The Role of the RE'13 Session Chair

For RE'13, we plan to give the Session Chairs a more significant role in the conference. Session Chairs are recruited for their RE knowledge and expertise, so it makes sense for them to be more than just time-keepers! We regard Session Chairs as integral members of the RE community, people who can make others feel welcome at the RE conference, help participants to meet new contacts, and obviously add extra value to the paper sessions themselves. If you are an RE Session Chair, then this guide is for you!

Common Issues Associated With RE Paper Sessions

1. People are not sure which session to attend each day.
2. Some presentations can be a bit wanting: the PowerPoint is poor, the speakers are nervous, the audience starts to fidget, etc.
3. Some presenters don't manage time very well.
4. People can't hear the questions asked of speakers.
5. People use the Q&A session to waffle off-topic. Others don't dare to ask the good questions they have.
6. There is no real opportunity for a constructive discussion in the sessions, while attendees do have things to say.
7. Someone gave a presentation, listened to a presentation, or participated in something. What's next?

This is what we hope the Session Chairs can do at RE'13 to address these issues:

Before the Conference

- ***Advertise your Session in Advance with Pitch Slides.*** The authors of each accepted paper have provided a single PowerPoint slide with a synopsis of the key contribution of their paper and its value proposition (i.e., why should someone read the paper or come to hear a presentation on the paper – what will they get out of it?) The Program Chair or Industry Chair will pass this pitch slide on to you. Examine and collate the one-slide synopses for each of your session papers and add a first slide to the pack. Animate the pack of slides and maybe add a voice over (20 seconds max) – this will be an advert for the session and will be made available to help the conference participants plan their RE'13 schedule. Your animation and words will be put up alongside the conference program on the RE'13 website before the conference. The RE Interactive Chairs will be chasing you for this.

- ***First Contact.*** The Program Chair or Industry Chair will send you the authors' contact details and also an advance copy of the papers. Please contact the authors of your session papers BEFORE the conference and find out who will be presenting. Invite presenters to a meet-up during the conference, at breakfast or coffee before your session, for example. We will assign a special table for doing this at the conference. We want to ensure that each author who is presenting at the conference has a contact point. This is especially important for anyone who is new to the RE community, as we hope to make them feel less nervous and more welcome, and provide them with a friendly face to meet them if they know no one else.

- ***Know your Speakers, Read the Papers.*** Read the papers that will be in your session and jot down a couple of questions you could ask of each author to trigger a Q&A session if needed. Also, try to think of a question or comment that could unify all the papers in the session. This means that you can sit back and enjoy the session more than focusing on what question to ask if there is an awkward silence afterwards ;-)

- ***Better Presentations.*** The RE Interactive Chairs have provided some guidelines for preparing better presentations. Please recommend that your authors examine this material when preparing their presentation. You could also encourage them to send an advance copy of their slides to you if they would like some feedback.

At the Conference, *Before* your Chaired Session

- ***Meet-up.*** As described above, you should have a meet-up planned with your speakers. Use this moment to communicate the protocol. Tell the presenters how you plan to run the session. For instance, request that they do not re-introduce themselves again after you have already done so. You can also tell them about the time constraints, how you will run the Q&A, and what you plan to do if you sense the presentation needs speeding up, slowing down or something else. Tell them that you might be a bit more "interactive" than what they have seen in other conferences, as you are part of a team dedicated to providing the best conference experience for the audience. Also, by meeting-up you can ensure that the conference organizers have their presentation slides, and you can help to calm any pre-presentation nerves.

- ***Plenary Session Mash-ups.*** We plan to advertise your session in the plenary sessions. So prepare some words and, perhaps, something special to increase their interest and encourage people to come to your session.

At the Conference, *During* your Chaired Session

Being a Session Chair is an active role and a "good" Session Chair will somehow make the best out of what they have available. If you find yourself losing focus on the speaker, it is likely that the audience is having problems too, so plan to do something if this begins to happen. Don't be scared to interject if you think it is needed. Think of ways you can liven things up or help the presenter along (they may be quietly dying and appreciate a friendly helping hand … and we have all been there!) This is why meeting with your presenters and telling them a bit about how you would like to run the session and what you could do to help them (that is acceptable to them) is so important. So:

- ***Audience First.*** While you strive to be the advocate for your session topic and its presenters, your number one responsibility during the session is to the audience. Interject (nicely and professionally, perhaps with a question) and change the tempo if you see it is needed. Please remember, you are not just a time-keeper!

- ***Repeat the Question.*** Ensure that either you or the presenter repeats any question that is asked by the audience. Even if you think the question was loud, clear and that everyone heard it … repeat it and/or rephrase it. This is the number one complaint about Q&A at conferences. The fix is trivial, so please make it standard practice. Also, it gives the presenter a moment to pause and think, which will hopefully lead to a more considered response.

- ***Timebox Q&A.*** If something has not been asked or answered succinctly, find a way to move things along. It is your job to deal with anyone that uses the opportunity to make statements and/or peddle their own work.

- ***Be Creative!*** New and old technologies exist to facilitate Q&A sessions such that they deliver more value. In particular, we seek to harness what's in every attendee's brain in order to make the most of the session. It's a pity that everybody noted something down, has got a nice question they are keen to ask, but it's usually always the same folks who ask a question because they have the confidence. So, why not distribute index cards to everyone for noting down ideas, questions and remarks for presenters, collect them at the end of the session, and pass them on? Why not use Twitter to have people send questions as the presentation goes along, then select the most pertinent ones when the Q&A time comes around? Be creative, and let us know afterwards what you did and how it went! We will award a prize for the most creative Session Chair.

At the Conference, *After* your Chaired Session

It can be devastating for someone to give a conference presentation and to feel that it went really badly. Moreover, many times these feelings are simply not grounded. Even if someone's presentation did not go so well, we want to provide support and encouragement so that people don't become disillusioned and never return to RE. So:

- ***Spend 5-10 Minutes.*** Don't run out of the door as soon as the session is over. Take a few moments to pass on a bit of feedback to the speakers and to make them feel positive. Simple rules to give actionable feedback include:
  - Ask people how they think it went.
  - Tell them what they did well, and how they could do other things differently or better next time.
  - Talk about what they did, not about who they are (i.e., *the presentation was probably a bit low tempo* rather than *you seem to be a bit of a lazy person.)*

- ***Birds-of-a-feather.*** If you are chairing a morning session, why not invite the speakers and people in the audience to meet up for lunch to continue discussions on the topic of the session. (See the "Thematic Lunches" organized by RE Interactive). If you are chairing an afternoon session, why not invite the speakers and people in the audience to meet up for a drink at the evening social to continue discussions on the topic of the session.

- ***Feedback.*** We would like to have a trace of your session. Summarize one cool or interesting thing that you learned from each of your speakers and send an email to the RE Interactive Chairs (within an hour of the session if possible or by the end of the conference day). They will make an interactive synopsis of the day using keywords and visuals and post this on the RE Interactive page of the RE13 website. This material will also be used prior to the next plenary session to summarize the past day's sessions.

Thank you! *-- Prepared by Olly, Mav, Martin and David, as suggested by RE4RE feedback (March 2013)*