

“ASK THE ADMINISTRATOR” about ... ORGANIZING CONFERENCES

Pātai: (Question)

Recently, we completed our first major conference and it was a great success. However, a key theme in our de-briefing and evaluation of the process was that there must be a better way of handling the mass of detailed tasks. We do not have the financial resources to hire professional conference organizers. Are there any web-based systems that might help us next time?

Editor Les Williams replies:

Thank you for raising this timely question. It is an important issue for many academic and community groups, especially in this modern information age where communications and knowledge exchange continues to grow at an amazing rate. There is a huge amount of research (in its broadest sense) going on and conferences are an important way of sharing knowledge.

It is recognized that there are many expert teams of people who can provide a very professional and high standard of conference (or event) planning, organization and support; and if you have the financial resources, that is a fine option. If you do not have an adequate budget and plan to “do-it-yourself” then that can be an administrative and managerial challenge.

As we are aware, there are many components, processes, and details to manage. In addition, there are a whole range of post-conference tasks to organize and complete. The question here is timely; firstly because more and more people are running conferences and secondly because over the past few years we have seen excellent developments from a major international drive for “Open Access” to knowledge.

The Open Access movement was initiated at the University of British Columbia in 1998 and it now has a significant international presence. For further background, see Jenny Hobson’s earlier workshop article entitled “Open access information” (Hobson, *MAI Review*, 2007, 3, Library Workshop 3, <http://ojs.review.mai.ac.nz/index.php/MR/article/view/81/80>).

One of the early benefits of this movement was the development of an “Open Journal System” (OJS). After learning about it in 2007, we changed the MAI Review system from an email-exchange base to the OJS web-based package. This OJS system brings together all the operational components and details of running a scholarly journal into a single efficiently-coordinated management system.

Following on from establishing OJS we have seen the introduction of an “Open Conference System” (OCS). I was delighted to discover this earlier in the year and after reviewing closely what it does and how it works, I am convinced that like the OJS impact on journal publishing,

OCS is a package that would suit a wide range of applications—from conferences through to other similar events such as symposia, colloquia, seminars and retreats.

OCS brings together into a single easy-to-use package, the whole series of bits and pieces one has to do in running a conference. For example, instead of repeatedly composing, typing and emailing out lots of different attachments through a range of email-distributions, OCS centralises the task and brings a clear coordination under a unified management system. Further, it has recording and database histories or logs that store your key information for subsequent analysis and reports. It greatly simplifies the whole process, and it costs nothing!

Here is an extract from the OCS site that lists some functions:

***Open Conference Systems (OCS)** is a free Web publishing tool that will create a complete Web presence for your conference. OCS will allow you to:*

- *create a conference Web site*
- *compose and send a call for papers*
- *electronically accept paper and abstract submissions*
- *allow paper submitters to edit their work*
- *post conference proceedings and papers in a searchable format*
- *post, if you wish, the original data sets*
- *register participants*
- *integrate post-conference online discussions*

OCS version 2.1 is now available. New features include:

- *manage conferences that occur more than once (e.g. yearly)*
- *an expanded, multiple-round review system*
- *e-mail template system*
- *localization & translation tools*
- *credit card payment for registrations*
- *automated "thanks-for-submitting" messages*
- *accept login/password for participants*
- *Creative Commons licensing of presentations*
- *more customizable, scalable and secure code*
- *Session Scheduler*
- *Multiple languages*
- *Help files*
- *Documentation*
- *...and much more.*

(Source: <http://pkp.sfu.ca/?q=ocs>.)

The OCS site has a nice one-page flow chart of the key steps for conference directors, conference managers and for authors, reviewers and participants; and it continues to add new features that enhance the system further (<http://pkp.sfu.ca/files/MapOCS2.pdf>.)

You can also take OCS for a test drive on their server where you can login and try it out. The test site is regularly purged of all data because it is meant to be used only for making a short-term evaluation of the software. Go to: <http://pkp.sfu.ca/ocs2/demo/testdrive/>.

Once you have gained an idea of what OCS can do, it is time to visit a number of sections nested in the main navigation bar on the left of the page <http://pkp.sfu.ca/?q=ocs>. A key one is the “Documentation” link which takes you to “OCS in an Hour”; which is a detailed manual that takes you step by step through the whole process. It is very well constructed and very easy to follow.

Another section is “Demonstration” which allows you to visit and access demonstration setups. The section “Download” tells you what computer systems you need and how you can download OCS for free. The other excellent section is “FAQ” and it is fitting to end this workshop’s recommendation with these two extracts:

Why use Open Conference Systems?

OCS does more than simply create a conference Web site; it an electronic conference organizing tool. OCS will allow conference organizers:

- *to post their conference proceedings quickly, easily, and inexpensively.*
- *to efficiently administer labour-intensive conference organizing tasks including accepting paper submissions and registering participants*
- *to create a common, interactive Web community for conference participants*
- *to create a searchable, online archive of conference papers.*

How do I get Open Conference Systems?

As a conference organizer, you have two choices:

1. *To have the OCS development team host your conference site on their server on a cost-recovery basis, fill in the relevant information (e.g., conference name, overview, call for papers, etc.) on OCS's online forms using a Web browser. You could edit this information at any time. The conference Web site will then be available for you and your colleagues to see online.*
2. *To download the OCS package and install it on your own server click on download. (It is recommended that your technical administrator do this). You can host and publish conference proceedings for colleagues in your department or institution.*

Conclusion

If you seek a web-based system that takes a lot of the hassle out of organizing conferences and conference-type events, OCS is highly recommended. It is not difficult or costly to place the system online in a specifically named domain, and after registering with the host, you own that account. Following registration, it should take a junior web developer no longer than 4-6 hours to set up and get the site online.

If you are interested in OCS, it is suggested that you first visit the site addresses given above. Then if you want to know more, contact us via MAI Forum and our web developer will happily and openly respond to any questions regarding setting up a system and offer advice or recommendations.

Kia ora.

Write to Les: either via the Te Kokonga section of MAI Forum:

<http://ojs.review.mai.ac.nz/mai/viewforum.php?f=4>

or via e-mail at editor@review.mai.ac.nz

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