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[About eJSS](#)
[System Safety Society](#)

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Special

26th International System Safety Conference: Innovations and Legacy

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by Jeffrey Joyce, Conference Chair

Pages 1 | 2

Our planning team introduced a number of innovations for this year's Conference. We hope that many of these will be adopted by the Huntsville planning team, who will undoubtedly find ways to improve upon our innovations, as well as introduce their own. This briefing has been written to aid the Society in its oversight of Conference planning. As well, we hope that it will serve as useful background information for EC members when they find themselves in discussions with Conference attendees about the format of the Conference.

Use of Web-based services: Most large conferences in both academe and industry now use a Web-based approach to interactions with contributors and other registrants. The Society contracted with a company to provide a Web-based service for the collection, distribution and management of submissions from authors for all forms of contributions to the Conference program (e.g., abstracts, papers, tutorials, posters). Despite due diligence (e.g., checking references), the service provided by this particular company proved to be disappointing. It created tremendous frustration for both the planning team and contributors. Nevertheless, the concept is sound, and this year's frustration could be resolved by moving to an alternate service provider. The Society also contracted with a company, IPlanIt.com, to provide a Web-based registration service. This proved to be a much more positive experience. IPlanIt was reliable, extremely responsive to requests and made every effort possible to help our registrants. Undoubtedly, the Web-based service for registration could be improved upon; however, this would mainly require more forethought by the Conference planners to provide IPlanIt with a better understanding of our needs. The ideal solution would integrate all of the Web-based services in a single service.

Student travel bursaries: The long-term existence of the Society depends on attracting the active participation of more members from a younger generation of system safety professionals. To this end, ISSC '08 established a program for awarding travel bursary to qualified students who made a contribution to the Conference. The funds for these bursaries were generously provided by two special sponsors, GM Canada (\$5,000) and Thales Canada (\$9,000), for the specific purpose of encouraging students to pursue careers in the field of system safety. Of all the innovations introduced by our planning team, I especially hope that this one will prove to be an enduring legacy. We were a bit disappointed not to have seen evidence that individual chapters of the Society (except for the Eastern Canada Chapter) made any effort to seek out eligible students in their region who could take advantage of this opportunity. In particular, there was not a single application or inquiry from any U.S. student. This should be an unsettling fact for the EC in light of the goal of involving more participation from the younger generation of system safety professionals. If this innovation is repeated next year, we hope that individual chapters will take on the challenge of recruiting local funds and local students for such bursaries. A very worthwhile objective for the Huntsville team would be to double the number of students brought to the Conference on a bursary next year.

Peer-reviewed papers: At the "lessons learned" session in Baltimore last year, there was a consensus that an effort should be made to improve the quality of papers prepared for the Conference. This was not meant by anyone to be a criticism of the Baltimore team's effort; rather, the quality problem was recognized to be largely the result of being compelled to accept hurried last-minute submissions without sufficient time for revisions. Under the leadership of Rod Simmons, we created two tracks of papers in an effort to improve the quality of submissions and the final papers. For submissions to the "peer review" track, authors were required to submit a full draft of their paper. The draft was reviewed, and for those papers accepted in this track, comments provided to the author so that they could revise the paper. We also provided a second track of "forum" papers that followed the process used previously by the Society Conferences. We decided not to make any distinction in the program between peer-reviewed and forum papers, since this was not necessary to

[President's Message](#)
[From the Editor's
Desk](#)
[Outside the Lines](#)
[In the Spotlight:](#)
[A Tribute to Trevor
Kletz](#)
[Making Safety-
Related Decisions](#)
[Gains from Losses:](#)
[System Safety
Commentary on
Accidents and Other
Events](#)
[Special:](#)
[26th International
System Safety
Conference:
Innovations and
Legacy](#)
[Tech Corner](#)
[Chapter News](#)
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achieve our primary objective, i.e., to improve the quality of papers. The addition of a peer review process offers another important benefit; namely, to increase the likelihood of researchers to participate in our Conference, since a peer review process for papers is often an important factor in the decision of which conferences a researcher will attend.

Program committee: Another measure intended to increase the quality of Conference papers was the establishment of a program committee. Following the example of other conferences that already enjoy a reputation for consistently high-quality papers, we populated this committee with recognized experts from a variety of industries (and academe). The membership of this committee included qualified individuals who have not been closely involved in the activities of the System Safety Society, as it is important to make sure the gene pool remains diverse. The program committee should be distinct from the session chairs, who become involved in the process at a later stage. Our intention was to ensure that every paper was reviewed by several members of the program committee. However, we were unable to make full use of this committee for a variety of uninteresting reasons, e.g., delays and other problems caused by problems with our Web-based service for managing papers. If the Society aspires to achieve a reputation for consistently high-quality papers, then the establishment and use of a program committee will be essential for future Conferences.

Thirty-minute limit per paper: We noticed some informal feedback from people who have attended previous Conferences about the excessive duration of paper presentations. In response, we shortened the time allocated for the presentation of individual papers to just 30 minutes, i.e., 20 minutes for presentation, five minutes for questions and five minutes for changing/introducing presenters. There are mixed opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of this; therefore, this particular change should be regarded as an experiment for this year. We hope that this approach will motivate presenters to "get to the point" more quickly and more easily resist the temptation to be sidetracked. The success of this approach will largely depend on the effectiveness of session chairs in helping the presenters stay on track and also to help the presenter manage interruptions from the audience: e.g., participants who steal time away from the paper presentation with an impromptu mini-presentation in the guise of a question. (A better place for these impromptu mini-presentations will be the just-in-time sessions described later.)

Posters sessions: Borrowing an idea that is popular in many other conferences, we have created an opportunity for conference participants to display posters that communicate a concept via a combination of graphics and text. The high quality of most of these posters is largely due to the care and attention paid by our poster chair, Jim Ronback, in providing poster contributors with feedback and guidance. We see many important benefits to having posters at the Conference. The "one-on-one" nature of interaction during poster sessions draws in active participation by Conference participants who do not have a more formal contribution, such as a paper. It is also a great way to put the notion of "conferring" back into the concept of a "conference," especially for Conference participants who are not comfortable asking questions in front of a large group at the end of a paper presentation. The display of posters is also appreciated by Conference participants who need a break from sitting through many hours of paper presentations. Finally, the possibility of submitting a poster is a good alternative for those who have missed earlier deadlines for submission of abstracts. To recognize the importance that our planning team has placed on poster contributions, a Conference award for the "best poster" was presented in conjunction with the "best paper" awards.

[next page »](#)

Home

Subscriptions & Memberships

Contact

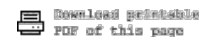
About eJSS

System Safety Society



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Special

Download printable
PDF of this page

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Pages 1 | 2

Just-in-Time sessions: Another innovation introduced at this year's Conference was the scheduling of Just-in-Time (JIT) sessions. As with poster sessions, these JIT sessions are intended to put the notion of "conferring" back into the meaning of "conference." The JIT sessions are reserved for discussion of impromptu topics that are driven by the interests of participants. These sessions are based on the "open space" concept described at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Space_Technology, and are intended to promote real dialogue between attendees as well as encourage cross-pollination between disciplines. Instead of just spending all of their time listening to prepared presentations following a pre-set agenda, the Just-in-Time sessions will allow participants to engage others in topics with new thinking, constructive criticism and problem solving. The organizing team is excited about this innovative addition to our annual Conference. This is another innovation that we especially hope to see repeated in Huntsville.

More formal approach to tutorials: Other conferences, such as the annual Digital Avionic Systems Conference (DASC), feature prepared tutorials with prepared handouts, registration and other attributes that clearly put their tutorials in the area of professional training. Many tutorials offered at previous Conferences of the System Safety Society have also been high quality. However, the lack of formalities such as prepared handouts and registration has sometimes created difficulties. For example, it is common for participants to wander in and out of tutorials or, as we sometimes called it, "pigeon-like" behavior. For example, someone might attend the first 30 minutes of one tutorial, and then visit another tutorial for a few minutes, next attend a paper presentation and then wander back to the first tutorial to pick up their CEU certificate. Our efforts to put the tutorial component on a more solid foundation focused mainly on performing a more thorough review of tutorial proposals. For example, this included a requirement that tutorial proposals be accompanied by sample slides from the teaching material. For logistical reasons, we were not able to implement a formal registration process. However, we recommend a formal registration process for tutorials be implemented at future Conferences. We also recommend offering to partially reimburse tutorial presenters for travel expenses — just enough to make the tutorial proposals more competitive, but not so much as to undermine the "volunteerism" that the Society has enjoyed from members who have prepared and presented tutorials at the annual Conference.

Multiple tiers of sponsorship: Our Sponsors and Exhibitors chair produced an innovative strategy for offering multiple tiers of sponsorship in an effort to attract a larger amount of funding from sponsors, without excluding sponsors who are only able to afford sponsorships at the existing level. For various reasons, it was not possible to implement this strategy this year. However, we passed on the results of this effort to the Huntsville team for next year.

Welcome reception: Aside from the obvious fact that this Monday evening reception enhanced the Conference experience for our registrants, this event was intended to help avoid a surge of people who would otherwise wait until Tuesday morning at 7:50 a.m. to register, pick up their Conference bag, etc. To further this goal, a complimentary drink ticket was included in the registration materials, and attendees needed to register first if they wanted to have a free drink at the Welcome reception.

Awards luncheon: After careful consideration, our planning team decided to break with tradition by scheduling an awards luncheon rather than an awards banquet. This decision was made for a number of reasons. Some of these reasons were unique to the circumstances of the Vancouver Conference. However, the most important reason for this change was the desire to provide a greater opportunity for Conference participants to see presentations of best papers. At past Conferences, these presentations were not well attended because many participants leave the Conference on Friday morning. This year, the best paper presentations were given on Thursday afternoon. Another



27th International System Safety Conference

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May 16	Peer Review Paper Presentation Slides
Jan 16	Forum Paper Abstract Submission
Feb 16	Acceptance Notification
Mar 16	Forum Paper Submission (draft)
April 16	Forum Paper Submission (final) w/ Publication Release Form
May 16	Paper Presentation Slides (draft)
June 16	Paper Presentation Slides (Final)
Mar 31	Tutorial/Workshop Abstract Submission
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important reason is that the social event on Thursday evening provides an opportunity for informally congratulating and celebrating all of the award winners. Recognizing that the awards ceremony is a significant part of the Conference, we took several measures to ensure that the luncheon on Thursday was both celebratory and special.

More hospitality for guests: The "lessons learned" from recent Conferences have called for more hospitality for spouses and guests. While it might be argued that spouses are not our "customers," we suspect that more than a few spouses have had some part in a decision by registrants to attend the Society's Conference each year, and any funds spent on hospitality for spouses this year will almost certainly be recovered in the form of additional registrations next year. (This is true even if it only yields three or four additional registrations.) As well, we benefit from the volunteer help of several spouses. In keeping with our Conference theme, we have extended this hospitality to include children.

Multi-chapter planning team: Although this is not really an innovation, this year's Conference is not formally associated with any specific chapter. Members of the Eastern Canada Chapter, under the leadership of Bob Fletcher, have individually contributed a large portion of the overall effort that went into planning this year's Conference. As well, the Eastern Canada Chapter has served the Conference by being its Canadian "banker." Nevertheless, Society members from other chapters have held key positions on our planning team. The fact that individuals from multiple chapters were involved in the planning team was not problematic. In fact, it could be argued that this approach brought us some important benefits: (1) because we could not have a conversation at the local water cooler, we were probably more careful to communicate plans and issues with one another and (2) we somewhat avoided "burning out" a single chapter (although I am sure that the Eastern Canada Chapter is looking for some respite from Conference planning for a few years). In conclusion, the multi-chapter approach to Conference planning is quite feasible under appropriate conditions and offers some distinct advantages.

"Lightweight" approach to printed program and proceedings CD: Mindful of both our budgetary constraints and the impact of our Conference on the environment, we decided to take a lightweight approach to the printed program. Based on quotes we received, the costs of printing a program similar to last year's have increased sharply over the past year. This increased cost would have placed an unacceptable pressure on our budget. Furthermore, we believe that most registrants discard the printed program soon after the Conference. While not as attractive as the printed programs of past Conferences, we believe that the printed program for this year's Conference fulfilled its functional purpose, reducing the impact on both our budget and on the environment. ♻

[« previous page](#)