

Guidelines for Big Stuff conference organisation

Big Stuff is a series of conferences and meetings focused on the preservation of large technology heritage and run on a voluntary basis by interested organisations. Meetings are generally held every three years, but interested organisations are welcome to host interim meetings, for instance in conjunction with related conferences, or to focus on capacity building in specific themes or geographical areas.

A Guiding Committee has been established to liaise with hosting organisations to provide continuity between Big Stuff meetings, access to relevant networks for assistance and advertising, and advice on options for efficient meeting organisation and administration.

The Guidelines below outline some key issues that host organisations should address when planning a Big Stuff event.

Target audience and focus

Big Stuff welcomes academics, professionals, volunteers and private owners, with backgrounds in diverse fields. While core fields include materials conservation and science, engineering, mechanical trades, curatorial studies, architecture and urban planning, Big Stuff also welcomes the inclusion of people and ideas from other disciplines and communities. Big Stuff also particularly welcomes students and young people.

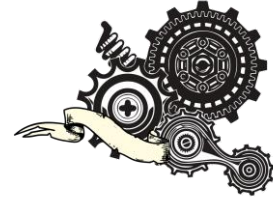
Big Stuff is focused on big technology, but this does not necessarily mean industrial or metal based technology. Other forms of large technology are of equal interest, such as transport (cars, boats, trains etc), computers (and other items with major plastic and electronic components), space technology etc. Presentations about smaller items are also welcome if they illuminate relevant issues, such as new approaches to operation of machinery or advances in corrosion protection.

Language

Big Stuff meetings welcome delegates with many different languages. The host organisation must therefore decide whether to hold the conference in a common language such as English, or to have translation services. Translation services are expensive, so this decision needs to be made early in the planning process. However transcription and captioning options within online conference apps such as Zoom are improving rapidly, and may provide a cheaper option in the next few years.

The Committee can assist with mentoring and editing of papers for delegates who are not writing and presenting in their native language.

Presentation formats



It is recommended that host organisations consider a variety of presentation and delegation formats, including face to face and online options, traditional talks, plenary and concurrent sessions, posters, lightning (short) talks, tours, workshops etc. This provides flexible options to accommodate student presentations, project snapshots, small projects, technical skill sharing etc. It also provides flexibility in program design, both to provide variety and to accommodate presentations from many delegates in a shorter time frame.

Short presentations – often called Flash talks or Lightning presentations – are a great way to showcase smaller projects, to give people new to the conference environment a less daunting option than a full talk, or to allow poster presenters to talk briefly about their posters. Flash talks should have no more than about 6 slides. People presenting information from posters should be asked to create a series of slides to represent their poster, not just use the poster powerpoint itself. This ensures that the presentation text is the right size for the audience to see it, and the format is easy for the presenter to move through.

It is vital that adequate time is scheduled in the program for questions and for delegates to have the opportunity to make contacts and share information. This informal sharing is crucial for developing robust professional networks and has been identified by delegates as one of the key reasons for choosing to come to a Big Stuff conference.

A point of difference between Big Stuff and other conferences is a focus on skill sharing rather than just lectures, and host organisations are strongly encouraged to include some practical skill sessions or group workshops in the program. These sessions keep the meetings grounded in the real-world challenges of large technology.

Administration

The host organisation must work out costs for the meeting, including the cost of registrations and the break-even point. Big Stuff has tried to keep meetings accessible by keeping the registration cost relatively low, but the host organisation can consider a tiered registration cost, with higher prices for professionals and lower price points for students, retirees, etc.

Online attendance options have been normalised by the COVID pandemic, with many online connection products now available, including with automated translation and subtitling. While face to face attendance offers many benefits, online attendance provides equity options for people who cannot attend in person (including for financial, political and health reasons), and reduces the environmental impact of conference travel. We should not be worried that online attendance will hollow out in-person attendance: in the same way that the availability of home video rejuvenated the film industry rather than killing it, online conference attendance currently seems to be adding an online audience who would not be attending the conference in person anyway.



To get good numbers of registrations it is essential for the host organisation to establish a well-designed website for the meeting, with an online registration form and automated payment system (eg Paypal or Eventbrite). The website should be visually attractive and easy to use and navigate. If the organisation does not have an existing website that they can add the Big Stuff information into there are many website design programs that provide a structured, easy-to-follow process for setting up an attractive website. Many of these have free or low cost options – recommended ones include Wix, WordPress and Squarespace. It is recommended that the organisation have at least 5 people test the website and payment system to guarantee that it is easy to use and all the required information is present.

Some participants may require a letter of invitation from the host organisation to get permission to attend the conference or to get a visa for the host country. Some participants may also need a certificate of participation to confirm that they attended the conference.

Information for prospective participants

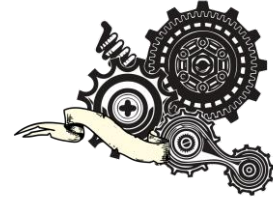
Many participants like to stay in the same hotel as other delegates, so that they can meet socially and share activities like going to dinner and getting to and from the conference. The conference team should therefore recommend at least one hotel that is of good quality, reasonable price, located near to the conference venue or easy transport networks, and big enough to have rooms available for a number of people even fairly close to the conference dates (for people who register and book late). The team does not need to have actually booked rooms at the hotel, though it is quite common to make an arrangement with a suitable hotel to reserve a block of rooms.

The team should also provide a map showing the conference location, transport options, sites of interest and some suggested restaurants.

All these details should go up as soon as the registration page is available, as they are important in helping people make decisions about their trip and about whether to come in person or online.

Publication

It is important for the content of the meeting to be made publicly available after the meeting so that the information can be disseminated. The default option should be to collect for each presentation at least one of the following: abstract, powerpoint, presentation notes or full manuscript, and to place the relevant documents on the Big Stuff website. However academic participants may require the possibility of peer-reviewed publication to them to get funding from their university, so the host organisation may want to offer this option as well if they have links to suitable publications.



The Easychair program is proving popular for managing abstract submissions and communications with potential presenters and authors.

Running the online component

The online audience is not physically present in the venue, so cannot hear announcements made to the physical audience (eg that there is a technical or other hold up). It is therefore vital to have an “Online MC” dedicated to taking care of the online audience. The Online MC should be both in the venue and online, so that they can provide a link between the physical and online audiences. The Online MC should be online 5 minutes before the start of each session to admit and welcome online participants, and to help them resolve any technical problems. The Online MC should also relay any information that will affect the online participants, such as changes or delays to the program.

It is really important to stick to time when there is an online audience, as they are often juggling other commitments outside the conference, or may be staying up during their night to attend. This means they often come online for just one paper or session, which makes a delay really hard for them to manage. If a delay is really unavoidable the Online MC should put up a share screen slide advising the online participants of the delay, and when things will start again.

The Session Chairperson should:

- Have a screen of their own, separate to the one that is displaying the conference feed. (This is so they can control their own view to monitor and manage the online attendees, and send them private messages as necessary).
- Tell the online audience what protocols are in use, eg
 - Keep mics muted unless speaking
 - An online timer app (eg Zoom has a timer app) will be used so presenters know how much time they have left
 - Use the raise hand action or the chat to ask a question, so that the chairperson can page through the attendee view, check the online participants function, or check in the chat to see questions