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

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geographies (King, 2008; Woolard, 2011). In re-
search 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. How-
ever, 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 con-
ferences. 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 pre-
sent and compared with a physical conference
having common environmental variables. The case
analysis suggests immediate impact of collabora-
tive web tools on the productivity of conference
team as well as on time and cost savings. Oppor-
tunities 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 & Woo-
a conference as an opportunity to gain “valuable
input and constructive criticism before submitting
manuscripts to journals, book publishers, or grant-
ors.” 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 & Wood-
rum, 2009). One school of thought is to prefer
conferences over journal publications owing to
the speedy review process and faster dissemina-
tion 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; Pat-
terson, 2004; Vardi, 2009).

Though most of the academic promotion com-
mittees still do not consider conference publica-
tions at par with journal publications (Truman,
2007; Vardi, 2009), fact of the matter remains
that conferences are an integral part of scholar-
ship 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 profes-
sional conferences for scholarly success. McCor-
mick 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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