EDITORIAL

On Conferences and Technical Information — A Journey Over Five Decades

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When Jack Mowry told me that our 60th meeting of the Society for Machinery Failure Prevention Technology would be featured in this fine publication, I was delighted. Then he asked me if I would write a special article for this issue. How could I refuse without being consumed by guilt? Jack suggested that my long experience in organizing conferences could reveal some interesting items. I agreed. My title was chosen because conferences and technical information are so closely linked and because most of my professional life has been consumed by both. This editorial is not an autobiography, although some elements of my career will undoubtedly emerge. For example, I retired from federal service as the director of a U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) Information Analysis Center (IAC) for which I organized numerous conferences. My next retirement is from the position of executive director of a professional society for which I (and my wife) organized 17 conferences. I will begin this story by telling you why I chose this rewarding career, and then take you on a 50 year journey from which I will share some "behind-the-scenes" experiences that I hope you will find interesting.

How I Got Hooked

In 1952, with a B.S. in Physics, I was employed at a U.S. Army shock and vibration laboratory in Virginia. My boss was chief of the packaging development branch at the engineering research and development laboratories. He decided that I knew more about shock and vibration than anyone else in the branch. Unbelievable? Yes! He appointed me as one of the four Army members of the Interservice Technical Group (ITG) that provided technical advice to the Centralizing Activity for Shock and Vibration (CAS&V) headed by Dr. Elias Klein. Gad! What a boost to the ego! After only three months out of college, I was assigned this important job. The truth is that it didn't take very long to find out how little I really knew about the subject. I did not share this secret with my boss.

I attended the 19th Shock & Vibration Symposium in September 1952 at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. The theme was "Aerial Delivery and Impact Upon Landing." While pursuing some very interesting research, development, test, and evaluation work over the next five years at Fort Belvoir, I diligently fulfilled my ITG responsibilities. Dr. Klein and the other members of the group were mostly seasoned experts in shock and vibration. Although I 'helped' organize the programs for the symposia and even presented a couple of papers based on my work, my participation was mostly a wonderful learning experience. Once each year at his request, I traveled with Dr. Klein for up to two weeks. We visited Army, Navy and Air Force labs and test centers, DOD contractors, and universities to exchange technical information on shock and vibration with those working in the field. The idea was to discover recent advances in the technology and emerging critical problems that were yet to be solved. This information was used to plan effective symposia and to respond to queries from the technical community. By 1957 I was privileged to know most of the pioneers in shock and vibration technology and had acquired an extensive 'breadth' of knowledge in the field. I also had decided that Dr. Klein had a really neat job.

In 1957 I had been promoted to a level above which I could expect no further advancement, so I accepted a job in industry with a significant pay increase. Seven months later in 1958, Dr. Klein called and asked if I would apply for a position at the CAS&V. He was retiring and his replacement was a nuclear physicist who would take the job only if he could hire someone who knew something about shock and vibration. That was me? I applied and was offered the job again at an increase in pay. It was hard to believe that I would soon have the job that I had coveted. I accepted with delight and went on board in time to attend the 26th Symposium in May 1958. I never looked back.

Shock and Vibration Symposia

These were government-sponsored conferences organized by the CAS&V located at the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL). My new boss was Dr. W. W. Mutch, and I was assigned administrative and technical responsibility for planning, organizing, and conducting the symposia. The Centralizing Activity's mission was to "collect, correlate and disseminate technical information relating to shock and vibration." This was accomplished through about 60 technical visits each year by the technical staff and ITG members, the presentation and publication of symposia papers, and responses to technical queries from our users. The job was both enjoyable and rewarding. Technical personnel at organizations we visited often said that they gained more than they gave during the visits. The symposia were and still are a valuable information resource. The average attendance during my tenure was over 500.

After NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) was formed, we had an additional sponsor providing four members to what became the Interagency Technical Group. The Defense Atomic Support Agency (DASA, which is now the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, or DTRA) became a sponsor with one representative; at that point, the ITG had 17 members. Each symposium had a host. This responsibility was assumed in turn by the Army, Navy, Air Force, NASA and DASA. The host provided local support and a secure facility to hold classified sessions. This arrangement worked quite well, the symposia received rave reviews, and I honed my skills at negotiating hotel contracts and in conference organization and management.

The symposia were DOD conferences managed by the Navy in house at NRL. Doing this job from within the government has some advantages over a contract operation. The doors at both government and contractor facilities were open to us allowing full cooperation and a free exchange of information. This made the organization of a high quality, effective, technical program somewhat easier. The mechanics of running a meeting and working with a hotel are essentially the same for any conference manager. But for the symposia, it was a definite plus to have a local agency host to provide local support. This included people to help with registration and covering the cost of the classified meeting facility, including the cost of bus transportation when required. This eased the burden on our budget. However, we were fully funded to perform our mission, at least until 1964 when we became an IAC. Happily, the symposia participants paid no registration fees during those golden years. As government employees, on the other hand, we had to abide by all the rules. We could do nothing that could be perceived as conflict of interest. We traveled under the limits of allowable *per diem*, which was $9 per day, including meals, when I began my career. We were not allowed to have exhibitors at the symposia. The vendors solved this problem using hospitality suites. Although we could not officially recognize these, we were glad they

were there. They were an asset to the symposia. In general the good things were better than the bad. The work was rewarding. At times I was able to provide solutions to problems that researchers needed quickly. My satisfaction must have been similar to that of a minister who had just saved a soul.

The IAC Adventure

In 1964, DOD issued an instruction on establishing and operating an Information Analysis Center (IAC). Since our activity was already performing IAC functions, we became one. The name was changed to the Shock and Vibration Information Center (SVIC). SVIC was the only in-house DOD IAC managed by the Navy. The Army had a few located at the Waterways Experiment Station. The rest were managed by contractors to the Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC). The latter knew how much funding they had each year. SVIC funds depended on the source in the chain of command between us and DOD. At first this was the Office of Naval Research and things were fine. When the Naval Material Command (NAVMAT) was created, our source was moved to a technology transfer office in that agency, and the SVIC situation became much more tenuous.

Our funds were decreased and it soon became clear that the ultimate mission of our Point of Contact (POC) at NAVMAT was to eliminate SVIC. He thought he had his chance when DOD issued a directive that half of the budget of an IAC should come from the users. SVIC was told that NAVMAT would match user funds in the next fiscal year. Our POC thought that we couldn't survive this. Boy, was he wrong! I got on the phone to our principal users and received funding commitments from other agencies and contractors totaling more than twice our most recent budget. Of course our POC had to match this money. SVIC had a record-breaking budget for that year and we were able to do some very good things. Later other actions were taken to eliminate us – but none succeeded. SVIC prevailed and NAVMAT was eliminated as a failed Navy experiment long before SVIC was disestablished.

Transition

I retired from civil service in 1983 believing that SVIC and the symposia would go on forever. I hung out my shingle as an independent consultant and did some very interesting things that are not part of this story. Three years later, in 1986, I found that my conference management days were not over. SVIC was disestablished much to the consternation of many members of its advisory group. They thought it was a big mistake that had to be corrected. DOD does not reverse its decision on such matters without strong justification; so two actions were taken almost simultaneously. My wife Sallie and I were paid to organize and conduct the 58th Shock and Vibration Symposium in Huntsville, Alabama. I was paid to conduct a study to determine whether there was indeed a real need for SVIC and the symposia. The 58th Symposium was held with about 400 attending. I conducted the study culminating in a workshop in Dayton, Ohio. The conclusion was that there was an overwhelming need for a Shock and Vibration Information Analysis Center (SAVIAC), and action was initiated to get a contract in place to manage SAVIAC. Before the SAVIAC contract was finally awarded, Sallie and I, using various contract mechanisms, organized and conducted the 59th, 60th and 61st Symposia so that the chain of annual conferences would be unbroken. The 62nd Symposium was held on schedule by the SAVIAC contractor.

The MFPT Story

In 1967, the Mechanical Failures Prevention Group (MFPG) was organized under the sponsorship of ONR (Office of Naval research). This was the first time that the focus was on failure prevention as the central issue and as a multidisciplinary technology in its own right. Twelve meetings were held over the first two years. Meeting attendance grew, and it became clear that failure prevention technology was critical to our national interest and should receive continuing attention. The National Bureau of Standards (NBS) assumed the lead role and sponsored successful meetings for nearly 30 years. The governing body was the MFPG council, with members from government, industry, and academia.

After the 43rd meeting in the late 1980s NBS (now the National Institute of Standards and Technology, NIST) decided to terminate its sponsorship. MFPG council chairman Henry Hegner approached the Vibration Institute and asked if we could find a way to continue the meetings. It was agreed that Sallie and I would organize and conduct the meetings for the institute on a cost-recovery basis. Beginning in April 1990, MFPG meetings 44 through 48 were successfully held with no money lost, but not much gained. At this point, all parties involved agreed that if this series of conferences were to continue and grow, it would have to be on a more permanent and structured arrangement. At a special meeting of the council, the MFPG became the Society for Machinery Failure Prevention Technology (MFPT). New bylaws were approved, and the Vibration Institute was formally asked to accept the MFPT Society as a national division of the institute. In March 1995, the board of directors of the institute approved the request, and the rest is history. The former council was restructured as the MFPT Society's board of directors. This issue of S&V previews the 60th MFPT meeting in April 2006. You could be reading this article at that meeting.

Over the last 10 years, the MFPT conferences have been rated highly by those who attended. The papers presented and published are of high technical quality. Some of the papers contain cutting-edge technology, while others offer technical information that an engineer can take home and immediately apply to his problems. Advancements in critical technologies such as prognostics can be tracked through our proceedings. The participants have been kind enough to compliment us on our efficiency in conducting the meetings. Therefore, I can proudly claim that our MFPT conferences are of high quality and very well received. This being true, it is reasonable to expect that meeting attendance would increase. Why has this not happened? There are no simple answers. There are many excellent conferences competing for registrants. Travel and training funds are often limited. Even enlightened managers usually limit their engineers to one or two meetings per year. We need to find a way to convince engineers and scientists to place the MFPT conferences high on their priority lists. To do this, we have to convince their managers in the public and private sector that the acquisition and application of failure prevention technology will enhance their bottom line, whatever it is. To the extent that we can accomplish this goal, we may attract more corporate sponsors of the society. The MFPT Society needs all the help it can get.

Thoughts About Conferences

There are people and organizations that do nothing but organize and manage meetings. They handle all the details – the mechanics of running a conference. They have nothing to do with the content or purpose of the meeting, nor do they care. I would not like that kind of job. For technical conferences organized by professional societies or their equivalent, I think it is in the best interest of the community they serve that the responsible society handle all aspects of managing their meeting. This is the way I have done it throughout my career. The personal interactions with the people in the com-

munity served can be rewarding, especially from a technical viewpoint. I have personally met and discussed technology issues with more people than I can estimate. I learned something from all of them and I expect that some learned from me. This is by far the most interesting and satisfying part of the job. I, and the conferences that we organize, are like a pipeline through which information flows in both directions. Except for a few technical areas that I know well, I have no in-depth expertise in the technologies that I deal with. I don't know all the answers but I usually know where the answers are. Hopefully that makes our forums and me effective mechanisms for information exchange.

In my opinion, the society staff should also handle all administrative details for the meeting. This includes hotel meeting arrangements, all the details from the call for papers through publishing the proceedings, and advance and on-site registration. I will not bore you with details, since they are mostly straightforward. I will offer some insight on a conference manager's biggest problem – deadlines. Engineers and scientists are generally wonderful people, but at least 90% are procrastinators. I know that these folks are very busy, but some of the delays are difficult to understand. For the MFPT meetings, usually less than half of the abstracts of proposed papers have arrived prior to the deadline. After that, program committee members and I have to go after those who have promised abstracts but not delivered and twist arms to get others to fill empty slots. Finally, we have most of the preliminary program to post on the web. The authors then have two months to prepare and deliver their manuscripts for publication. There is no way this will happen. By the time of our firm deadline, only a small percentage of the manuscripts have arrived. I think that some authors see the delivery date as the time to start writing their paper. Then there are those who have paper release problems. Hello! The solution to all of these problems is to write your paper a little earlier. It makes us very sad to have to leave papers out of the proceedings because they arrived too late.

Speaking for Sallie and me, we are leaving the MFPT management with some sadness, but at our age, we know it is the right decision. We have made many friends and we will miss seeing you from the driver's seat. We say farewell but not goodbye, since you will likely be seeing us for a while longer at our favorite meetings. May God bless you all. S/V

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