

Conscription

Progress Report Two

Cobden Hotel, Birmingham.

24 - 25 September 1988

Introduction

Welcome to *Conscription's* PR2. This is our first PR to include a *forum* for articles related to con-running, though the response has not been as high as we hoped. It should be emphasised that the articles represent the views of the contributors and not the committee. We would like to receive any comments on what has been published below and more articles.

News

Ian Sorensen wishes to make *Conrunner 10* a special issue and has suggested merging the post convention publication with it. This will be out for *Novacon*, *Conrunner 9* will be out for *Conscription*.

Jonathan Cowie has said "*Concatenation* will supply the prizes for a ballot with the category 'best new' *con-runner*, the prize is a copy of the BMA's book '*How to do it*' which is all about running conferences." More details in the next PR.

Inclusions

You will should find enclosed with this PR the Hotel Booking form, which we hope is self explanatory, a leaflet about the hotel and a general questionnaire. Please return the questionnaire by the deadline of the next PR.

Committee

There has been a change on the committee, a committee member has left and a new one has joined: Steve Miller has resigned because of other commitments. Laura Wheatly has joined the committee, there is a short introduction to Laura given below.

We have also implemented a management structure: even though this is not needed for a con-

vention this size, we are doing this as an experiment, the results of which should be obvious at the convention.

Laura Wheatly:

Wandered in to the Chaplaincy at Warwick University in 1977 looking for a Quaker and, by a strange twist of fate, ended up at the Science Fiction society. She never found the Quaker but did begin attending Science Fiction conventions and has been doing so ever since. Laura has had many dealings with hotels in a professional capacity, including the fact that her family used to run one.

Other interests include collecting weird, wonderful, brightly coloured spectacle frames and haircolours to match.

Conscription Programme Structure

The programme has been structured into four sessions, each of which will deal with a particular theme, these will be:-

Organisation	-	Saturday Morning
Hotel/Site	-	Saturday Afternoon
Programme	-	Sunday Morning
Operations	-	Sunday Afternoon

The sessions will start with a brief introduction and then will split into discussion groups, of four to six depending on numbers. After about an hour, we will meet in a plenary session and report back. We will be asking various people to act as convenors for the sessions and also as leaders for the seminar groups.

At the moment we plan to start the morning sessions at 9:30am, finishing at noon, and the afternoon ones at 2:00pm finishing at 4:30pm. This may well be changed. We will run other, much less serious items, special interest items and so on in the evening.

Publications/Editorial

There seemed to be a whimper of response from Britain's con-running community, in the way of articles for this PR. Does anybody have anything to say about con-running, or have all avenues already been explored to everyone's satisfaction?

We are now looking for articles, short comments and other pieces of useful information. The deadline for contributions for the next PR is 1 July 1988, and for the programme book 1 August 1988. Please send them to the convention's address as given below.

Forum

Technical Operations

Gary Stramann

Of all the divisions of a con's workload, this is probably the most pervasive. Scarcely any item of programming does not require the services of this department.

Tech. ops. has three broad sections: equipment, operations and maintenance.

The first is theoretically simple and practically complicated. On the face of it, all that is needed is a list of equipment for each item on the programme, enough of everything and enough able bodies to shift stuff where needed. Unfortunately, this requires that all equipment needs are known in advance and that everything turns up and works. Also no items which need the same piece of kit, overlap. So, imaginary cons aside, this aspect of tech-ops is primarily an administrative one and, as it involves a lot of paper work and a general overview, is really the province of ops. manager. This post has to be filled by someone sufficiently well disciplined not to go off doing things instead of sitting and directing.

Operations is often the easiest part, consisting of things like running mixing desks, moving microphones etc. However, it also includes lighting and cine projection. Things best put in the hands of experienced sub-managers. Operations, generally, absorbs a lot of manpower but is not particularly demanding. Conscientious people can watch programme items usually a good vantage point.

Maintenance is the place for real experts. If it will not work - make it. If it is broken - fix it. The relatively small numbers of experts should be acting as 'on call' troubleshooters, it is a mistake to tie them up in routine work if it is avoidable.

Overall, tech ops is primarily about organisation of work and division of labour. A tech-manager has to be on top of his job and able to use his staff to the best advantage.

Forward Planning

Bernard Peck

Whatever your opinions on the size of SF conventions it seems certain that some con committees will opt for the giant economy size, particularly for Eastercons. There are some problems which organisers of large cons will have to face, problems made worse by the scale of the task they set themselves.

Some of the problems involved in running a con are proportional to the size of the con. In 1979 we washed 1000 chairs that Seacon had hired, they had been delivered dirty. A job like that needs materials, manpower and management. Other problems are not inherently worse for a large con. If a programme item falls through, at the last minute, finding a replacement is not more difficult for a larger convention.

What makes large conventions more difficult to run is that the number of possible problems is related to the size of the con, and problems compound each other. The person on-the-spot needs to find the appropriate person to make a decision, and that may entail waiting for the decision maker to handle their current catastrophe. There may be two problems for them to deal with, so priorities need to be set before any problem solving can be started. If there are too many problems assigning priorities becomes a full-time job and catching up is impossible. After the decision has been made other people have to be told about it, communications become a new problem, and the decision itself may create more problems.

Another difficulty that large cons must face is that there is likely to be too low a proportion of experienced congoers and conrunners to handle problems that do arise. Becon 87 had about 200 people involved in running the con in some way, about 25% of attendees. (These figures are estimates.) This problem is going to be with us as long as cons continue to grow.

Large cons just cannot tolerate the same proportion of problems that small ones can. The job of managing all of the small problems is too much and the resources available are spread too thinly.

Larger conventions have one advantage though, they usually have more time to prepare in advance. That time has to be used to design out problems. Of course it is impossible to foresee all of the problems but there are some areas that will benefit from extra attention. Fandom has no shortage of people with experience of analysing complex organisations. Whether they use common sense or systems analysis they will come to the same conclusions. Most of the predictable problems will be with people, interfaces with other organisations and with equipment, probably in that order of severity.

People problems are best dealt with by making sure that you know who is going to be where at all times. All of the program participants and gophers should know exactly what their jobs will be before they arrive. It would be nice for them to have a copy of the program, even a draft copy, before the con. It is far easier to get information to people before the con than during it.

Make sure that everyone knows what their job is and who to go to with any problems and where that person will be at any given time. Above all make sure that you have enough people to fill all of the essential jobs. If you don't have all of the essential positions filled a month before the convention panic! At this stage you need to phone people that haven't yet volunteered. If you haven't filled all the critical jobs at the start of the con you are in deep trouble.

Know where new volunteers can be used. You cannot count on getting any special skills in *ad hoc* volunteers. Know what jobs can be done by people with little knowledge of conrunning; traditionally this included things like handing out membership packages and issuing badges. Because this is where the inexperienced people are going to be used, it must be planned to the last detail. Avoid using untried volunteers in any situations that require decision making ability or unusual skills, like tact, for instance.

Sometimes people drop out for some reason. In 1981 Becon had to drop the first program item, the presenter had an accident on the way to the con. Sometimes people promise to run a program item but just don't turn up. If it happens you need to replace them. The simplest way to replace a lost program item is to have some items in reserve. This is one of the few times when it is reasonable for committee member to take part in a program item. They are less likely to object to being told at a short notice to fill in.

Interfacing with other organisations is the second major problem area. Hopefully all of the hotel negotiations will be completed long before the

con. Make sure that the hotel has been told exactly what is expected of them. Put all of your questions down in writing and make sure that when you get an answer you get it in writing. Have copies available at the con. Make sure that you know who makes the decisions in the hotel. You will have problems if the person you talk to does not have the authority to make decisions, and make them stick.

When you deal with other organisations make sure that both negotiators know their responsibilities. Make sure that your contact is the one who makes decisions. Make sure that you know how much authority you have. Allow a margin in your deadlines but don't let them know that. Phone up daily just before your deadline, even if you know that you have two weeks to spare. The extra time may be needed to deal with something unexpected in the answers they give you.

Failures are only half of the equipment problems. The other half is making sure that the equipment is in the right place at the right time. The working programme sent to all participants should also detail any equipment needed. This has two advantages. Each participant can tell whether you have allocated the equipment they need, 35mm projectors OHP etc. In addition the gophers can tell what equipment needs to be moved where and when.

Of course equipment does fail. I remember an occasion when one 16mm projector blew 5 bulbs in one day. We finished the day on our last bulb. If you are hiring the equipment check how quickly the hire company can respond to a failure. Remember that conventions are at weekends, some hire companies only operate on weekdays. If you are borrowing the equipment make sure that you get it well in advance, make sure that it works and that you have any operating supplies and spares needed. If the equipment needs to be connected with anything else make sure that the technical requirements can be met. Do the 'scope lenses fit the projectors, will the plugs on the P.A equipment mate with those on the projectors?

None of the things I have mentioned will guarantee a successful convention. What they can do is make it easier for the concom to control the event. It is up to the committee to make sure that their control of the convention is used constructively. The committee carries the ultimate responsibility for everything.

The Fan Room

Ian Sorensen

The modern fan room was *invented* by Greg Pickersgill in the late 70's and that is what fans expect to find at a convention today. If asked, they'd be hard put to say what makes a particular fan room good, but there are some general points that are common to them. The programme should consist mostly of items relating to fandom and not SF, i.e. the questions in a quiz would be along the lines of "How many Novacons have been held in the Angus" rather than "Who wrote *Colour of Magic*" or "How many actors have portrayed Dr Who on TV". Discussions are also more like "What's Wrong with Split Sites" than a panel of authors discussing "Heroic Fantasy". Thus the programme is of limited interest to SF readers and the broad mass of fans: it is a special interest programme stream. Panels, games and quizzes should try to involve the maximum number of people - people should participate not watch. Any panel discussions will have as much coming from the floor as from the panel.

The few (approximately 100) fans who would be interested in this programme are the ones who normally don't leave the bar throughout the weekend, or who are manning registration desks for other conventions. For the fanroom to work it must either be the social hub of the con or have a good enough programme to attract these fans from the bar and elsewhere. Because the programme participants are also the fans in the bar it is all very incestuous. It is not really elitist - you simply have to have a broad knowledge of fandom and fannish issues to make sense of it all, so, in practice, this excludes the newcomers.

It is up to the committee to decide how much effort they wish to put into catering for the needs of this small number of fannish fans. The main reason to do so is to ensure that they will attend the con at all, as these are the fans who provide the bulk of the Main Programme participants. They are also the opinion leaders of fandom and control the main channels of communication - gossip and fanzines! No fanroom may in fact be better than having a bad fanroom, as this will be the main topic of conreports published after the event.

General points about the programme: it should be timed so that items do not begin before noon and there are gaps between them. Although late night items are possible, it is better to let the fan programme die when most people go to eat and replace it with a party/disco. The programme area should be next to the bar or social hub, but should be separate so that noise from the bar does not drown out an item.

The programme should reflect the tastes and interests of the people attending it (though this is a chicken and egg situation). Although the fan room is sometimes quoted as being the place where new fans are introduced to fandom, this rarely happens. New fans attend the main programme because they are SF fans. They do not like the endless discussions about fandom that prevail where fannish fans congregate. So, items to introduce fans to fandom would be better on the main programme.

Hotel

You will find a hotel booking form enclosed with this PR, and a new version of our membership form including questionnaire. The convention will have a banquet only if a sufficient quantity of the membership is interested, please let us know by saying so on the questionnaire.

There will be reasonably priced food available at the convention, and the hotel will cater for vegetarians.

Please send the Hotel booking form to Laura Wheatly, 257 Barclay Rd., Smethwick Warley, West Midlands B67 5LA.

Membership

To try and encourage con-runners to join well before the convention, membership will go up on the day of the convention to £15.

You can convert at any time to full membership, the conversion rates will be kept constant. Please note that membership is limited to a maximum of 120.

The convention address is: Conscription, Flat 4, 8 West Ave, Walthamstow, London E17 9QN.

Membership at 15/03/87			
1	Henry Balen (f)	19	Roger Robinson (f)
2	Hugh Mascetti (f)	20	Bernie Evans (p)
3	Laura Wheatley (f)	21	Jonathan Cowie (f)
4	Gary Stratmann (f)	22	Sieve Linton (p)
5	Jay Felton (p)	23	Pat Brown (p)
6	Fiona McArthur (p)	24	Roger Perkins (p)
7	Fiona Anderson (p)	25	Iain Dickson (p)
8	Caroline Mullan (p)	26	Angus H C Scott-Brown (f)
9	Chris Cooper (p)	27	Tim Illingworth (f)
10	Bernard Peek (p)	28	Mike Figg (s)
11	C J Suslowicz (p)	29	Stephen Davies (f)
12	Martin Easterbrook (p)	30	John Stewart (f)
13	Margaret Austin (p)	31	Andrew N Morris (f)
14	Colin Fine (p)	32	Kathy Westhead (f)
15	Doug McCallum (p)	33	Tom Taylor (f)
16	Paul Oldroyd (p)	34	Maureen Porter (f)
17	Martin Hoare (p)	35	Ye Gerbish (f)
18	Vince Docherty (p)	36	Martin Tudor (f)