

Thought Force: Use Of Computers at the World Service Conference (WSC)

Bette R./Cathy B., Chairperson
Panel 50/Panel 51
Oregon/Illinois South

In 1997 the Board of Trustees, after input from the Conference evaluations and the Conference Leadership Team, decided that laptop computers would not be used during the general sessions of the Conference for a variety of reasons. At the 2011 Conference, the issue of computer use by Conference members was brought forward because of the increase in the use of technology for communication and informational purposes. Since many of the Conference members stated that they feel as comfortable using their laptops as they do working off of paper copies, it was asked whether it is time to consider how computers could be used during the Conference. The Thought Force was asked to brainstorm the pros and cons of computer use by Conference members at the Conference and to develop a variety of strategies that demonstrate the specific ways that laptops could help individual Conference members in their responsibilities during the Conference week.

The original charge posed to this Thought Force dealt with laptop computer use at the World Service Conference (WSC). With permission of the Board Chair, the Thought Force changed the charge to the use of electronic devices at the WSC. The term “electronic devices” includes laptop computers, tablets, smart phones, e-readers, etc.

The Chairperson of the Thought Force opened the discussion by stating the following: “The world is rapidly adopting technology, as is much of the AI-Anon membership. Our cofounder Lois was all for change to ensure progress in AI-Anon. The World Service Office has adopted many uses of technology, such as e-mails, e-Communities, Web sites, e-literature, AI-Anon on-line meetings, Alateen chat rooms, use of blogs, social networks, etc., but Conference members have been asked not to use electronic devices during Conference sessions. A Delegate brought up a proposed motion during the 2011 World Service Conference ‘to develop policies that would allow optional usage of computer devices for all World Service Conference members during the general sessions of the Conference.’ (2011Conference Summary, page 80) See below:

“Our trusted servants bring matters for discussion to the WSC that need consideration for adoption, rejection, or direction, thus ensuring and making effective leadership possible with trust in our Higher Power, AI-Anon, and each other. The use of electronic devices can improve communication, participation, and representation in carrying the message in unity, working in harmony with mutual trust, and singleness of purpose.

“Note that electronic devices are very different in their software and hardware. They use different types of storage media and have a variety of ways to transfer data back and forth to the device. Some can use USB flash drives, some use memory cards, some require a cable to connect to a computer. The wide variation in electronic media software is of concern, as noted.

“If there is a Task Force for this issue, it may wish to consider strategies for placing restrictions on the use of these electronic devices during the Conference. This was not our issue to consider.”

The Thought Force members presented the following strategies, including the pros and cons for each.

Strategy One: use electronic devices to share information and documents with other conference members during conference

- Electronic/digital materials are easier and faster to distribute during Conference.
- Facilitate common access to documents on e-Communities.
- Conference material may be easier to find and access on these devices than in the Conference Notebook.
- All Conference Notebook materials could be stored on the device and are accessible at any time by the members.
- Presentation handouts can be shared electronically instead of making paper copies.
- All information on the Members’ Web site would be accessible during the Conference
- Notes can be shared with other Conference members (e.g., in case someone is out of the room when something important happens; or if someone’s device fails).

Pros

- Schedule changes and updates to materials could be done dynamically, and everyone could see the updates instantly on their device.
- Enhances communications among Conference members.

Cons

- Sharing information and documents with other Conference members during the WSC could be a distraction to current activity.
- Some members’ perception of what is important to share can be different from others’ perception.
- Not all devices can easily share information with other dissimilar devices.
- This could be a violation of Concepts Three and Four.
- This could be a violation of the no side conversations rule.

Strategy Two: use electronic devices to improve understanding during conference

- Enhances the experience and the performance (view PSAs and podcasts during Public Outreach presentations, view WSO Web site, look up/research for information in “notebook” materials, find Conference materials faster/easier if the device has a search capability).

- Helps to prepare and organize thoughts, for example, when speaking at the microphone.
- All notebook materials could be available on the electronic device.

Pros

- Access to current/accurate information as being presented during the Conference.
- Can receive presentation handouts electronically, instead of making paper copies.

Cons

- Everyone may not be working from the same document version.
- Not everyone may have universal software.

Strategy Three: facilitate common access to documents on e-communities and WSO web site

- Real-time Internet access to e-Communities and WSO Web site.
- Users can download files to their preferred electronic device at their convenience.

Pros

- Files can be distributed to all Conference members through e-Communities by the Conference Leadership Team.

Cons

- Some may engage in sidebars on Web site, instead of staying focused on the topic.

Strategy Four: use electronic devices to ensure that the Conference's work is done effectively

- The use of electronic devices may encourage greater participation.

Pros

- Conference Notebook materials could be stored on the electronic device.
- Much less paper used during Conference.
- Can share presentation handouts electronically instead of making paper copies.

Cons

- Members who are not comfortable using electronic devices or members who do not have an electronic device could be discouraged from serving.
- Some members may view other non-AI-Anon sites during the Conference.

Conference members were asked to respond to the following questions.

Which strategies presented do you believe can be effective?

Which strategies presented do you believe may not be effective?

Are there other possible strategies that are missing?

The conference floor was opened for discussion and the following comments were made:

- The rules seem to differ between Trustees and the Conference, as Trustees are allowed to use laptops during the Board of Trustees and Policy Committee meetings.

The Board made the decision to use laptops for its meetings; the Conference would need to make a decision for its use of laptops.

The needs of the Board and the Conference are different, including the work that each body does.

- The decision to discontinue the use of computers at the Conference was due to the excessive noise the machines and keyboards made.
- If computers or other electronic devices are allowed to be used, the Conference would need to be guaranteed adequate Internet access.
- The use of electronic devices would facilitate note-taking during the Conference. Even without Internet access, computers could still be used to take notes.
- Internet access could help Conference members who speak a different language translate words on their devices, to help them better understand the discussions.
- The fact that we don't use electronic devices seems archaic, as electronic devices have considerably improved since the decision not to use them was made. The use of technology could enhance our communication at all levels. We can establish rules to prevent distractions and remind all Conference members that we are here for a purpose.
- The use of electronic devices could be a great thing, but perhaps we are not there yet, and we need to further research how it would work best for us.
- For an individual like me who has a disability, it is easier for me to take notes on my computer than by hand.
- I often plan to transfer my hand-written notes to my laptop when I go back to my room, but after a long day of meetings, it is very difficult for me to do so.
- It is easy for me to get distracted with the information on other people's computers, as well as for me to stay focused, if I can access my e-mail. Perhaps the use of computers could be limited to the back rows or a certain side of the room, and Conference members could be given the option to use or not use electronic devices.
- We need to determine whether we would use the electronic devices to take notes or to access the Internet as well.

- We need to review our guidelines and take all factors into consideration to make a decision regarding this matter.
- As Delegates, it is our responsibility to take information to and from the Area. I believe that electronic devices could enhance our communication. We need to decide what would work best for all of us, and find a solution.
- As we are trying to attract younger people into our fellowship and into service, we need to recognize that technology is an important part of their lives. By using electronic devices, we could be perceived as more welcoming.
- I would hate to give all the information in advance to the Conference members, including the presentations and take away the excitement of showing the presentations for the first time and having the Conference have the conversation on the topic.

The Chairperson of the Board noted that the Board will consider all the suggestions and comments made by the Conference and will determine what the next step is. A Task Force may be formed to develop strategies to move forward with this topic.

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Floor Discussion—Technology

A Delegate introduced a proposed motion to develop policies that would allow optional usage of computer devices for all World Service Conference members during the general sessions of the Conference by sharing:

“In 1997, a decision was made by the Board of Directors (based on Conference evaluations) that computer usage by Delegates during general sessions of the Conference would not be allowed. A former Chairperson of the Board thought she recalled that it was due to the ‘clicking noise.’ That cannot be verified as the 1997 Conference evaluation forms are no longer available.

“The decision at the time was based on the information at hand; however, the omnipresence of computers in our service work as Delegates and in our everyday lives may have brought us to a time and place to reconsider this 14-year-old decision—which is a lifetime in the world of technology.

“This idea to change cannot be accomplished without serious considerations that would define and comply with Conference etiquette and Al-Anon’s Legacies.

“If the decision were reversed, ‘optional’ and ‘discreet’ would be the foundation of policies and procedures.

“During this 14-year period, decisions have been made to allow the Conference Recorder and selected World Service Office employees to use computers while seated in the back of the Conference general session room.

“The transition to Delegates having the privilege to use a computer device during the general session as a familiar way to organize their thoughts and prepare for their Assembly reports appears to be a natural next step in our appreciation for the many advantages of technology.”

Discussion followed:

- I would greatly appreciate the ability to use my device in a non-communicative format.
- At a Regional Delegates’ Meeting, one member texted another member to say, “Quit texting,” and another member was checking basketball scores.
- I think it would be distracting with the clicking and the visual of the screens.
- I am sitting in front of the Conference Reporter and I hear nothing from her computer. On another note, I cannot imagine all the wires going across every aisle.
- I would find this distracting—I’d jump on my e-mail, etc. I suggest that a Task or Thought Force investigate this.
- The time has come to consider this again, but we need to proceed slowly.
- The Chairperson of the Board noted that the process to form a Thought or Task Force would be initiated if the majority of the Conference feels we should go forward.
- I suggest this be done on a trial basis.
- Think of the trees we can save without using paper.
- I’m thinking of the new Delegates who will be sitting behind computer screens, rather than interacting with their Mentor.
- An Executive Committee member noted that there would be additional costs for electricity and routers, etc., which would go to the Areas.

The Conference Co-Chairperson asked if the Conference would like to request a Thought or Task Force (to be determined by the Board of Trustees) to look into this. The response of the consensus was unanimously for a Thought or Task Force to consider the use of computer devices for all WSC members during general sessions