

Letter from the President, September 2015



Marshall Dozier

Information Services
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, UK
Contact: marshall.dozier@ed.ac.uk

Dear Colleagues,

In keeping with the theme of this issue, I'd like to use this letter to reflect on what I learned from being a part of the organising team of the Workshop. In a way, this is a letter to future conference and workshop organisers but I hope the points could be extrapolated more generally too.

It helps to reduce the number of uncertainties

I extrapolate this learning point from a tip given to us by the conference management team who managed the delegate registration process for us: they suggested adding to the registration form a question about whether the registrant planned to attend the Welcome Reception or the dinner-dance. This way, instead of paying the caterers in advance for all delegates, we would have a better idea of the actual numbers and cost. We then tried to extend this principle to information sent out in advance to delegates, trying to provide enough information so that everyone would know what to expect at each event – for example, that there would be snacks but not a full meal at the Welcome Reception.

What is a business continuity plan?

Basically, be prepared for things not to work and build in extra time or plan for alternatives. There are a lot of estimates and guesses even after trying to reduce the uncertainties, and of course it is impossible to know what will go well and what will not go to plan, so for me the key learning point is: allow even more extra time for getting things done than the extra time you think should be enough. I think this is a lesson I will continue to re-learn in the future. Along similar lines, build in safety-nets: for example, we arranged to have an IT and audio-visual technician available throughout the Workshop to deal with any problems with equipment. Knowing the typical weather in Scotland, we worked on the assumption that it would be raining a lot. And of course the weather was better than anyone could have imagined.

Some things will go wrong, no matter how much you plan

It is really disappointing when things do not go perfectly after months (years) of planning. After thinking (probably too much) about what did not go perfectly, I have two main thoughts: firstly, it is important to recognise that some “snags” are unavoidable when there are so many factors involved, and secondly, it is important not to let the problems make it feel as though the whole event were a failure. So my main learning point is to accept that there will be disappointments, even while working to avoid them.

Social media are great, but assume no one uses them

We tried to use FaceBook and Twitter to augment the Workshop website in two main ways: to draw people to the website (either to attract potential delegates or to give links to information for people already registered), and to provide a place for discussion and sharing more playful information (e.g. what novels to

read to get in the mood for coming to Edinburgh?). We got good feedback about the way FaceBook especially was used, but a few questions received by email or during the Workshop made me very aware that about 70% of the delegates were completely unaware of the dialogue on social media. A trick, then, is to duplicate the core information shared on social media across the other modes of communication (email, website, face-to-face announcements during plenaries) but to avoid drowning everyone in more information than they need at any one time.

It is such a joy to work with a team

I was chair of the international programme committee as well as a member of the local organising committee, so I could see the work of both groups (in fact there were four of us on both committees, which I think helped a lot for keeping things coordinated). There are of course immediate practical benefits from working in collaboration or cooperation to get jobs done, having team members take the lead on particular areas, and collectively solving problems with combined wisdom. It is a well-worn saying that for a team, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, but there is more: there is an unexpected joy that grows out of the trust in one another as a team.

Also, there are the beneficial side effects which go beyond the immediate project: you get to work more closely than you might have done before with colleagues from other organisations, and that can be a real blessing and advantageous to your “day job”.

Ask for help without expecting obligation, and do not feel guilty about asking

Sometimes it feels difficult to ask others for help – especially if the job might be boring, or if it could be a burden. But there is no harm in asking, and I continue to be pleasantly surprised by how willing people are to help when asked. We also had offers of help from local colleagues to help share out many different types of work – we hadn’t anticipated it but looking back, all those offers really helped share the load. I think it is important not to feel guilty about accepting or asking for help, and that someone who cannot help should not feel guilty about saying No, but I am confident we always achieve this.

Allow time “off duty” during the Workshop, even just for an hour

The days of a big event like the Workshop are a complete whirl of activity. For those of us on the local organising committee, we made a timetable for being “on duty” and “off duty”. The off duty times were for attending sessions or resting. By building in some resting times, my feeling is that we were able to pace ourselves and keep energy up during the week.

There is a lot of fun to be had...

It is easy to get caught up in the amazing amount of detail that goes into an event, and that can be intimidating and stressful. But, many of the details also offer chances to learn something, try new things – lots of little adventures. Even mundane activities can be enjoyable, like the half-day spent wrapping about 60 gifts for session leaders was made fun by telling jokes, coffee treats, and pretty paper...

Huge thanks to all the International Programme Committee and Local Organising Committee members, the session leaders and speakers, colleagues who gave and offered help, and all the enthusiastic and friendly Workshop participants – thank you for the rewarding experience!

Kindest wishes,

Marshall