years. Such conferences could, and sometimes do, decide to change their affiliation or they might even become their own full-fledged organization. As an example, HotOS broke their affiliation with the IEEE Computer Society Technical Committee on Operating Systems and Application Environments and affiliated with Usenix. These conferences seem much closer to organizations such as private universities or religious congregations, where each such organization is run by self-perpetuating group of trustees. These trustees do not own the organization and could not sell it for their own benefit, but they could, for example, decide to disband the organization and sell its assets. Unlike in a business, such trustees are not financially responsible for the organization, but may well face liability for negligence or malfeasance.

3. AUTONOMY AND OVERSIGHT

With any steering committee, the potential for management conflicts arises, with the desire for autonomy by the organizers conflicting with the perceived need for oversight by the steering committee. This tension is natural, since too much autonomy can lead to inconsistency and occasionally to very undesirable outcomes that tarnish the reputation of the sponsoring organization or may even endanger the future viability of the conference, while too little autonomy can stifle innovation, lead to frustration by the organizers and incur higher administrative overhead. There is no magic formula that works for all conferences; even for a single conference instance, a steering committee may tilt more towards oversight initially and then relax when things seem to be moving along smoothly, or, conversely, tighten the reins when the organizing committee seems to stumble or is consistently late. This conflict is hardly unique to steering committees;

rather, it applies to any complex organization, whether it is a university department or a governmental agency.

For major conferences, organizers often will only get one chance in their career to put their stamp on the conference, and thus, naturally, want to make the conference the best they can, according to their biases and ideas. This might, for example, encourage riskier budgeting, novel review mechanisms or providing extra, possibly expensive, services to attendees. Steering committees tend to be more conservative and worry about risks and, maybe, ensuring a healthy surplus. In some cases, it may also have a different sense of the community it represents. (This can also be partially explained by the incentives: one or two general chairs get the credit as individuals, while the whole steering committee will take the blame and has to deal with the consequences when something goes wrong.) In addition, while conference organizers of major conferences have typically run smaller events before, they may not have had much behind-the-scenes experience with a flagship conference, and its usually much more diverse constituency.

4. RUNNING CODE NEEDS DOCUMENTATION

Regardless of the structure, I would strongly suggest that long-running conferences that set up a steering committee create at least an informal set of bylaws or collection of policies and procedures that address a few core issues, such as:

- Is the conference permanently affiliated with a particularly society or can the steering committee change such affiliation?
- Is the steering committee the same as the (SIG) executive committee, overlap with that executive committee or does it report to the executive committee?
- Does the conference maintain its own budgets and accounts, e.g., to carry forward surpluses from one year to the next? (This only applies to conferences that are independent organizations, such as VLDB.)
- Does the steering committee just pick the general chairs, or also the technical program chairs?
- Who gets the final word on adding or deleting major conference elements, such as tutorials or social events?
- Does the technical program chair report to the general chair or only to the steering committee? (In a corporate analogy, is the general chair the CEO and the technical program chair the CTO, or are they more like chief operations officer and CTO?)
- Does the steering committee provide take-it-or-leave-it advice on the technical program committee, leave this completely to the technical program chairs or do they have to get formal approval?
- Are there a set of conference practices, such as how sponsors are treated, where changes require steering committee approval?
- Who decides the location of the conference, both the rough location (“New York”) and the specific venue (“the Hilton”)?
- Who appoints or elects the members of the steering committee?
- Are terms on the steering committee members limited or do members stay until they decide to quit or are permanent no-shows? (Many steering committees have members that are no longer actively engaged with the conference; having steering committee members that do not attend the conference is a bad sign. Term limits also avoid the awkwardness of having to ask somebody to step aside.)
- Are there ex-officio members of the steering committee, such as previous chairs or representatives of the sponsoring SIG or society?
- Does a steering committee member sit in on the conference calls of the organizers and participate in the mailing list discussions of the organizing committee?

Based on my informal survey among faculty in my department, steering committees across computer science differ dramatically in their responsibilities. In some cases, the steering committee essentially hands the reign to the general chairs for the year, and then does not discuss the conference again until it is time to pick the next set of chairs. In others, the steering committee has much more hands-on involvement.

To further complicate matters, some conferences, such as ICNP, have advisory committees. It is important to distinguish their roles and responsibilities. For example, advisory committees may provide guidance, but may not have direct influence on conference location or chair selection, or may simply provide external “gravitas”.

While there is a certain amount of flexibility, the basic conference model, discussed earlier, limits what is feasible. As in all organizations, it is probably a bad idea if a group has responsibility without power, or vice versa. For example, if the SIG budget is on the line if a conference sponsored by the SIG runs a deficit, it is hard to expect the elected officers of the SIG to simply leave the finances completely to the conference organizers or some other organization and hope for the best. Also, given that the SIG cannot simply disown their flagship conference, the SIG leadership has some responsibility to maintain quality and other core attributes of the event year after year. For example, having the organizers dramatically raise registration fees may be considered detrimental to the community represented by the steering committee, and thus, it may have to intervene.

There are many ways to run a successful series of conferences, both technically and logistically, but even successful conferences can do better if all four legs of the conference organization work under a common set of assumptions. As many conferences approach runs of twenty or more years, writing down these assumptions may work better than relying purely on oral traditions.

5. HOW ABOUT SIGCOMM?

5.1 How is the Conference Run Today?

In the classification made earlier, SIGCOMM is not just another conference, but the flagship conference of the SIG, with significant reputational and financial risks. (Obviously,

this is a common pattern in ACM, with many SIGs organizing an eponymous conference.) Since the SIG and its officers are held responsible if the conference runs a deficit, and since the SIG leadership has been elected by the SIG membership to be stewards of community resources such as the annual conference, the SIG executive committee probably cannot avoid involvement in at least some aspects of the conference.

For SIGCOMM, there are at least five major aspects of the conference that need to be decided every year, namely the location, at the city granularity, timing, the set of general and technical program chairs, the overall schedule, such as the number of days devoted to workshops or new activities and the conference budget, including the registration fee schedule.

In addition, every so often, there are discussions about more fundamental changes in conference organization, such as having parallel sessions. There is also a set of customs and conventions, such as how sponsors are treated or that lunches are included in the conference registration fee.

Currently, the SIGCOMM executive committee, consisting of the three elected officers along with previous office holders and a number of appointed members, essentially functions as the steering committee for the conference, selecting the conference site and the conference organizers based on proposals received from the community. The conference coordinator, an appointed member of the executive committee, acts as a liaison between the conference organizers, such as the general and technical program chairs, and the SIG executive committee. He or she participates in the regular meetings of the organizing committee.

While a logistically well-run conference that does not run a deficit is clearly a minimum requirement, the SIG leadership also has a responsibility to reflect the broader goals and needs of the networking research community.

An important consideration is that the conference organizers for SIGCOMM are typically senior and seasoned members of the networking research community, so that it is to everyone's benefit to avoid micro-management and to allow the chairs to try out new ideas. At the same time, it is important to recognize that significant conference problems will ultimately harm the SIG, long after the conference organizers have moved on. Thus, the basic operational model should be one where the conference organizers are assumed to take care of most of the details and make their own decisions, but the steering committee is kept informed and can, if it sees significant risk of financial loss or damage to the SIG, intervene.

While it is not clear that SIG members vote on candidates for the SIG executive committee based on their plans for the conference, typical steering committees tend to have no real representational mandate, either and typical conference proposals do not lay out specific goals and objectives that an executive committee could base their choice on.

5.2 Options for a SIGCOMM Steering Committee

Given these constraints, there are at least three realistic options on how to run SIGCOMM:

1. Continue in the current mode of operations, but clarify that the SIGCOMM executive committee is the conference steering committee, and more explicitly define the

responsibilities and expectations, such as job descriptions for the SIG and organizing committee members, and an outline of the kind of decisions that require steering committee awareness or approval.

2. Create a new steering committee that consists of representatives of the executive committee (ex officio), former general and technical program chairs of the conference and possibly other senior members of the community.
3. Create a separate steering committee that shares no members with the executive committee.

For both the second and third option, there may be certain financial aspects where the SIG executive committee may need veto power; a steering committee should not be able to decide on its own to run a deficit or double the registration fees.

In all cases, a document should define which aspects the organizers need to clear with the steering committee and what updates should be provided, to avoid inadvertent misunderstandings and unnecessary concern.

5.3 Advisory Committee

In some cases, conference chairs just want advice on the customs and history of a conference, drawing on the experience of those who have run the event before. An advisory committee could be formed to serve as a sounding board and repository of institutional knowledge. This is not a new idea. In fact, until a few years back, SIGCOMM had a technical advisory committee (TAC) consisting of senior members of the community. The committee had only an advisory role and did not, for example, choose the conference site and general chair. However, experience showed that it was difficult for organizers to draw on the expertise of the TAC for advice, as there was no strong leadership to ensure that questions would be responded to. It is thus not clear that a formal committee is necessary, since former chairs are much more likely to respond if they receive a call or personal email, rather than hope for responses from a mailing list of busy people. Since the identity and contact details of former chairs are presumably easy to locate, a pure advisory body may not add much value beyond individual consultations, but may cause additional opportunities for miscommunications. ("You mean I should have sent the budget to the steering committee, not the TAC?")

6. CONCLUSIONS

As many conferences become institutions that define parts of the scientific community, with lifetimes measured in decades, oral traditions are no longer sufficient to ensure that conferences maintain their institutional knowledge and history, as well as encourage innovation and adapt to changing needs. A well-defined steering committee can help in ensuring that the conference serves the community, and avoid surprises and friction between the organizing committee and the SIG leadership. This editorial is just a first step in a community discussion that may help arrive at a common vision of how we run our conferences.

Acknowledgments

Joe Touch, Mark Crovella and Jennifer Rexford contributed helpful comments to this editorial.