

## Organising your first conference

The two main objectives of a conference are: i) to promote developments in a particular area and/or ii) to gather opinion on the state of play. In my case I'd been involved with a great project [1] and wanted the opportunity to brag talk about it. As there didn't seem to be any appropriate event to attend, I ended up volunteering to organise one. Of course there are many better reasons why you might want to do this; it may be to support your colleagues or a professional body in their endeavours, it's (now) part of your duties, or because you need to boost your CV.

Whatever the reason, organising a conference isn't something to take on lightly. Assuming there are other people who can assist you, then forming an organising committee is a great, first, idea as responsibilities for various aspects of the conference (e.g. programme, venue, registration, hosting) can be split among the committee members. Of course it's also important to determine what budget you have available, before proceeding too far with your plans.

If you haven't already got a name for the conference then you'll need to decide on one. It may also be that you're uncomfortable using the term "conference" particularly if this is your first event, in which case you may prefer to use seminar, symposium, showcase or workshop, especially if it includes an interactive element. Whatever you call it, it's worth thinking about an acronym or shortened title to use as a hashtag for the event.

### Developing the draft programme

Before you can develop an initial programme you need to be clear about what you're trying to achieve. In other words, what is the purpose of the conference and what will the attendees get out of it? The answer to this will hopefully start to inform you about what elements to include in the programme. It may also suggest the approximate size and (more importantly for your programme) the likely duration of the event.

Clearly presentations are likely to form a significant proportion of the overall programme. It might be you already have a few people in mind to approach, but otherwise sending out a "call for speakers" is a common starting point especially if the conference has been run previously. Traditional email lists remain the best method of reaching prospective speakers, although nowadays twitter [2] comes a close second and can potentially reach a wider audience. You'll need to provide some basic details of the conference, for example the overall subject, probable date(s) and venue before people will be willing to commit to the conference. Budget will have as part to play here, as speakers usually attend for free and may expect expenses such as travel and accommodation, to also be paid for.

### Call for Speakers

Meeting the Reading List Challenge  
Tuesday 5th - Wednesday 6th April 2016, Loughborough

For the sixth year running Loughborough University will be hosting Meeting the Reading List Challenge. This event brings together librarians, developers and suppliers to discuss the issues around resource/reading lists.

We are looking for people to share their experiences of reading lists. So whether you've just implemented a system, ran a successful advocacy campaign, developed guidelines for best practice or any other innovation we want to hear from you!

Proposals should be emailed to [g.p.brewerton@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:g.p.brewerton@lboro.ac.uk) by Friday 29th January 2016. It is anticipated that presentations will be approximately 30 minutes long (including questions and answers).

Please visit the event website <http://blog.lboro.ac.uk/mtrlc> for details about past events.

[Figure 1. Sample call for speakers]

It's possible your call might result in an abundance of speakers in which case you will need to carefully select which to include and which to reject. This selection should be based upon providing the best overall programme for the conference (although of course what is best is a very subjective thing). Rejecting speakers is never easy so you might consider holding "lightning talks", a series of short (often time-limited) presentations or a panel session, which brings together multiple speakers on a single platform.

Other than presentations there are a variety of sessions that you could include for your conference. Chief among these are group discussions which can be a great way to elicit feedback from attendees as well as a break up the tedium of presentation after presentation. Group discussions are also an ideal means for attendees to make new acquaintances and network with people with similar interests, which is why I tend to schedule them just before the lunch break. Poster sessions and exhibitions are also worth consideration, the latter especially so if commercial vendors will be invited to attend.

If the conference will be taking place over two or more days then you may also need to include some social activities for attendees in the evening(s) such as a conference meal, quiz night or disco.

### **Finding a venue**

Unless you already have a venue in mind then keeping close to home for your first conference is probably a good idea. It may be that your institution has some suitable space to host the conference which would be ideal, and hopefully keep the costs down. Staying local will allow you to easily scope out the venue and if during the conference you encounter any issues, then you'll have access to all your usual resources (e.g. equipment, personnel, etc.) to hopefully resolve them. However, there are plenty of other options, including hotels, halls and a growing number of dedicated conference hosting venues.

The intended size of the conference will play a significant factor in the choice of venue as will its suitability for the intended programme, for example you may well require a number of private rooms or break out areas in a larger space, to facilitate group discussions. Of course it may be that budget or other factors will mean selecting a venue that negatively impacts on the programme and requires it to change to accommodate limits such as the number of possible attendees, or type of sessions run.

Other factors including the availability and quality of food/drink, projection equipment, access to lockers or a locked room for storage (both for you and attendees), wifi access, transport links, accommodation and cost will also need to be considered. Transport and accommodation are particularly significant as they may impact on the start and end times for the event. It's often a good idea to check the timetable of the local train station (and airport) to see when a majority of attendees might be arriving and want to depart. This again may impact on the event's programme.

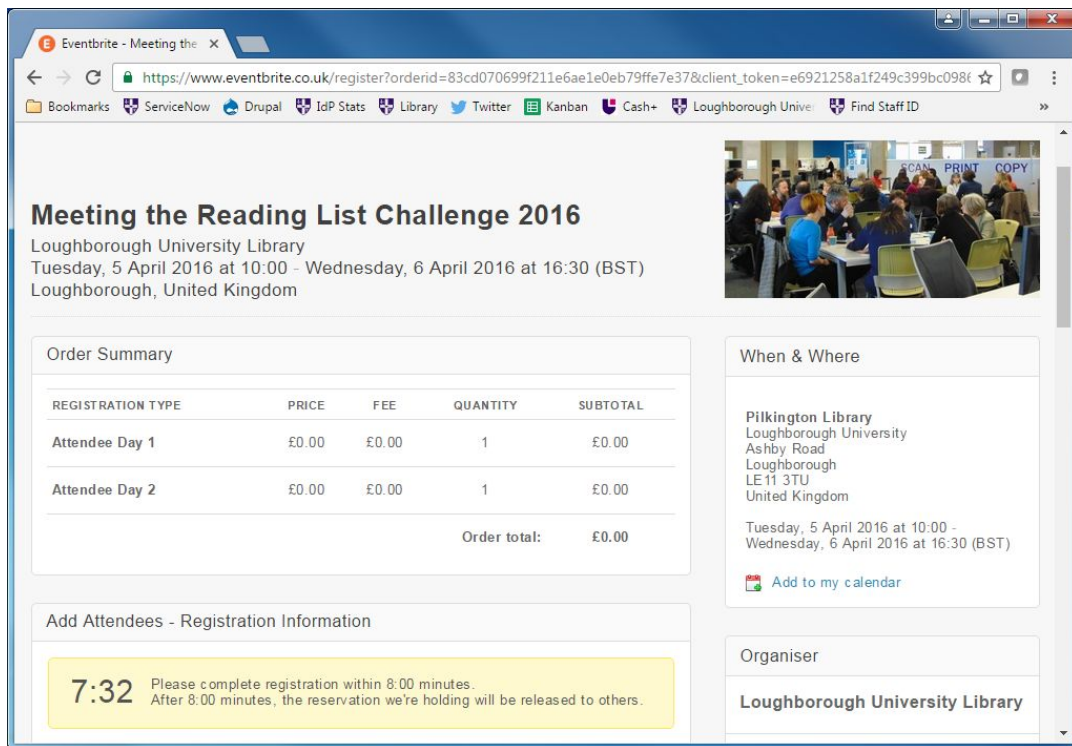
Obviously before you can book the venue you will also need to confirm when the conference will take place. This could be influenced by the availability of speakers or the venue, or it may be that the nature of the conference itself will determine the date.

## **Registration**

With the programme, venue and date agreed you are now almost ready to proceed with attracting attendees. The final step to undertake before doing so is to decide on the price for attendance. Typically this needs to be sufficient to cover the cost of the venue and extras such as presenter's expenses and any administrative costs that are likely to be accrued. This may be offset by income generated by sponsorship, or by charging commercial vendors extra to display their wares at the event.

When it comes to publicising the event you should start by using the same channel(s) as the call for speakers. In addition to these you could consider advertising via blogs, journals and other sources of interest to your potential attendees. You might also want to encourage your presenters to announce their participation and if you have any vendors attending you might consider asking them to promote the conference to their customers.

Obviously you'll need to get attendees to register for the event, this is to ensure that numbers don't exceed your venue's limit, catering is sufficient and that there are enough people interested in attending, to make the event worth holding. Ideally you need to know the names of who wants to attend, what organisation they represent and if they have any special dietary or other requirements. You could ask potential attendees to contact you with this information although, ideally, this is better handled by a simple web form or online ticketing service such as Eventbrite [3]. Such systems can typically handle payment of conference fees (for a cost) which can take a considerable burden off you.



[Figure 2. Screenshot of eventbrite]

At some point you may hit your limit for attendees, in which case you'll need to put out a message stating that there are no places remaining and possibly stop the registration process. However, it is worth considering having a waiting list of potential attendees, in case you get some cancellations.

Of course it may be that the venue you've chosen may be willing to handle the registration and charging for the event.

### A month to go

With a month to go before your conference, it's a good idea to confirm with both speakers and attendees that they are still coming. Hopefully this will give them sufficient time to organise travel and accommodation (if they haven't already done so) and also for you to find replacements attendees or speakers if necessary. Finding a replacement speaker may be difficult and attendees are usually happy to forego one presentation, if it means having longer breaks or leaving slightly earlier. However, if you can it's a good idea to have one presentation (usually from a colleague or even yourself) in reserve just in case the need arises.

You might also want to prompt your speakers to send through their presentations before the conference starts so you can get them uploaded beforehand. Typically most presentations are still in PowerPoint although cloud-based presentation software such as Prezi [4] is not uncommon.

At this point you should be able to finalise the programme for the conference. If there are any major changes from the draft programme, then the attendees should be alerted to this. As you're already contacting all the attendees it would also be a good idea to inform them of the hashtag for the event. This will hopefully start to generate some enthusiasm and interest for the conference even before it starts.

## **A few days before**

Before the conference starts you'll need to print off copies of the final version of the programme and an attendees list to hand out. You might also want to produce badges for attendees to wear during the conference. If you have group discussions on the programme, then you might want to consider pre-sorting people into groups to reduce administration on the day (the group could be indicated on the attendees list or perhaps even on their badge). If you want to be able to evaluate the success of the conference then producing a simple feedback form is advisable.

Finally you'll need to check you have sufficient stationery supplies (e.g. pens, flip charts, blu-tack) for the event and it's also useful if you can get hold of some power extensions and laptop/phone chargers.

## **Hosting the conference**

On the day of the conference there are two important tasks to complete before you can begin. The first is to put out some signage to confirm to attendees that they are at the right venue. The second is to set up a registration desk to welcome the attendees, record their arrival and give out any handouts (such as badges, programmes, attendees lists and perhaps even goodie bags if the event has been sponsored). It's not uncommon for people to arrive at the reception desk who haven't registered for the event. Sometime this is acceptable, for example if they are in place of a colleague who isn't now able to attend, but other times it can be more problematic. You will need to decide, usually on a case-by-case basis, what to do on these occasions.

It's important to note that one person can't do everything and you definitely need additional support. At the very least you'll need someone to staff the reception desk and another to run errands and chase up anything you are unable to deal with. Having someone to take photographs or live tweet the event is also very useful. You might also choose to outsource the hosting duties to another person rather than doing it yourself.

Being host for the conference means helping it run smoothly, which might mean adjusting the programme, for example swapping the order of speakers if the first one hasn't arrived yet. It also means opening the event by ushering the attendees to their seats and welcoming them. It's important to highlight any health and safety issues (e.g. what to do if the fire alarm sounds) and indicate where facilities such as toilets, breakout rooms and drinks are located. You might also want to point out the wifi password and remind attendees of the hashtag for the event, before outlining the programme for the day and introducing the speakers.

Throughout the conference you will need to keep an eye on the time and if necessary step in to keep it on track. This might mean cutting a session short if it's overrunning, or filling in time if it's underrunning (on one occasion I gave a live demo of some new functionality we'd recently introduced - not something I'd usually recommend doing). However, it's important to recognise that some things will simply be out of your control. To help cover any minor emergencies it's useful to have a laptop, tablet or phone handy to lookup the number of local taxi firm, locate the nearest pharmacy or find out departure times for the trains.

As the conference comes to a close it's important to thank both the presenters and attendees for coming and deal with any remaining administrative tasks, such as getting people to complete feedback forms.

## **All over (until next time)**

With the conference over and the attendees all gone, it's time to give yourself a huge pat on the back. But before you can relax and take a well deserved drink, you might want to help tidy up the venue (especially if you want to use it again in the future). You might also be tempted to review some of the feedback from attendees (although this can probably wait until later). Hopefully the feedback will be positive, or least constructive. It might also be useful to note down your own thoughts of the event, in particular what worked and what didn't. So if you do organise another conference you'll know what to do differently.

If there is an event website then you should upload the presentations, and possibly any images from the event, so these are available to the attendees. You might also be able to get one of the attendees to write an event report [5], for submission to an appropriate journal [6].

## **Final thoughts**

As you can hopefully see organising a conference is a lot of effort. But it is also an incredibly valuable and rewarding experience and certainly something that everyone should have a go at once at least, and it does get easier the more you do it.

## **Acknowledgements**

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of the many people who have helped me organise the Meeting the Reading List Challenge [7] conference over the last six years. Special thanks go to Ann, Sue, Jon, Jason, Mel, Linda, Karen, Dawn, Chris, Garry and Emma.

## **References**

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