

The Forum conferences

The first 20 years of the concept

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It all started with a phrase I found myself using when returning from conferences:
– The paper presentations were mostly tedious and unrewarding, but I met very many interesting people during the breaks. Pity though that the breaks were so short.

So, when we had started INTECOM and the idea of an international conference came up, I began to think of a way to arrange a conference consisting of an entire, long break. The idea was presented to an INTECOM board meeting in Stockholm in 1974, accepted and the date for the conference was set to the beginning of September 1975. We had to make all the preparations in one year.

Right from the beginning the main idea was to make it as easy as possible for the conference participants to find people with common interests and arrange situations where they could exchange ideas and experience. The combination of brains and experience from different backgrounds should be made use of. The participants should come home from a Forum conference not only with ideas that others have planned to "hand out" but also with ideas generated at the conference, thanks to people with different backgrounds and creative conference methods.

No chairs permitted

So we had to ban all lectures (presenting papers etc.). But still we needed a program with specific subjects to attract participants.

The solution was the Idea Market, a big room where 8-16 activators (also called Chart-keepers) had their stands (two flip-charts) and where prepared to discuss pre-announced subjects. The participants should be able to move freely around, join the discussion in one group, leave it and join another (no chairs allowed that could "permanent" the groups). Some activators found this way of direct communication with the participants a bit difficult in the beginning (while others immediately adapted themselves to the situation). I remember seeing an activator at Forum 75 standing all alone

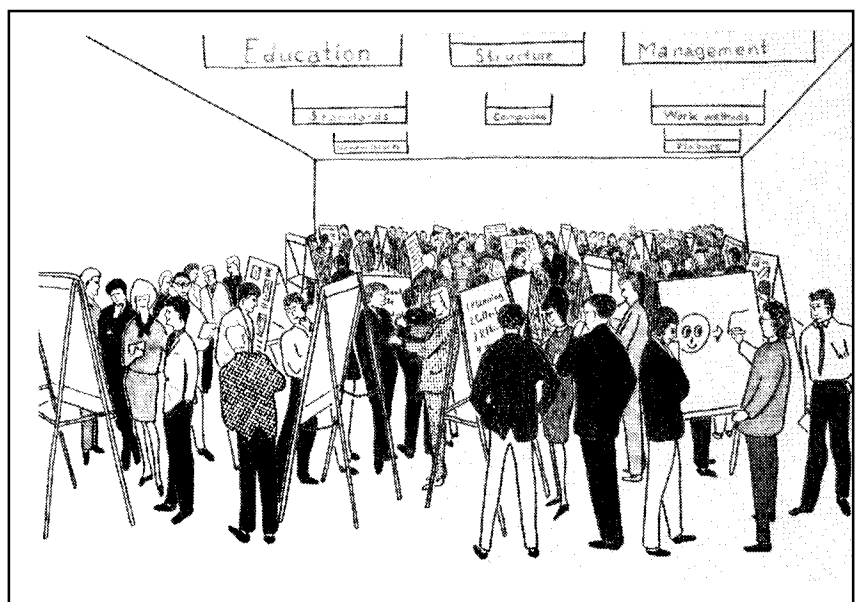
at his flip-charts reading aloud from a manuscript and not a single person was in the vicinity. I moved up to him (although he didn't notice) and when he paused for breath I asked him a question. He "woke up", dropped his manuscript on the floor – and suddenly found himself in the role of a chart-keeper (he managed to adapt and had during the rest of the session lively discussions with small groups without the help of the manuscript).

For most chart-keepers the group size will vary during an Idea Market. So, as participant you can choose to have a dialogue or what Ed Bragg named a multilogue (where there are more than one discussion going on in the group).

At the Idea Market each activator had two flip charts. On one of them the activator had a number of prepared sheets, to be used to outline the subject and to provoke discussion. Also to point the discussion along a new track when the ongoing one was losing momentum. We emphasized that these sheets did not have to be perfect "posters". On the contrary, many activators created the sheets at an Activator Workshop during the day of preparation. The sheets had to "work" rather than impress.

The organizers of a conference can only to a certain degree influence the content. Mostly it depends on who are interested (and able) to

This is how I tried to visualize the Idea Market in the first presentation of the Forum conference to be.





A high noise level (due to a marble floor) and the worst heat wave for centuries couldn't prevent people from intense discussions at the Idea Market at Forum 75.

attend and what they have to offer. In a Forum conference it can however be even more useful to have an interesting question than to have an absolute solution. The interesting question can help the participants' thoughts to move in new directions, help them see at the world from new perspectives.

Suitable conference rooms a problem

The biggest problem with the Idea Market has been to find a suitable conference room to house it (at least when economy also has to be taken into consideration). In Malmö 1975 we had a big hall floored with marble in the Town Hall and got a rather high noise level. (At the same time we were hit by the worst heat wave in southern Sweden for many centuries). In Helsingør 1985 we were also hit by a heat wave. The conference hall we used there for the Idea Market was a bit too small, with the result that the chart-keepers came a bit too close together and some participants found the noise level again disturbing.

The best room for the Idea Market we have got so far was in Stockholm 1990. It was a rather big room (11 x 22 m) with an effective noise-reducing ceiling and floor (wall-to-wall carpet) combined with effective air conditioning. Since we didn't have more than 8 chart-keepers at each Idea Market they could be placed well apart so they didn't disturb each other. At the same time you could in one glimpse get an overview over the whole room.

Crazy ideas

The second leg for the Forum conferences already from the beginning was the brainstorming sessions (sometimes called the Super-Brain sessions). In these the

participants could in a short time combine their efforts to produce lots of ideas and have fun at the same time (one important rule: have 50 % crazy ideas).

In Malmö 1975, however, we had to convince the local authorities that "brainstorming" wasn't such a wild activity that it couldn't be run in the Town Hall's gala rooms. Those rooms had not been changed since the restoration in 1863-69 (the house itself dates back to 1528). Now people were afraid that "wild" brainstorming sessions could ruin the interior. We managed to convince them that it was only the thoughts in the participants brains that were running wild, so they let us use the gala rooms.

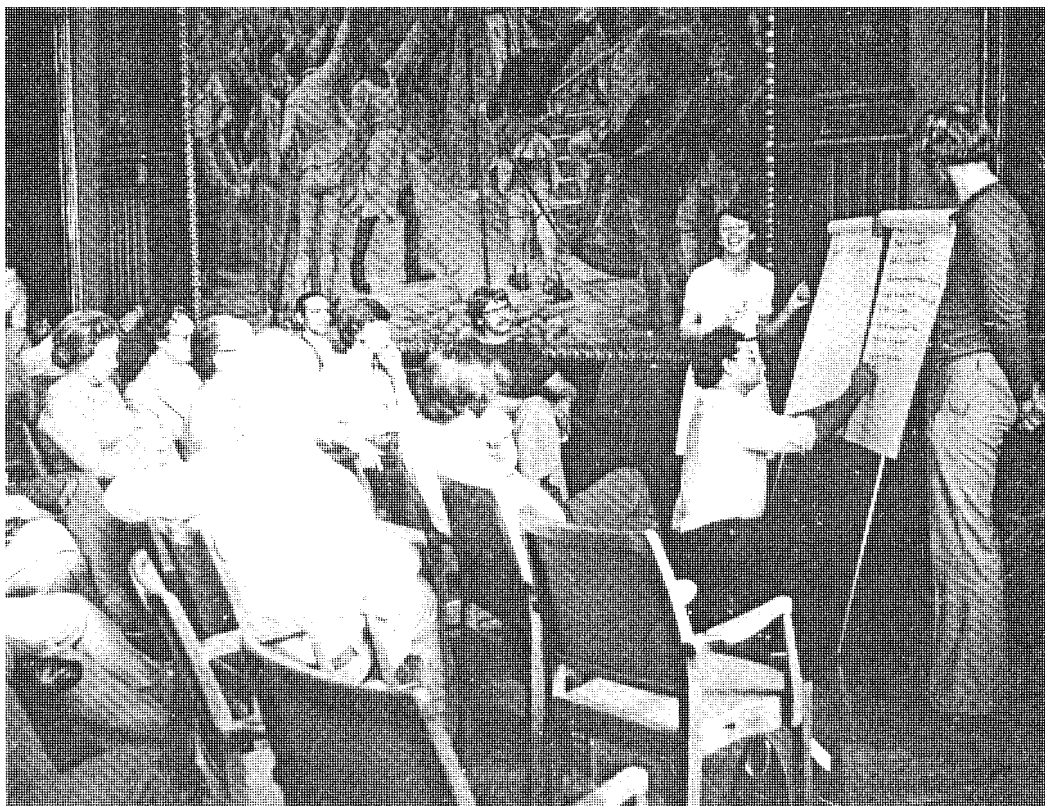
Brainstormings have been arranged both in the market place (without any chairs) and in rooms with chairs. At Forum 85 we even tried a "multi-brainstorming" at the Idea Market and it worked well.

"Chaired" activities

We have always tried to have activities parallel to the Idea Market. For some people it is all right to stand and discuss for the 90 minutes we have found suitable for each Idea Market. Others, however, find it too tiresome to stand for such a long period (although in Stockholm we had one chart-keeper who was so popular that she had to go on for three and a half hours, with a short coffee break, and most of her audience were with her and discussed with her all the time.

Parallel activities we have used are "canned technical information festival" (where people could go to a room and sit down and look at technical films and videos), "new media room" where we had a small exhibition of multimedia

With kings and warriors from 17th century Swedish wars looking down from the paintings on the walls in the Town Hall, the Forum 75 participants poured out ideas in the brainstormings - and had fun at the same time.



and demonstration of interactive video (a program was produced during the conference), and "communicators' show room" where participants could display examples of information they had brought with them.

We have also tried to have a coffee corner where people could sit down and deepen the discussions from the Idea Market. And the bars at the conference hotels have also been open to deep discussions.

In Lillehammer 1980 we had "group writing" where a small group could sit down, discuss a subject and write down the conclusions (for example as a resolution). I myself participated in one such group with people from the USA and several European countries and was a bit astonished by how well we worked together writing a resolution stating among other things that the technical communicator should act as the user's defense lawyer against the product designers. This was of course not an official decision making body and our resolution had only the effect each of us could produce by trying to get the ideas accepted in his or her country.

At Forum 85 in Helsingør we named this activity "Sort-and-build". We also used it in Stockholm in 1990 and provided the groups with computers and a laser writer but this equipment seemed more to be an obstacle (maybe they felt it too exacting).

Test lab

At Forum 85 we had arranged a test lab with video recording facilities (two cameras, mixer, monitors and recorder). The participants could be invited to take part as test subjects. So many were interested in taking part that I am afraid we couldn't use them all. The Forum activators could book the lab and conduct their tests. A couple of them did so. Since heavy equipment is difficult to bring to such a conference most of the tests were on computer programs and their manuals. One of the activators even used the test lab to collect data for her doctoral thesis.

Conference newspaper

At Forum 75 we published all the ideas from the brainstormings (long lists) in the conference newspaper. This was produced every night and was available to all participants at their hotels at breakfast next morning. This Forum newspaper also contained reports in text and pictures of what has happened the previous day and articles and news items on coming activities at the conference. With today's desk-top publishing it is rather easy to produce such a newspaper (and it is rather common at conferences), but in 1975 we didn't have those possibilities. We had to work with electric typewriters, Polaroid cameras, a repro camera to reduce and enlarge

and scissors and glue to put the originals together.

At Forum 85 we wanted to try a more modern medium. So every day we had 5-6 video reporting crews out in the conference premises. Each group, consisting of 2-3 activators, had a video camcorder. Before going out they had a quick discussion with me on what could be of interest (but they were free to catch anything else they themselves found interesting).

During the day they delivered their material to a specially build television studio (thanks to Lars-Erik Lindhe who provided all the equipment and worked as an editor, together with one of his employees, 16-18 hours a day during the conference).

The video recordings were screened and the parts to be used were chosen. Additional interviews and introductions were taped in the studio (and we found an American born information manager in a Norwegian computer firm an excellent program presenter).

At about 3 or 4 in the morning we were ready with the editing and had a transmittable video journal ranging in length from about 20 to 40 minutes. From 6 o'clock in the morning it was run once every hour over the conference hotel's internal television network so that the participants could see it in their rooms when they woke up.

With today's equipment (digital editing) it would be very much easier and take much less time but in 1985 that wasn't available.

Live television show

At Forum 90 we tried another variation: a live transmitted television program every evening after the official program. Also this was transmitted over the hotel's TV-network and the participants could look at it at their rooms (it was also taped and repeated next morning). Even if we didn't have so much time for preparations it worked reasonably well. During the day I asked some activators to pick someone they could interview or discuss with on television that night. And we got interesting and lively interviews and discussions, even if it was late evening after a full day. And the television crew, picked out from the audience, worked very well although they had only 2-3 minutes instruction how to handle the equipment.

Preseedings

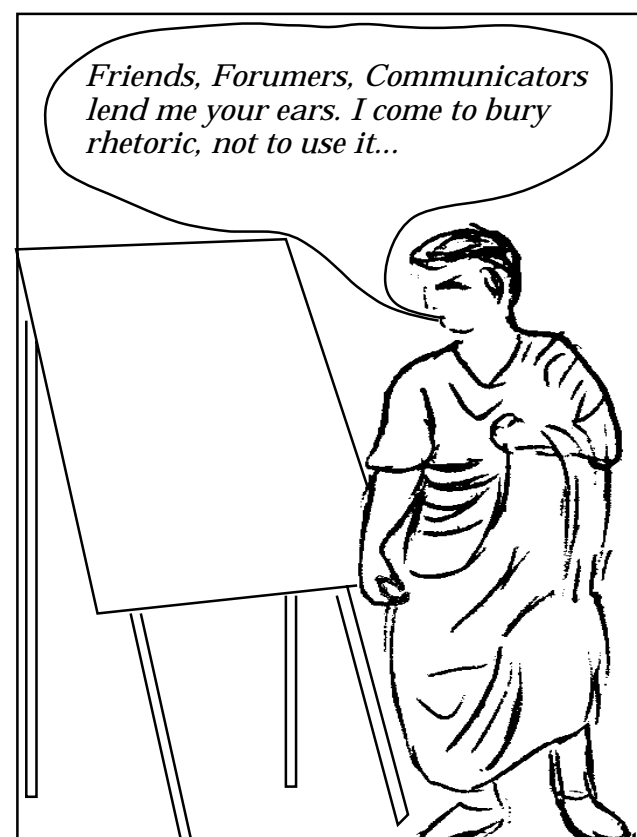
When planning for Forum 85 in Denmark we had gained so much experience from the conference methods that we could include some new features. At previous conferences activators handed out information material on

paper during the Idea Market discussions. However, if this material could reach the participants well before the conference, people could better prepare for the different activities and it would make it easier for them to choose what activities to take part in.

Material had also been produced in group discussions and brainstorming sessions and sometimes it was only available for those who took part in that particular activity so we decided to try to produce one book to be sent out prior to the conference to help the participants to prepare for it, and one to be sent out after the conference, collecting the material produced during the conference and combining it with "afterthoughts" from the activators. Thomas O'Connor named those two books Preseedings (the spelling is deliberate) and Postharvest.

"Forcing" new friendships

A conference can be a place to meet old friends – and to make new ones. However, often the old friends take up all the time. Also, very often, you stick to people you already know (from your own company or country) at meals and social activities. New ones might not feel themselves welcome in the group. At the Forum conferences we have tried to overcome



This was a joke I used in one of the newsletters prior to Forum 90. I hoped to give the readers an idea that the discussions at a Forum conference were not as much debates but more of a cooperative evaluation of ideas.

this problem in different ways. The most radical method we have tested was assigning places at the dinner tables with the help of a computer program. I designed the program so it would at each table put together people with different background (sex, country, industrial branch). For each dinner during the conference the computer produced a new combination (the participants had their table numbers on the back of their name badges). Even if a few cheated and choose the wrong table to try to be among old friends it worked well and people were "forced" to take new contacts.

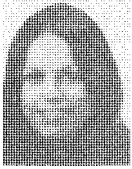




At lunches we have tried other methods to create interesting combinations at the tables. We took the idea from the Swedish smörgåsbord where you have lots of different courses and you choose to pick from those you like best (well, amateurs usually go for everything at the table). The "Intellectual smörgåsbord", as we called it, offered many different courses (subjects to talk about), one at each table – but you could of course only choose one subject for each lunch. The tables were numbered and the subjects preferred at each table were announced in the conference program. At the table you chose you had a good chance to find others interested in the same subject (we had some "intellect free" tables for those who felt they needed to rest their brains).

At Forum 85 we arranged so that the activators could "book" a place at a certain table but it didn't turn out so well because many of them had found more interesting subjects before it was lunch time and didn't turn up at the "right" table.

The chart-keeper a "facilitator"

The chart-keeper has a somewhat different role from a conventional lecturer. He or she may not be "in focus" all the time. Once the dialogue or multilogue is started in the group the chart-keeper can act as a "facilitator", now and then helping the discussion onto more productive tracks, giving new perspectives in a discussion growing too one-sided. In fact, if the group works well the chart-keeper doesn't need to interfere at all.

In Stockholm 1990 I had lots of things to do with the conference arrangements. Still I took the chance to act as a chart-keeper. We had a small local cellular phone system for the conference administration (supplied by one of the activators) and in the middle of my Idea Market I got a call from the restaurant in the conference hotel. Something about the dinner had gone wrong and had to be decided immediately. As the discussion in my group was in full swing and I saw no need for me to

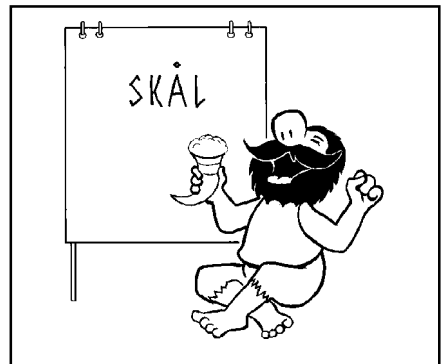
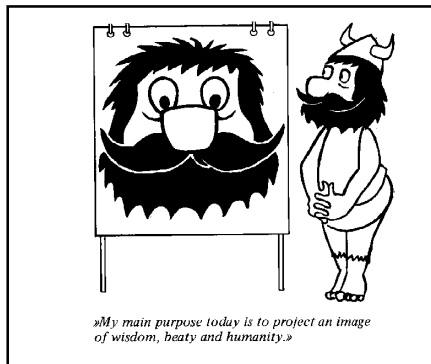
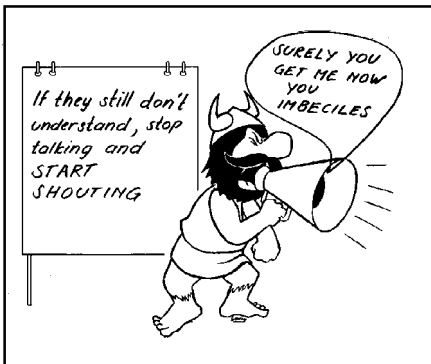
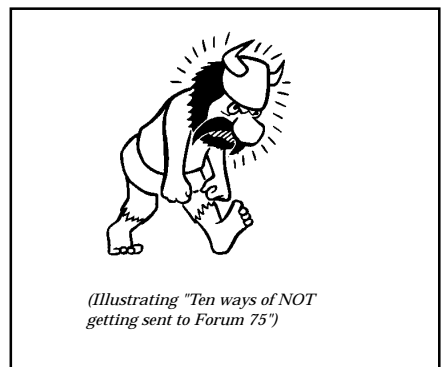
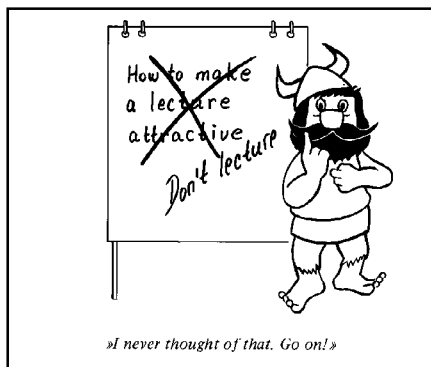
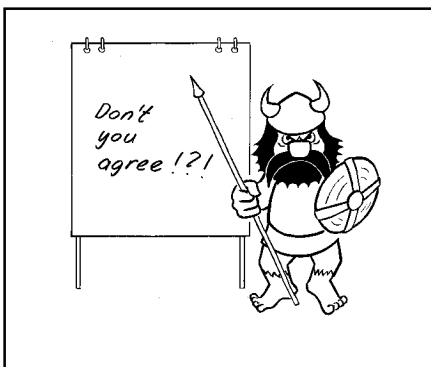
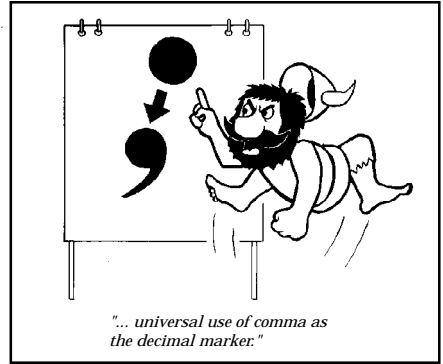
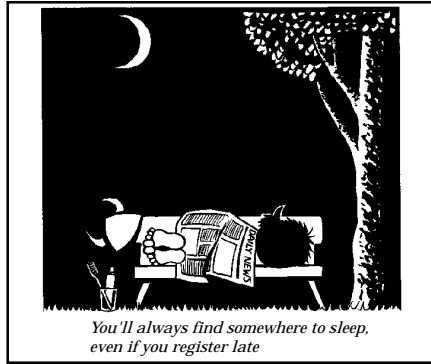
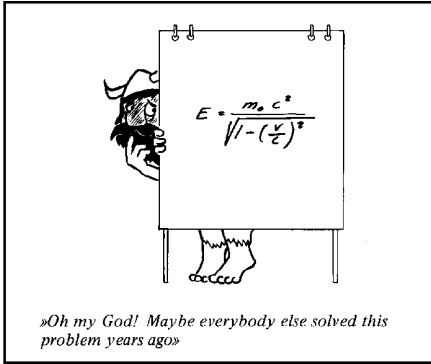
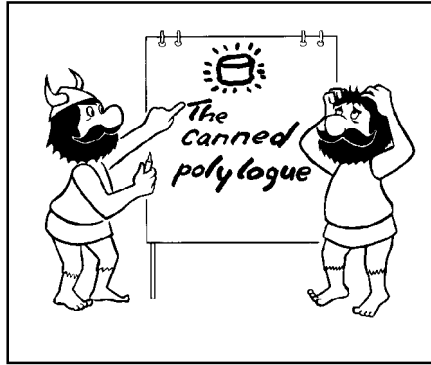
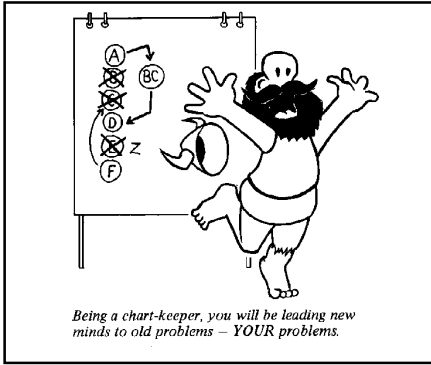
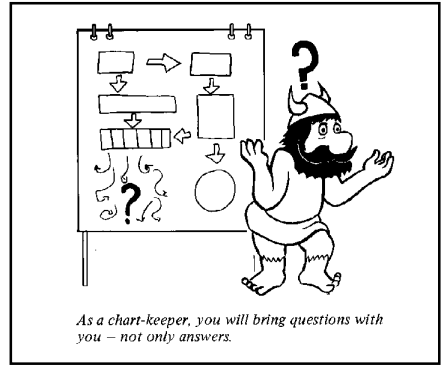
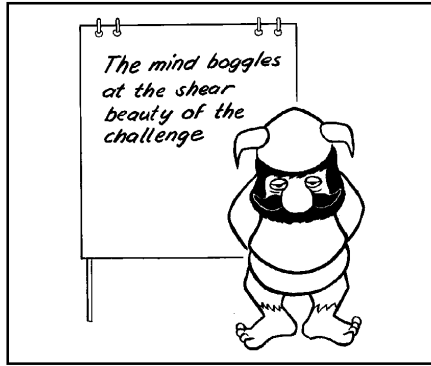
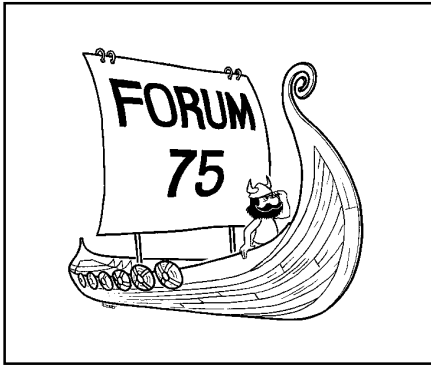
<p>Brigitte Beuttenmueller Publications Manager IBM Germany Program Product Center, Dept 0446 58-60 Schwertstr. D-7032 Sindelfingen, West Germany Special interests: Machine-readable manuals, Profit with good publications. How can we get more creative?</p>	
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<p>William M Boyd Technical Editor IBM Germany Program Product Center, Dept 0446 58-60 Schwertstr. D-7032 Sindelfingen, West Germany Activator: C3 - Education for technical communicators.</p>	
<p>Edward W Bragg Information manager at ASSAB, Sweden Home address: Roslagsgatan 12, S-113 55 Stockholm, Sweden Activator: D2 - A routine for analysing technical communication needs in export marketing. Special interests: Convincing writers they need help, Limits of English as international language</p>	
<p>Tineke W Brascamp - van der Lee Scientific editor Centre for agricultural publishing and documentation PUDOC, Marijkeweg 17, Wageningen Netherlands Special interests: Can effective communication be learned, Availability of solutions, Communication of the future</p>	

The list of participants at Forum conferences has always had photos of the participants to make it easier to recognize people at the conference and remember them after it. However, it hasn't always been so easy to get photos from all participants. The only conference where we had photos on all was the first one in Malmö. But then we solved the problem by taking Polaroid photos at the registration of those who hadn't submitted any and published a supplement to the list of participants together with the conference newspaper.

interfere I silently left the group, met the hotel people and solved the problem. I am not sure that most of the group members were aware that I had been away. At least only one (a Norwegian friend) showed a sign of that awareness by waving "Hello" to me when I came back. The rest were still involved in an intense discussion.

"Some sort of English"

Right from the beginning we stated that the language to be used at the Forum conferences was some sort of English. We have also tried to tell those participants who have English as their mother tongue to be patient with the rest of us who have learned it as our second or



In the Forum 75 publications Nils Petter Smeby's Norwegian vikings inspired to new thoughts.



Even interactive theater has taken place at the Idea Market. Here in Stockholm 1990.

third language. The importance is understanding, not necessarily a perfect language. And in a dialogue both parts can help to accomplish the understanding (even if you disagree you can both help each other to understand how you disagree).

Inspiring the activators

We have tried various means of inspiring activators to choose subjects for the Forum conferences. One way has been to publish subject ideas that are not yet covered in other ways. Sometimes they have been taken up but just as often they have inspired activators to choose a somewhat different subject. We have also tried to discuss (mostly by letter) with the activators so they could develop their subjects a bit further. At Forum 90 we had for example a suggestion for an Idea Market discussion on interactive theatre. By corresponding with the activator in Kenya the idea came up that he could stage an interactive theatre play at the Idea Market which of course drew much attention and gave the participants and the audience many new insights, both of the communication method itself and of the situation in an African country.

More humor useful

Humor is an underdeveloped resource at many conferences. At the Forum conferences we have tried to use humor as an inspiration for new thoughts, both in the paper information sent

out and at the conferences. At Forum 85 we had collected cartoons and humoristic expressions and displayed it all at the Technical Communication Cartoon Party. In Stockholm 1990 we put cartoons and humoristic quotations on each table in the restaurant to serve as starting points for the discussions at the tables (if needed).

Extra day for activators

We have tried to give the activators an extra day (at no extra cost). In the beginning we put that day before the ordinary conference days. The aim was to help them prepare themselves for the somewhat new conference methods, but also to have a better chance to get to know each other. At Forum 85 we tested to have half the extra activators' day before and two half days (afternoon and morning) after the conference days, but the two half days after the ordinary conference didn't turn out so well. I had the idea that the activators together could develop what has come up during the conference days but they were tired after three hectic days and we didn't get so much result. So in 1990 we were back on our original model.

At this day of preparation new activators can get hints and tips from those who have experienced it before and also get to know the conference premises and the fellow activators (especially those having activities at the same time as they themselves which they otherwise may miss).

High response rate

Only twice have we had energy enough to hand out questionnaires to the activators and participants to see what they thought of the Forum conference model. After Forum 75 I sent out questionnaires by post to all and asked them to fill it in and send it back anonymously (so I couldn't remind those who didn't). But still I got a 83 % return rate! And there was an almost 100 % agreement that this was a conference model they liked (all the activators but one said they preferred this type of conference to a conventional one – although one added "if it's a subject I know"). At Forum 85 we instead put out the questionnaires at the breakfast tables the last conference day and asked people to fill in and hand them in before they left. In this case the return rate was only 64 % but still a very good figure for an anonymous questionnaire. Also here a large majority was very positive to the conference methods.

Here are some remarks ordinary participants made on these two questionnaires:

"Thanks to the Preseedings I knew the subjects and level of discussion before arriving and therefore was able to contribute / understand more."

"A comfortable atmosphere which broke down barriers to communication (anxiety, shyness, defensiveness)."

"Easier to select subjects from Preseedings than from abstracts."

"I liked the organized informality of the Forum conference."

"The freedom one has to spend as long as you want at each activity."

"Liked meeting many new people of similar interests (intellectual smörgåsbord)."

"Forum was like a big family."

"A few questions would disclose whether or not the chartkeeper knew his/her material – or had anything new to say. My time was not wasted with irrelevancies."

I had the activators mark their questionnaires so I could see if their opinions differed from the rest. They were also very positive and had some special remarks too. Here are some:

"More fun being a chart-keeper than giving a conventional lecture."

"All bright thoughts and ideas that kept falling over you. You just couldn't avoid them."

"For reasons not quite clear to me, I feel both exhilarated and exhausted."

Small group of individuals

Small groups of individuals have made all the arrangements for the Forum 75-90 conferences. Since we haven't got a standing organization much has had to be improvised.

Almost from the beginning Ed Bragg has been part of the Forum team. I happened to meet him when I helped a Swedish company to screen and test applicants for a job as technical communicator. Ed, an Englishman "imported" to Sweden and "held captive" here by a Swedish girl, was put in first place in my evaluation. Ed's

humor, good ideas on conference methods, experience of cross-cultural communication from many years of work with Swedish export information and (for us not having English as our first language) his English mother tongue has been very valuable to the Forum conferences.

We have used the Forum conferences as a test ground for different unorthodox conference methods. Quite natural for at conference on communication, it seems to me. We couldn't have done it without the help of all the activators and participants who dared to take part – many of them again and again.

Forum conferences

Forum 75

Malmö, Sweden
3-5 September 1975
(activators day
2 September)
Arranged by:
Ulf-L Andersson
Ed Bragg
Lars Forsslund

Forum 80

Lillehammer, Norway
24-27 August 1980
Arranged by:
Roger Andersen
Kjell Eriksmoen
Arne Ryen
Asbjørn Tunheim
Nic. Kiær Holter

Forum 85

Helsingør, Denmark
26-29 August 1985
(activators program
26 and 29-30 August)
Arranged by:
Thomas O'Connor
Margot Gunzenhauser
Asbjørn Tunheim
Ulf-L Andersson
Ed Bragg
Lars Forsslund

Forum 90

Stockholm, Sweden
28-30 August 1990
(activators day 27
August)
Arranged by:
Ulf-L Andersson
Ed Bragg
Lars Forsslund

