Tasks of TPC Chairs

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Abstract

This is an attempt of describing the tasks of a TPC chair in some reasonable order. The list is by no means complete and it is definitely colored by my own opinions and experiences. I also added some of the things that I was not aware of in advance but learned from my experience as TPC chair of ISIT 2023.

1 Preliminary

Be aware that being a TPC chair is a huge task that one should not accept lightly. To give an idea of the scale of work: during the last 12 months before ISIT 2023, I handled around 25'000 e-mails regarding the conference. Of course, I did not need to reply to many of these e-mails, but still, I had to have a look at all of them.

2 Basic Setup: Two Years before Conference

- Choose your TPC co-chairs, and choose them well. You will have to be able to work with them very closely in stressful times and you need to be able to rely on them. I personally do not believe in being assigned to such a job. You accept a huge workload and must be willing to do this. For this, you should know your co-chairs and be sure that you will be able to work with them.

- I also recommend to have a chat with previous TPC chairs of the conference. They can give tips and hints in general and specific to this conference.

- Decide about the basics of the conference:

  - Do you allow virtual sessions (hybrid conference)? In which form? Live sessions? Recorded videos? How may the attendees choose whether they attend in-person or online?

  - Is the review process blind or double-blind? What other format do you want for the reviewing process (rebuttals, appeals, etc.)?

  - What review system will you use? EDAS, CMS, other? It is not recommendable to have somebody else managing this system as the communication overhead is far too high. It is the task of the TPC chair to be EDAS/CMS master at the same time!

– Who is responsible for the proceedings? (This has become a much smaller task nowadays because one will only need a summary program booklet, but still, this needs to be taken seriously and should be done with care.)

- Decide on a time plan:

  – Invitation of TPC
  – Submission deadline(s)
  – extensions of submission deadlines
  – date of paper distribution to TPC members
  – regular review due date
  – meta review due date
  – TPC meeting
  – acceptance notification
  – final manuscript submission deadline
  – early registration deadline (actually, this is a general chairs' task, but you still need to synchronize this)
  – publication of technical program
  – invitation of session chairs

- Choose the paper topics of the conference: The paper topics are crucial and should be chosen exceedingly carefully. I suggest to have far more topics than just 20, rather something towards 40 to 50 or so. The authors must then pick exactly **one** topic for their submission. This will be of extreme help for assigning the papers to TPC members, for creating reasonable sessions, etc.

- Issues for hybrid conferences:

  – If you offer both virtual and in-person attendance, you will have tons (!) of people asking at different stages for a change from in-person to virtual track. Make sure to have discussed a very clear and simple rule when to allow this. I propose to only allow a swap if there is a visa issue or an unexpected medical issue. Note that switches are difficult because they involve room changes, different timing, etc.

  – It might make sense to have different submission deadlines for in-person and virtual track. For example, having an earlier submission deadline for the virtual track can help to increase the in-person attendance and it also gives another clear justification why a swap from in-person to virtual is not possible in normal circumstances (because it would be unfair to all authors who did submit in time). I also propose to plan an extension for the in-person deadline, but not for the (earlier) virtual deadline.

  – Note, however, that the reviewing process cannot start separately, because otherwise papers will be distributed for review while new papers can still be submitted for the conference, thereby giving a chance for authors to read results of other authors that then could be included into the their own submission for the same conference.

- Think about rules for your own submissions as TPC chairs. As you have full access to everything, it might be a good decision that TPC chairs cannot submit their own papers. If you still want to be able to submit, you have to think about rules on how to handle these papers.

- Another big thing to organize are the plenary sessions. Start thinking about whom to invite.

3   Call for Paper and TPC: One Year before Conference

- Create a call for paper. This will be done jointly with the conference chairs.

- Note that the call for paper should clearly cover the fact that one is not allowed to submit the same (or very similar) paper both to the virtual and the in-person track at the same time and that the consequence of such a discovery is the immediate rejection of both submissions. Interestingly, IEEE does not seem to think this a problem, so if you do not specify this, then you will have no way of kicking such authors out.

- Provide a LaTeX-template to be used by the authors for their submissions.

- Invite your plenary speakers. Check the situation regarding refund and honorarium: usually, hotel, flight and conference registration are covered for all speakers, but depending on the background of the speaker, also a honorarium might be paid.

- Set up the reviewing system (EDAS/CMS). Prepare for the invitation of TPC members. Make some tests and trials.

- Decide about the size of the TPC.

- Start inviting TPC members:

  - Each person who accepts must immediately choose a few areas of expertise. These should be identical to the paper topics of the conference. Thereby you are able to determine areas with too few TPC members.

  - The invitation will be done in several rounds. Depending on the number of accepting TPC members and their area of expertise you can then invite missing members in a second and third round.

  - There are *no* fixed rules how to choose the TPC members. This is entirely your task and under your decision and complete control.

  - The choice of the TPC members is crucial for a good review process. A *good* TPC member is a person who

    * is a good researcher in an area,
    * is a reliable person for the assigned task, and
    * takes this tasks seriously.

    It is amazing how many famous and research-wise amazing people are completely useless as TPC members because they do not want to spend enough time for this task or they simply do not follow any instructions regarding

deadlines, procedure, etc. The worst case is if a TPC member does not react immediately once a paper is assigned to him/her and then with great delay even refuses to handle the paper.

A chat with previous TPC chairs might be helpful.

– You will obtain emails of people who want to become TPC members (for various reasons). Do you accept such self-invitations? Why or why not? Think about this in advance!

4   Reviewing Process: Six Months before Conference

- The preparation of the reviewing system (EDAS, CMS, etc.) is crucial for this part. Make sure to think this through very carefully and make many trials. I submitted a bunch of fake papers under different accounts, assigned them to fake TPC members, then signed in under these fake accounts and provided reviews for the fake papers, etc. This way you experience the submission process yourself and are able to find issues.

- Carefully plan the scoring system:

  – What questions shall be answered by the reviewers?

  – What final score do you offer? Do you offer a "borderline decision"? If yes, do you want to enforce a written justification of the reviewer/meta reviewer?

  – If there is a student paper award, there must be also questions regarding this.

- Carefully instruct the TPC members about the reviewing process. It is in particular important to inform the TPC members how the reminding system is set up. I personally prefer to have manual reminders, so that each TPC member needs to send out reminders manually.

- During the submission of a paper, the authors need to choose **one** topic out of the list of topics. This will be extremely helpful for assigning the papers to TPC members and also for creating sessions afterwards.

- Once the submission deadline is over, assign the papers to the TPC members.

  – This task can be split among the TPC chairs. For example, sort the submissions according to topics and distribute the different topics to different TPC chairs for assignment.

  – Do not send the papers out until you have finalized the assignment. This way you can still swap papers around to optimize and level out the load.

  – Unfortunately, it has become more common for TPC members to refuse the acceptance of some assignments. So be prepared for reassignments.

  – You might want to keep one or two skilled TPC members for emergency assignments.

- I strongly suggest to ask the TPC member handling the paper for one (or several) possible session titles the paper could be presented in. This will be very helpful for creating sessions.

5 TPC Meeting and Final Decision: Three Months before Conference

- The TPC meeting needs careful planning in order for it to be useful:
  - What shall be achieved?
  - How will it be organized?
  - Virtual or in-person?

- Send out the invitation early! In particular, if the event is supposed to be in-person, this must be planned way ahead in time.

- If you have a virtual meeting, you need to be aware that the TPC members live in many different time zones. So you might have to make several periods of meetings, potentially also during a time in which it is night in your time zone.

- The main tasks for the TPC meeting are as follows:
  - Getting reviews for papers that were stranded because the handling TPC member did not do the job.
  - Looking at borderline cases to get another opinion.
  - Having a detailed look at difficult cases: this might include cases of papers where the reviews vary very widely, cases of potential plagiarism, cases of claims with doubtful proofs (particularly, if the claimed results are huge), etc.

- In my personal experience, the organizational overhead for letting the TPC members virtually arrange sessions, is too big. It's easier to organize the sessions yourself. The paper topics and the reviewer's session title will be very helpful here.

- I suggest a Zoom meeting where one can organize discussion groups if they are wished, and a Excel-Sheet with paper titles to be chosen from. The attending TPC members will ask for a paper, and you assign it to them as another meta reviewer.

- One important thing to notice for the TPC meeting is the reviewing privacy of papers of TPC members. It is not straightforward to keep the identity of reviewers/meta reviewers private at the TPC meeting. And, actually, even just revealing that a paper is a borderline case, might be problematic. If the reviewing process is double-blind, this issue becomes even more pronounced. I therefore strongly suggest that papers by TPC members that should be looked at at the TPC meeting are not given out to other TPC members, but are handled exclusively by the TPC chairs.

- Once the final decision emails go out, make sure to include all necessary information on the further procedure. I also suggest to BCC *all* reviewers because for a reviewer it is usually very interesting to read the reviews of the other reviewers and the meta review, too.

- Strictly speaking, conferences do not allow for appeals. But you can be sure to obtain appeals anyway. So it is important to think in advance about how to handle them. For example, you can ask a few TPC members in advance if they are willing to help handling such cases. Or you assign one TPC chair for this task. Note that appeals have to be dealt with quickly in order to allow you to start with the creation of the program.

6   Sessions and Program: Two Months before Conference

- The creation of the sessions and the program is another huge task for the TPC chair:
  - It is crucial to have an exact time plan of the conference week: which day has which sessions at which time in which room. This must be done in synchronization with the general chairs who are organizing the venue.
  - It is important to try to create running sequences of sessions that allow people interested in a particular topic to attend basically all talks within this topic.
  - Make sure to keep a list of special cases: people who ask for special treatment like arriving late or leaving early. You will not be able to remember all cases. But note: there is no obligation to fulfill any such request! However, at the start of the process such requests usually can be fulfilled relatively easily, while at a later stage, they can cause huge problems or basically be impossible.

- From the list of papers selected as potential candidates for the student paper award, you must make a selection of papers to be sent to the student paper award committee. How this is done is up to you. Think about this in advance!

- Note that the final candidates that will then present their work in front of the student paper award panel will only be selected shortly before the conference. To allow for an easier program creation, I suggest to arrange two special student-paper-award-sessions on Monday morning, where the 6 candidates present their work in front of the student paper award panel. But all of these authors do also have a second regular presentation within a session that fits their paper topic. This way, at the stage of program creation it is not necessary to know which papers will be selected in the end (every paper is simply assigned to a regular session). Moreover, the authors still have the chance to obtain feedback from people within the area of their paper.

- Make sure that you have title, abstract, and bio of your plenary speakers.

- After publishing the program online, send out another info email to all attendees.

- Based on the registrations (a list you should be able to get from the general chairs), you now need to start looking for session chairs. Note that certain time slots like first and last sessions of the conference are more difficult to fill. So I suggest to start with those.

- Once all session chairs are chosen, the program booklet can be created and printed.

7   At the Conference

- At the conference, the work load is not very high anymore unless some unexpected appeals or troubles show up. Basically, the TPC chairs are session chairs of the plenary sessions and will have to give a short speech at the banquet.