

## Speaker Guidelines

### Introduction and Background

Whilst some BCS members and other IT professionals, invited to speak at BCS conferences and other events, are experienced public speakers, many do not have extensive or recent experience of delivering presentations and other talks. Feedback from recent BCS events has often commented that whilst the speaker had an interesting talk, lack of experience in both preparation and delivery had resulted in a presentation that had less impact than it should have had.

The following notes are a set of simple guidelines designed to help the less experienced speaker improve the quality of their talk and its delivery.

### Guidelines

#### Structure

One of the most effective ways of delivering a talk is to break it into 3 parts:

- **Introduction:** Tell them what you are going to say.
- **Main Body:** Say it.
- **Conclusion/Summary:** Tell them what you have said.

In the main body a clear structure is useful for the following reasons:

- It helps the speaker put the contents of their talk into a logical sequence, which is usually based on some form of prioritisation of the contents or time if a series of events is being described.
- Defining the logical sequence is useful for helping order thoughts and ideas during the preparation for the talk.
- In turn, this creates a flow of the talk which both makes it easier for the audience to follow and the speaker to deliver.
- If the main body doesn't easily break down into a set of points, then consider using a "waterfall" structure where each step increases the level of detail about the topic talk.

#### Using PowerPoint

The overwhelming majority of speakers use a PowerPoint slide deck to support their talk and used well it is a very powerful aid. However, the dangers of "death by PowerPoint" are very real and to be avoided at all costs. The important points to remember are:

- Keep it simple. The audience wants to hear about your subject not see how clever you are at using PowerPoint, so only use those PowerPoint features that enhance your talk and ignore those that distract from what you are saying.
- If you are using bulleted list the guideline for keeping it simple is no more than 6 bullets per slide and 6 words per bullet.
- A diagram, chart or picture has more impact than a bullet list; but again, keep it simple. If the diagram or chart starts to look complicated, then consider using the animation feature to build it up piece by piece to give it a logical sequence.
- Normally it should take 1 - 2 minutes to talk through the contents of each slide. Any more and the slide has possibly become too complicated.

- Finally, don't just read the contents of your slides, especially if they are bulleted lists. The audience can read more quickly than you can talk, so you will tend to become boring. It is more interesting and informative to, for example:
  - Summarise the points on a slide by explaining their comparative relevance or importance.
  - Pick out the most important part and explain why in more detail.
- Slides, especially bulleted lists, are equally aide-memoires to prompt the speaker to give more information, examples or illustrations.

## Timing

The event organisers will have told you how long you have been allocated in which to give the talk and whether time for questions (see below) is included or in addition to this time. It is important to keep within your time if only out of courtesy to other speakers.

The amount of time you have been given will govern how much content can be covered by the talk. In turn, this will help you decide the things that must be included as opposed to things that could be included if more time were available. Therefore, define the "musts" first and build the talk round those. If there appears to be some spare time then add in some of the "coulds".

Using the 1 – 2 minute per slide guideline will help you determine how many slides you should have and consequently how much you can say in your talk. A rough guide is 1 slide for each of the Introduction and Conclusion and 1 – 2 slides for each of the main points of your talk.

It is better to limit the number of things you can say about your subject in order to stay within time than to try to cover everything at a too superficial level. Trying to cover too much always increases the risk of overrunning.

## Rehearsal

It is very true that the time spent on rehearsal is never wasted, though how you rehearse is a personal choice.

The questions rehearsing needs to answer include:

- Can I deliver the content within the time?
- Am I covering the points I want to make and in sufficient detail?
- Are these the most important points – especially if I have had to cut back on content?
- Is the talk pitched at the right level of detail for the audience – especially if it is a technical talk to a technical audience? (Note: speak to the organisers for guidance).
- Do the slides support and, are aligned with, the script?
- Is the flow logical and one that can be followed by the audience?
- Am I comfortable with the script so I can say it easily?
- Have all long and convoluted sentences and words been removed?
- Has jargon been removed and acronyms/abbreviations explained?

## Jokes

Unless you are an experienced speaker or stand-up comic, **don't**.

## Appendix 1: Dealing with Questions

Sometimes speakers regard the questions from the audience with fear and loathing, in fact, they are not, they are an opportunity to add detail and explain the complexity and your thinking.

Unless you are talking to a very small group it is better only to take questions, other than minor points of clarification, at the end. This avoids breaking the flow and eliminates the risk of distraction to both you and the rest of the audience.

Questions tend to fall into one of 4 types:

1. Request for clarification due to a lack of understanding.
2. Request for additional detail about one of the topics.
3. A desire from the questioner to enter into the discussion, because of their own experience or interest in the subject.
4. A desire from the questioner to air their own views or experiences to show the rest the audience how knowledgeable they are.

You should try to spot which type the questioner falls into and then respond accordingly:

- Types 1 and 2, the most common, are easier to deal with because you should know your subject and be able to provide more detail. Often the most effective response is by way of an example. Importantly you can induce these types of question by not going into detail in your talk on specific points and then use the resulting questions to provide the detail.
- Type 3 questions are valuable because they create an opportunity to add value to your talk by drawing on the knowledge and experience of others from which both you and the audience can learn. So let the questioner make his point, listen and respond positively. It can be effective when responding to ask the audience if anyone else has a comment. This also avoids the risk of a potential discussion becoming a dialogue which excludes everyone else.
- Type 4 questions are the negative version of Type 3. There is occasionally in any audience someone who thinks they know more than you and wants to show off. The logical response is to turn it into a Type 3, by asking the audience to comment; But, if you spot it is a serious Type 4, one approach is to turn it back on the questioner by asking them to explain what they are getting at or highlight the key issue for them. Usually, at this point, they dig themselves into a hole and can be gently side-lined. Fortunately, Type 4 questions are relatively rare.

When taking questions, be aware of the audience's body language. It will give you clues as to how to respond:

- Positive, and you will know the question deserves a serious consideration and response.
- Negative, and you will know that the question/questioner needs to be summarily dealt with.

If you detect a negative response from the audience to a question/questioner then one approach is to suggest that this is something that could best be dealt with off-line and invite the questioner to speak with you afterwards. This is particularly effective when there are other questions waiting or your time is up.

Finally, if you genuinely don't know the answer say so and offer to find out and come back to the questioner with the response. You are not infallible and the audience doesn't expect you to be, and you will be much more credible if you admit you don't know rather than trying to flannel an answer.