

VP Meetings Report to the Policy Council of the System Dynamics Society

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Respectfully submitted by Sara Metcalf (VP Meetings) and Billy Schoenberg (AVP Meetings)

This report provides an update on the status of future conferences and summarizes key outcomes of the 2023 conference relative to historical patterns. During the past year, we have built up a pipeline of sites and teams for the next 3 conferences. A 3-year lead time is critical to minimize uncertainty about future conferences, given their significant financial implications for the SDS. The sites, dates, and chairs are indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Plans for Future Conferences

Conference	Dates	Venue	Organizing Chairs	Program Chairs
ISDC 2024	August 4-8, 2024	Scandic Bergen City Hotel, Bergen, Norway	Birgit Kopainsky, Saeed Langarudi, and Ali Saysel	Susan Howick, Mohammad Jalali, and Hazhir Rahmandad
ISDC 2025	July 20-24, 2025	Hyatt Regency Schaumburg, Schaumburg, Illinois	Oleg Pavlov	Karim Chichakly, Niyousha Hosseinichimeh, and Rod MacDonald
ISDC 2026	July 20-24, 2026	Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), Delft, Netherlands	Willem Auping and Floortje d'Hont	Hyunjung Kim, David Lounsbury, and Jeroen Struben

Future conferences are planned to be delivered in a hybrid manner so that attendees may participate in person or online. Site selection continues the precedent of alternating between European sites in even years and North American sites in odd years. We are currently working to identify a suitable site for ISDC 2027 in North America.

As the single largest generator of revenue for the SDS, the conference is expected to return \$150,000 in net revenue on an accrual basis, accounting for direct expenses but not overhead. This threshold (the green line in Figure 1) is intended to provide \$125,000 in overhead and a surplus of \$25,000 to support other SDS activities. Historically, as shown in Figure 1, this is a difficult target to meet. The actual financial performance of ISDC 2023 fell just below this threshold, based upon our best estimates at this time, but beat the budgeted expectation by over \$32,000.

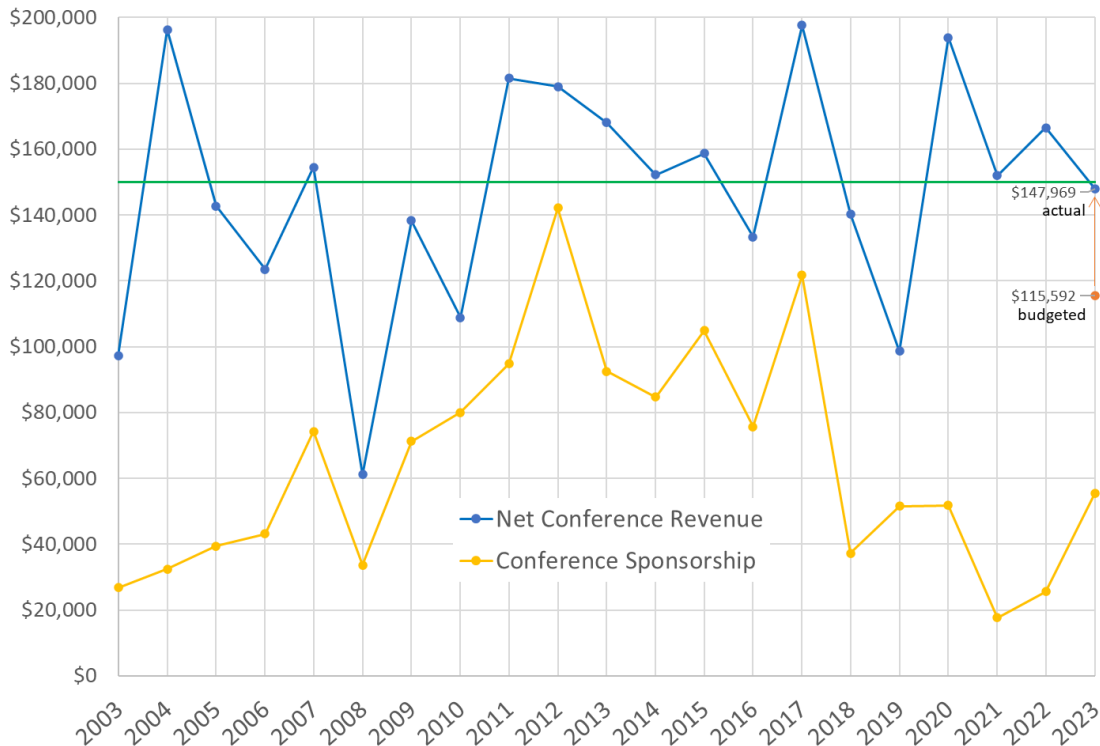


Figure 1. Financial Performance of the 2023 Conference in Historical Context

The 2023 conference was expected to return a lower amount of revenue due to the high cost of the Chicago Palmer House Hilton as a venue, which was a commitment carried forward from previous plans to hold the 2021 conference there. Although it was lower than the threshold for financial viability, the budgeted expectation for 2023 was more favorable than it would otherwise have been, were it not for a site visit in which we were able to negotiate crucial concessions. Prior to that, we were concerned that net revenue could be as low as \$50,000, missing the target by \$100,000, with severe repercussions for the SDS. This concern led us to seriously consider whether it was worth paying a penalty of \$54,000 to break the contract with the Palmer House and hold the conference at a more amenable location. We identified the Hyatt Regency Schaumburg, in proximity to the Chicago O’Hare airport, as such an alternative. After securing more favorable terms with the Palmer House for 2023, we put plans into place for holding the 2025 conference at the Hyatt Regency Schaumburg.

The 2023 conference performed better than budgeted due to sponsorship revenue that was more than double the budgeted expectation. The circumstances for such generous sponsorship are not expected to continue in future years without substantial outreach effort, so we are carrying forward the modest assumption of \$25,000 in conference sponsorship in the preliminary budgets for future conferences.

Conference submissions are a leading indicator of attendance. Figure 2 illustrates the pattern of historical submissions (including workshop, roundtable, and colloquium submissions as well as paper submissions) and attendance over time. We knew by the March deadline that ISDC 2023 submissions were low, with total submissions of 315 but only 264 paper submissions, lower than the threshold of 300 that we have historically considered necessary to have a robust program (in 2019, the submission deadline was extended by a week because this threshold was not met). Therefore, although registrations at the time appeared comparatively strong due to the registration window opening earlier than usual (in November 2022), we expected attendance to be low as well. As shown in Figure 2, this expectation was unfortunately realized, with attendance dropping below the target of 500 attendees. The ratio of submissions to attendees in 2023 was the same as in 2021, demonstrating that attrition of non-author attendees has been limited relative to the peak in 2020. Attendance at the 2023 conference was 456 in total, with 264 in person and 192 online. In person attendance was very similar to that at the Frankfurt 2022 conference, better than expected given the low submissions. We attribute this relatively robust in-person attendance to the relative accessibility of Chicago as a location. To ensure the viability of the 2024 conference in Bergen, which is less accessible internationally via direct flights, we must have more conference submissions.

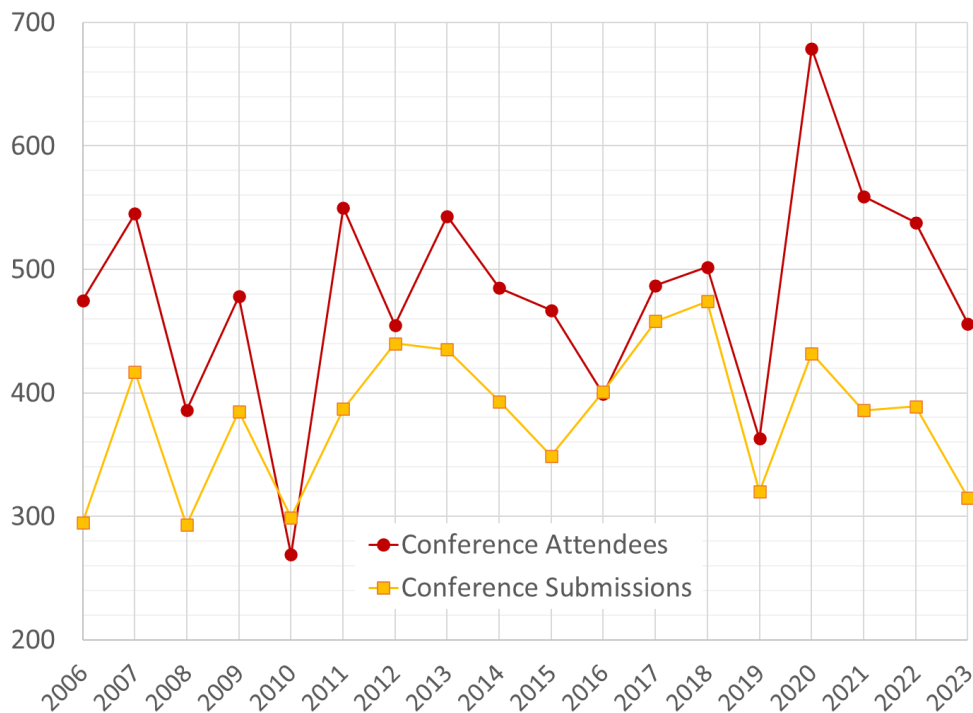


Figure 2. Conference Submissions and Attendance

To understand why conference submissions were low, we conducted an analysis of emails sent by the SDS during the submission window each year since 2017. What we observed, as shown in Figure 3, was that in the first quarter of the year until the submission deadline, the percent of emails focused on generating conference submissions has declined to less than 20% in 2023.

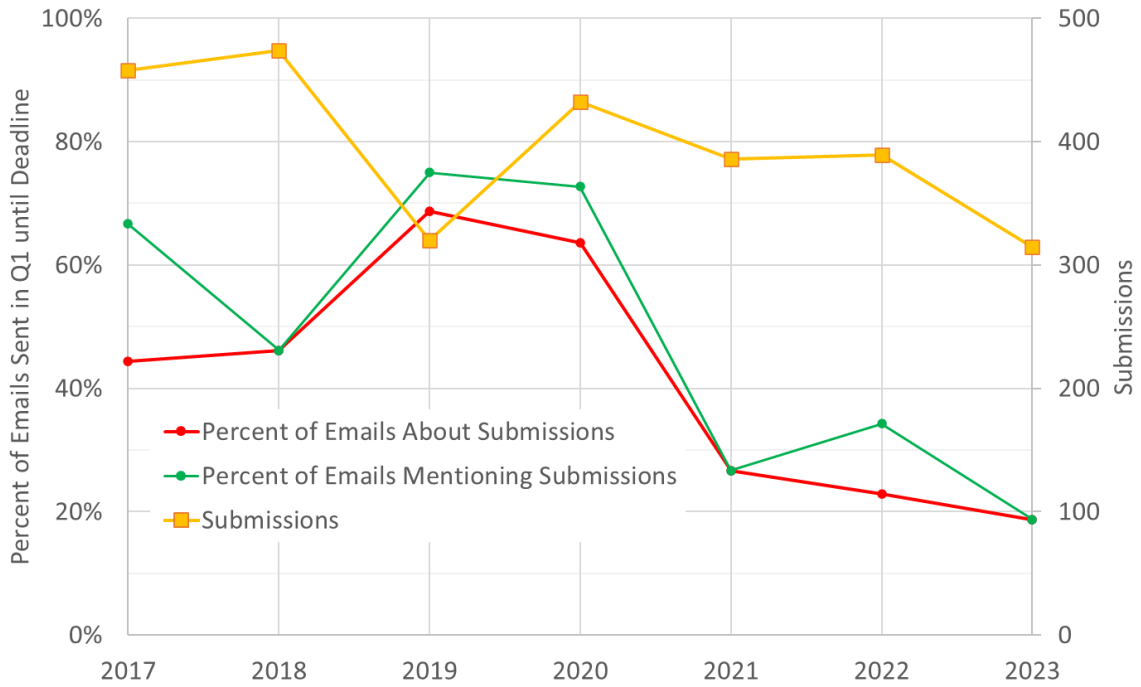


Figure 3. Emphasis of Emails Sent During Submission Window

As evidenced in Figure 4, the decline in relative emphasis has occurred not because there are fewer emails sent about conference submissions, but rather because there are more emails sent in total by the SDS.

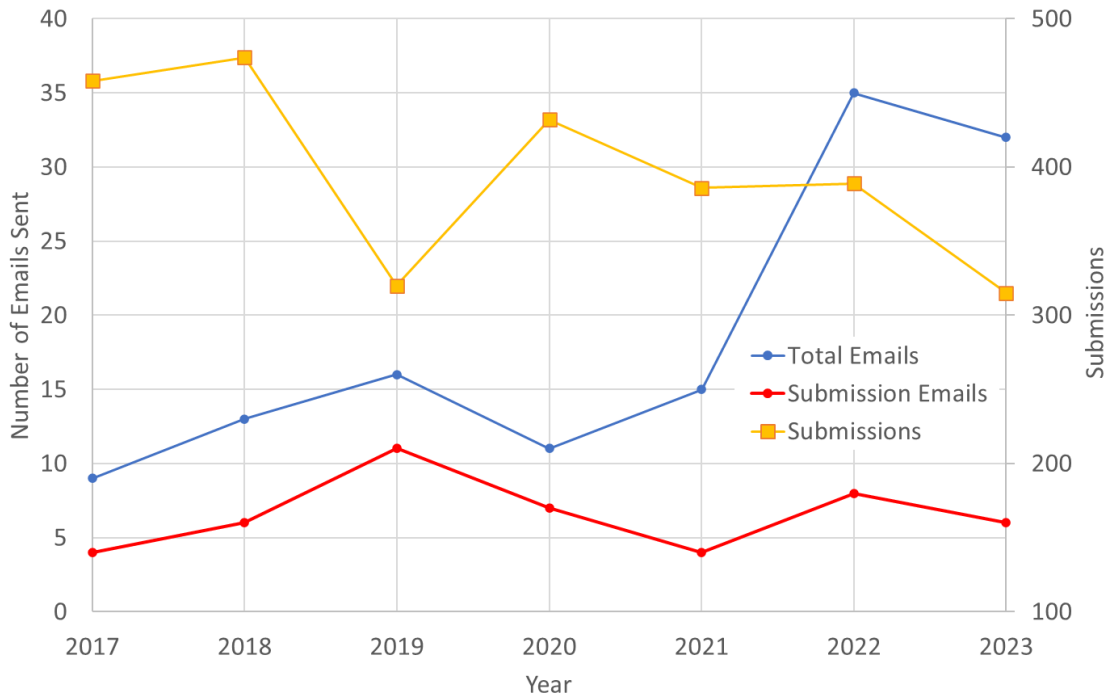


Figure 4. Volume of Emails Sent During Submission Window

We are working with the home office and the VP Marketing to ensure that messaging about conference submissions is effective during this critical first quarter, and more broadly to establish a complementary cadence of conference and other SDS messaging throughout the year.

For ISDC 2020, which was a banner year for submissions (submissions were pre-COVID lockdown, before anyone knew we would go virtual), during the end of the submission period all SDS emails were about submissions. This affirms the value of having focused email marketing (both email subject line, and email body content) during the submission period, especially the late submission period (i.e., the last month). For ISDC 2024, we are asking the office to create a plan that is at the very least more like 2022 than 2023, where we message on submission open, one month before submission deadline, 2 or 3 weeks before submission deadline, and many times during submission week. In 2024, we will synchronize the opening of conference registrations with the opening of the submission window, since early registrations were not a boon to attendance in 2023, and it will help to focus our first quarter emails on conference submission (as opposed to separate efforts on submission and attendance).

Between those standard reminder emails, we can do other innovative things that started in 2022 but dropped in 2023, like promoting the different kinds of submission types and presentation opportunities. In addition, there are likely other innovative message types that could be generated and sent. We believe the home office and VP Marketing, with appropriate time to be creative, can come up with these. Therefore, writing and scheduling the standard set of emails far in advance of the submission period is heavily recommended to allow for this creativity to spring forth.

Another key message for the home office is to ensure that email subject lines and email body content is aligned. We believe, based on our reading of the historical data, that the email subject line is critical to getting the message across to the widest audience, since most people are unlikely to click through to read and digest the body content, especially content which requires scrolling. Generic subject lines like “#In the loop” are not helpful for generating submissions.

We think it is a mistake to promote conference plenary speakers more than once during the submission period. While plenary speaker promotion can boost attendance, premature marketing of such speakers can hurt submissions if people think that they have no chance of getting promoted to a plenary. We should also avoid sending dedicated emails about conference sponsors until after the submission period, since it is not critical for generating submissions. In that same vein, we believe it to be important to carefully schedule any other marketing content during the (late) submission period to avoid any potential for confusion, conflict, or cannibalization of conference submissions. That includes things like prospecting for seminar series presenters, marketing for seminar series attendance, generating submissions of content for other sources, etc. Our strong recommendation is to ensure that the other marketing efforts of the Society during the (late) submission period are focused on complementary (non-competing) interests, or ideally (especially in the last 3-4 weeks) avoided altogether.

Beyond generating submissions and attendance at the conference, we are interested in the satisfaction of those attendees. Feedback from conference attendees has been received through a variety of mechanisms, including the post-conference survey, the conference debrief session, informal comments, and email messages. The post-conference survey includes some questions that have remained the same over time, such as the question about overall conference value. Participants are asked to respond to the prompt: “Regarding overall conference value, my evaluation is:” with an assessment on a 7-point scale, where 4 is neutral, 7 is the most positive, and 1 is the most negative. Figure 5 shows the percent of respondents who indicated a positive overall value (i.e., 5 or higher) in answering this question from 2013 through 2023 (data are missing for 2017).

For the 2023 conference, 78% of respondents (80 of 102) indicated a positive overall conference value. Among those who attended in person, 84% (54 of 64) indicated a positive overall value, slightly greater than the corresponding feedback from Albuquerque 2019. Among those who attended virtually, 68% (26 of 38) indicated a positive overall value. While a clear majority of all respondents felt that there was a positive overall conference value, the results indicated that we fell short of achieving our target 90% approval rating. Moreover, the bifurcation of online and in-person experiences was a marked difference from Frankfurt 2022, where the responses were similar regardless of attendance type. Indeed, many of the 2023 online attendees who had experienced the 2022 conference online were disappointed at how difficult it was to hear and engage in what was happening in person.

The online audio quality was limited in 2023 due to affordable audiovisual arrangements that were necessary to achieve our financial obligations to the SDS. While we will not have the advantage of a fully hybrid venue until the 2026 conference at TU Delft, we will have better audiovisual arrangements in place for ISDC 2024 and 2025.

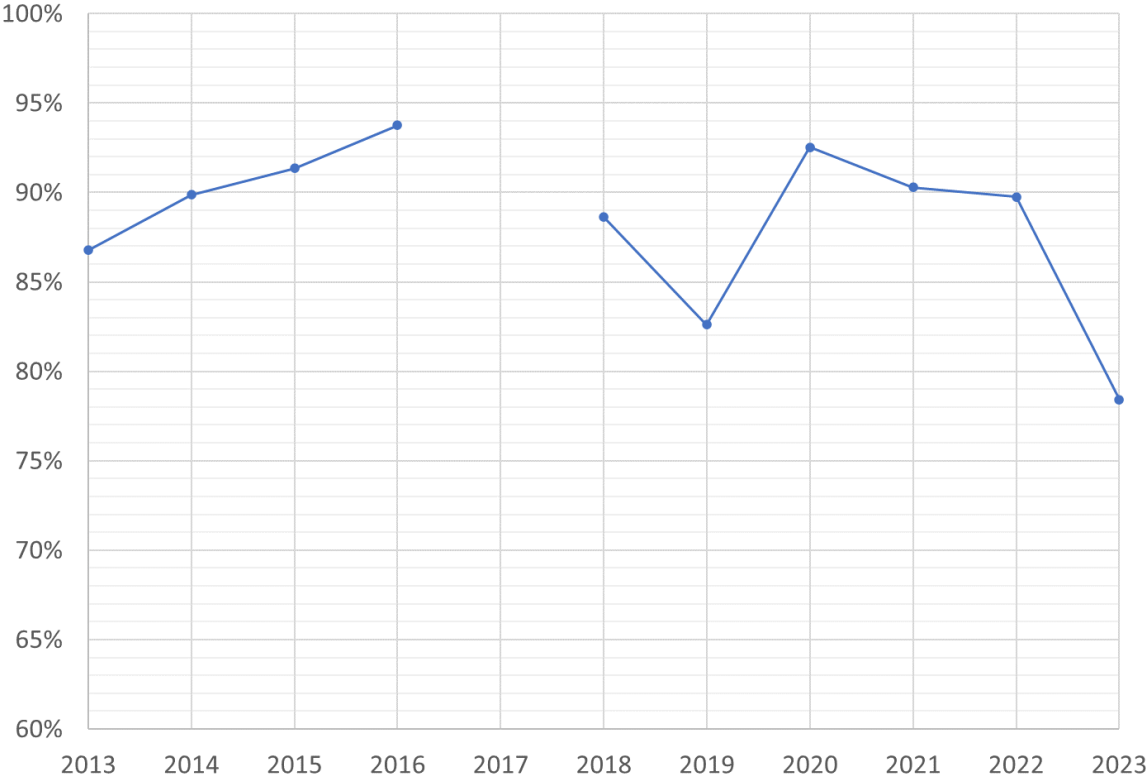


Figure 5. Percent of Survey Respondents Indicating a Positive Overall Conference Value