



## Perils of Conferencing

Many people who haven't travelled on business have the impression that it is a rather glamorous and pleasant task to attend a conference. And, of course, it can be wonderful to visit an interesting place for a few days, and come back refreshed with new ideas and perspectives, but this isn't the whole story. There is also the downside of cramped long-distance flights, disturbed sleeping patterns occasioned by differences in time zones, unfamiliar food, and lack of exercise. The American comedian Fred Allen (who incidentally was born in 1894, the same year that SAIMM was founded) said, rather cynically that 'A conference is a gathering of people who singly can do nothing, but together can decide that nothing can be done.' He also said 'I like long walks, especially when they are taken by people who annoy me.' However, all things considered, conferences still provide a great opportunity to exchange technical information, and to network with one's peers.

While it is true that all activities in life have some associated risk, attending or holding a conference is not usually ranked very highly among life's risky behaviours.

I have a friend, Mike, who travelled to Turkey in 2001 to attend Metal Bulletin's 12th International Iron Ore Symposium in Istanbul, along with about 250 delegates from 33 countries. The conference was to be held in the splendidly situated Swissotel overlooking the Bosphorus. On his way to the conference, Mike's luggage went missing, but he was hopeful that it would eventually find its way to the conference hotel. Not long after falling asleep on the night before the conference, he was woken by a phone call, around 1 am, from the hotel reception. The caller said he should come down to the lobby, as his life was in danger because the hotel had been stormed by Chechnyan gunmen. Mike initially thought that this must be some sort of practical joke. After looking out of his hotel window and seeing armoured vehicles in the street, he realized that this was no joke at all. He quickly dressed and went to the elevator which had a man with a shotgun inside. In the lobby, there was broken glass everywhere, and about 120 guests were held hostage and ordered to lie on the floor in case they were caught in any crossfire. One delegate from Iscor had a shotgun held to his head. The hotel was soon surrounded by hundreds of police, and a twelve-hour stand-off ensued. The 13 hostage-takers were supporters of independence for Chechnya, and were protesting at Russian attacks in Chechnya. The hostages were treated reasonably well, and after two or three hours were given water to drink and bread to eat. During the long wait, Chechnyan national music was played. After the Turkish interior minister held talks with the gunmen, they agreed to end the stand-off, shook hands with the military personnel, and surrendered to the police, feeling that they had made their point and gained the international publicity they wanted. All 120 guests that were held hostage were eventually freed unharmed, at least with no physical injuries. The conference was cancelled and delegates were provided with refunds.

So, what else could go wrong when holding a conference?

I once wanted to attend a conference on Pyrometallurgy that was to be held in Falmouth, England. Unfortunately, it was cancelled when the hotel burned down a few months before the event was to be held. (Perhaps someone didn't understand that it was supposed to be *pyrometallurgy*, not *pyromania*.) I have also attended a conference in Germany where an elderly delegate died of a heart attack. There was also a time when a few delegates suffered from food poisoning at a local conference. Earlier this year, at a conference in Seattle, the city experienced a power failure that shut down the conference for a few hours in the middle of the day. Without power, it can be difficult to obey the dictum that 'the show must go on', yet I have seen another Mike manage to continue with his talk at a Platinum conference despite the loss of power for projecting his slides; I vividly recall his hand gestures describing the graph that he had intended to project. Audiovisual problems are rather common at conferences, but the worst interruption I have seen was at a conference in Delhi when the presenting computer rebooted itself and was unavailable for about five or ten very long minutes, during which time the presenter had to stand waiting awkwardly in front of a very large audience. Two of SAIMM's own conferences have had to work around the complication of having a public holiday declared (for voting in an election) in the middle of the conference. Political disruptions can be even more serious than this, of course. A large international conference was granted to be held in Ukraine two years in advance of the event, but by the time the conference was held, war had broken out between Russian-backed forces and Ukrainian soldiers; quite a lot of soul-searching took place among the organizing body, but the conference eventually went ahead in the capital city very successfully despite the fighting that was taking place about a thousand kilometres away. Conferences held outside the organizer's own country can be especially challenging, and there have

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been instances of audiovisual equipment and materials for exhibition booths being blocked or seriously delayed at country borders. It often happens that presenters don't arrive at a conference because they have been unable to secure the appropriate visas in time. These 'no-shows' can seriously disrupt the scheduling of conference sessions.

Despite all of this, conferences remain one of the pre-eminent ways for professionals to exchange technical information with colleagues working in related areas. This is well recognized by professional registration bodies, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is mandatory for continued registration, for example, as a Professional Engineer (PrEng) with the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA). In order to be recognized for CPD purposes, conferences have to be formally accredited. SAIMM has the role of providing accreditation, on behalf of ECSA, of content for all mining and metallurgy conferences. Reputable peer-reviewed events are hosted by a number of local and international professional associations, including other institutes within the Global Mineral Professionals Alliance (GMPA), such as AusIMM in Australia, or CIM in Canada, for example.

Unfortunately, there are also many low-quality events in existence, arranged by commercial conference organizers. There are some people who make a very good (if not entirely honest) living by arranging international conferences in exotic locations far off the beaten track. The warning signs are easy to spot: there is no backing of a professional institute (or at least someone with a well-established reputation in the field), no organizing committee, no peer review of papers or presentations, and topics that are unnecessarily wide, general, or unfocused. These organizers typically prey on early-career academics who are drawn in by the prospect of speaking at an international event at an interesting and attractive destination. I have heard of conferences where delegates have presented to very small audiences who have no overlapping interests. Of course, it would be rather embarrassing to blow the whistle after the event, as this would expose the delegate's lack of good judgement, and so these events continue to proliferate.

SAIMM has a particular style of conferencing. Delegates can be sure that the conference will be held at a high-quality and comfortable conference centre, with good audio-visual facilities, tasty catering, and many opportunities for networking. Where appropriate, peer-reviewed proceedings are produced and provided to delegates in electronic form, with an option to purchase a printed copy. Conferences are volunteer-driven, with the support of a small full-time conference organizing team. Oversight is provided by SAIMM's Mining and Metallurgy Technical Programme Committees (TPCs), who take responsibility for finances, marketing, and training. Conference topics are usually based on commodities (*e.g.*, platinum, base metals, diamonds, heavy minerals, sulphuric acid), disciplines (*e.g.*, pyrometallurgy, hydrometallurgy), or are problem-focused (*e.g.*, power crisis, mine safety, furnace tapping). Some of these conferences are once-off, but others are repeated on a regular cycle of one to five years. SAIMM also participates, from time to time, in hosting large international events (such as IMPC, Apcom, Infacon, and Molten Slags) that are held in a variety of countries around the world. It is interesting to note that other countries and regions do things differently, some of them holding one large event (such as the TMS, SME, and CIM MetSoc annual conferences) in a different city every year, and some (such as GDMB's European Metallurgical Conference) having a large event every second year.

Conferences provide a very important source of funding for technical societies, and are the means by which resources are generated to support other worthwhile initiatives.

I often wonder what the conferences of the future will look like. In the past decade, we have seen an increase in the use of electronic technologies. It has become quite routine to have website repositories of conference papers and proceedings. Audio and video recordings of presentations are becoming more familiar too. It is likely that streaming video will be one of the next developments, enabling people far away to observe talks while they are taking place. I also expect to see greater use of devices or applications that will allow the audience to interact with the speaker to a greater extent, perhaps posing questions, or providing answers to snap surveys. I hope you will tell us what you would like to see in the future.

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