

Designing Conferences That Are Worth the Trip

Combined White Paper and Organiser Implementation Guide

A practical publication that combines the strategic white paper with a step-by-step organiser framework for designing conferences that deliver clearer navigation, stronger connection, and greater impact.



Author	Nicole Fontein
Organisation	BlueBox Events B.V.
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Executive overview

Large conferences still matter, but the argument for physical participation is no longer self-evident. Content is widely available online, collaboration already starts before people travel, and especially newer generations are more selective about where they invest time, money, and carbon. The challenge is therefore not only to curate strong science, but to design a participant experience that justifies the journey.

We do not need to change what we accept. We need to change how it is experienced.

Why conferences must become worth the trip

The central argument of this publication is simple: conferences should be organised as intentional journeys rather than dense containers of content. That means moving beyond overload, accidental networking, and passive listening. The organiser must shape orientation, connection, and active engagement as part of the programme architecture.

The participant story: Anna

Anna is an early-career researcher attending a large international conference for the first time. In the traditional model she arrives to a wall of parallel sessions, a poster hall that feels overwhelming, and networking that depends on confidence and coincidence. She leaves with many notes, but little sense of direction or momentum.

In the renewed model, Anna receives a recommended path before arrival, joins a small Day 0 Meet Your 5 introduction, recognises the anchor sessions that define the core of the day, finds her pathway hub on site, and uses ePosters and conversation-based formats to go deeper. She leaves with stronger contacts, clearer direction, and a real sense that the trip mattered.

The three-pillar design model

Pillar	Participant need	Design response
Clarity	Participants need orientation and visible priorities.	Fewer parallel core sessions, anchor sessions, recommended paths, stronger labels.
Connection	Participants need easier, more meaningful ways to meet.	Pathways, Meet Your 5, network anchors, hosted lunches, pathway hubs.
Impact	Participants need active engagement and stronger follow-through.	ePosters pre-event, poster-to-conversation blocks, spark sessions, clinics, problem sprints.

What organisers are really redesigning

- Not the scientific quality, but the participant's ability to navigate and absorb it.
- Not networking as an optional by-product, but as a designed feature of the event.
- Not posters and sessions as static display only, but as catalysts for dialogue and follow-through.

- Not a flat programme list, but a recognisable journey with priorities, routes, and moments of belonging.

The new organisational building blocks

These are the practical “new” components that make the conference experience more intentional and more valuable in person.

Item	What it is	Why it matters	Primary owner
Recommended path	Pre-event guidance by theme, role, or career stage.	Reduces overwhelm and helps delegates start with confidence.	Comms + platform
Anchor sessions	Clearly marked core moments in the programme.	Make the intellectual centre of the day visible.	Programme team
Pathways	Participant routes built around themes or communities.	Create direction, belonging, and continuity.	Programme team
Meet Your 5	Facilitated small introductions on Day 0.	Helps delegates make early connections quickly.	Hosts + ops
Network anchors	Hosted lunches, roundtables, or small-group moments.	Turns networking from chance into design.	Hosts + ops
Pathway hubs	Visible physical home bases in the venue.	Make the pathway logic tangible on site.	Venue + ops
ePosters pre-event	Digital posters available before arrival.	Start discovery and networking before the event.	Poster/platform team
Poster-to-conversation	Structured poster time designed for dialogue.	Transforms posters from display into exchange.	Poster hosts
Spark sessions	Small-circle sessions for emerging voices.	Increase intimacy, openness, and early-career visibility.	Programme team
Problem sprints / clinics	Interactive work formats around real questions.	Move from passive listening to active use.	Facilitators

Organiser implementation guide

1. Start with the design decision

Before scheduling sessions, align the organising and scientific teams around one shared principle: the conference will be designed as a participant journey. This affects programme design, communications, signage, moderation, platform structure, and venue flow.

2. Build the programme architecture first

Create the backbone of the event before fitting in all accepted content. Map Day 0, core plenary moments, anchor sessions, pathway moments, interactive formats, networking anchors, and poster blocks. Begin with the desired experience, not with the maximum number of sessions.

3. Set up pathways

- Choose 3–5 pathways maximum.

- Give each pathway a clear purpose, target audience, host duo, and visible touchpoints.
- Link each pathway to sessions, posters, one anchor moment per day, and at least one networking moment.

4. Create anchor sessions and reduce overload

Anchor sessions are the clearly marked “if you attend this, you will not miss the core” moments in the programme. Protect these timeslots and avoid excessive parallel core programming. Not everything should compete equally for attention.

5. Build recommended paths and communication layers

Segment delegates by interest, role, or career stage and send them short guidance before the event. A recommended path can be as simple as a pathway suggestion, three don’t-miss sessions, one hosted lunch, and selected ePosters.

6. Design network anchors

- Meet Your 5 on Day 0 or early Day 1.
- Hosted pathway lunches with table prompts or light moderation.
- Curated roundtables around one clear question.
- Pathway hubs that become a recognisable home base in the venue.

7. Redesign the poster experience

Make ePosters available before the conference so discovery starts early. Then create structured poster-to-conversation blocks onsite, with pathway grouping, visible prompts, and hosts who encourage discussion rather than passive browsing.

8. Add a small number of strong interactive formats

- Spark or campfire sessions for intimate early-career exchange.
- Preference Pulse panels to make learning shifts visible.
- Methods clinics or case studios to move from presentation to application.
- Problem sprints for collaborative work on real questions or data.

9. Brief every operational layer

The new conference model only works if moderators, volunteers, desk staff, platform managers, poster coordinators, and venue teams understand the intended participant journey. This is not just a programme change; it is an operational change.

10. Pilot, measure, and improve

A light pilot can already be powerful: 3 pathways, one Meet Your 5, one hosted lunch, one poster-to-conversation block, one anchor session per day, and a small set of active formats. Evaluate the experience by the three pillars: clarity, connection, and impact.

Suggested organiser timeline

Phase	Key actions	Main owners
9–12 months	Define ambition, choose pathways, design overall programme architecture, align scientific and organising committees.	Chair, PCO, programme lead
6–8 months	Assign pathway hosts, define anchor sessions, select pilot formats, align venue and platform logic.	Programme + ops

Phase	Key actions	Main owners
4–6 months	Build communication plan, set poster workflow, prepare signage and host briefings.	Comms + platform + ops
2–3 months	Publish pathway guidance, confirm roundtables and hosted lunches, test the programme journey.	PCO + hosts
2–4 weeks	Release ePosters, send recommended paths, issue “how to navigate” guidance, final briefing of all teams.	Comms + poster/platform
Onsite	Activate hosts, guide arrivals, monitor traffic and session flow, support interaction moments.	Ops + volunteers + hosts
Post-event	Evaluate by pillar: clarity, connection, impact; capture lessons for the next edition.	PCO + committee

Implementation checklist for organisers

<input type="checkbox"/>	Checklist item	Owner
	Define 3–5 pathways and give each a purpose, audience, and host duo.	Programme lead
	Reserve 1–2 daily anchor sessions and label them clearly.	Scientific committee
	Set a limit for parallel core sessions before abstract allocation begins.	Programme team
	Build pre-event recommended paths and guidance emails.	Comms + platform
	Schedule at least one Meet Your 5 or equivalent Day 0 connection moment.	Ops + hosts
	Convert posters into a pathway-based ePoster and conversation design.	Poster/platform team
	Select 1–3 active formats such as spark sessions, clinics, or sprints.	Programme team
	Map pathway hubs and signage in the venue plan.	Venue + ops
	Brief moderators, hosts, desk staff, and volunteers on the participant journey.	PCO
	Evaluate clarity, connection, and impact separately after the event.	PCO + chair

How to evaluate the new model

Measure the event separately on clarity, connection, and impact. This gives organisers a stronger improvement loop than generic satisfaction scores alone.

- Clarity: Did participants understand where to go, what mattered most, and how the programme fitted together?
- Connection: Did they meet relevant people, especially if they were first-time or early-career delegates?
- Impact: Did they engage actively, ask better questions, and leave with useful ideas, contacts, or next steps?

Suggested metrics include attendance at anchor sessions, pathway participation, ePoster views and bookmarks, uptake of hosted lunches and roundtables, and feedback segmented by career stage or first-time attendance.

Speaking note for presentations and pitches

When presenting this model, Anna can remain the leading participant thread:

1. Anna in the old model: overloaded, under-connected, and largely passive.
2. Anna in Clarity: she needs direction, not more noise.
3. Anna in Connection: she needs designed ways to meet people, not only coffee-break courage.
4. Anna in Impact: she needs formats that help her do something with what she hears.
5. Anna in the new model: she leaves with direction, relationships, and momentum.