

EXPERIENCES AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION OF THE 3RD FERENC FARKAS INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE ORGANIZED USING THE PDCA METHOD

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Abstract

The University of Pécs Faculty of Business and Economics, Department of Leadership and Organizational Sciences organized the biannual Ferenc Farkas International Scientific Conference for the third time in 2022 in Pécs, Hungary. The management-themed hybrid-form event had 129 international participants. The conference was organized using the PDCA approach. The event was professionally planned, held and the results were checked to use the experiences in future conferences. In the checking phase, a post-conference customer satisfaction survey was used to evaluate the activities of the event. The 42% response rate allows the evaluation of the event. This article shows the concept of the conference, brief description of the organizing and management tasks, and the results of the customer feedback survey. The survey is evaluated and the results are discussed. In conclusion, it can be said that there is a high need for networking time and networking events next to scientific presentations. Participants preferred the conference proceedings as publication outcome to journal possibilities offered to them. As the conference was held just after the end of the Covid-19 restrictions, participants preferred physical presence over online participation. The goal of this article is to share the knowledge gained through organizing the conference with ideas and knowledge that can be used at future conferences.

Keywords: conference, organizing, networking, customer feedback

1. Introduction

The Ferenc Farkas conference series (FFISC), held every two years, was launched in 2018 by the Department of Management and Organizational Sciences of the University of Pécs Faculty of Business and Economics (Hungary) with the aim of preserving the memory of Professor Ferenc Farkas (Sipos & Venczel-Szakó, 2018). Dr. Ferenc Farkas (1949-2016) taught and researched 44 years at the University of Pécs Faculty of Economics (formerly called Janus Pannonius University). He was the dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics between 1996-2002, then the general and strategic vice-rector of the University of Pécs between 2007-2010. His teaching and research activities covered the topics of leadership, organizational behavior, change management, and human resource management.

In his last years, he mainly researched and published on change management (Farkas, 2015, Farkas, 2017).

2. The PDCA Cycle

The PDCA cycle is a quality tool for managing and improving processes. It can be used in a very wide variety of processes and industries. The tool itself is very general as shown in Figure 1. The process is divided into four parts: (1) Plan, (2) Do, (3) Check, (4) Act. This theory is also called the Deming cycle (Deming, 1950). The PDCA cycle improves process management through proper planning and checking processes, where the last step is to make correcting and improve the process for the next cycle. (Chiarini, 2011, Taufik, 2020)

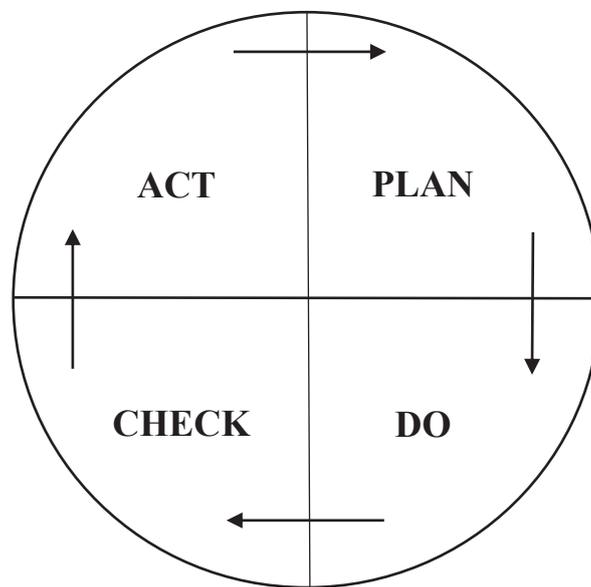


Figure 1. The PDCA cycle (Taufik, 2020, p. 158)

The 3rd Ferenc Farkas International Scientific Conference was organized with the PDCA cycle in mind to improve its processes.

3. The Plan Phase

The planning phase of the conference began 7 months before the conference date. First, the goals were set, which included the following. The conference had to be highly scientific, bilingual (English and Hungarian), offer hybrid participants, have flexible publishing options and break even financially.

The reason for the hybrid participant option is that at the beginning of the organization of the conference, it was not yet clear whether the conference could be held in person or not due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With this, we ensured that the conference could be held under all

circumstances - in contrast to the 2nd Ferenc Farkas conference planned for June 2020, which was canceled physically due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Only the papers were published due to limited opportunities at that time, early in the pandemic.

In terms of publication options for the 3rd conference, next to the traditional conference proceedings, journals were also offered. If the participant chose the journal publication opportunity, the organizers did guarantee the publication of the submitted articles, as they must also fulfill the journal's criteria and reviewing process. The topics of the articles were negotiated with the journals and only proposed for detailed reviews if the editor of the journal found the topic appropriate.

The conference was managed by an operative Organizing Committee from the Department of Leadership and Organizational Sciences. The Committee worked task-orientated by a previously determined schedule. The main organizer of the conference was Dr. Roland Schmuck. The work of the Organizing Committee was assisted by a 22-member Scientific Committee, which reviewed the articles submitted for the proceedings. The management was flexible to solve any problems that arose.

The conference fee was 75 Euro which was determined using benchmarking and preliminary cost calculations, examining the fee rates of similar conferences. The organizers did not differentiate between online and personal participation, as the nature of participation could be changed up to the day of the conference.

4. The Do Phase

The conference was organized according to the time schedule without delays. By June 2022, the restrictions caused by Covid-19 have ended, so the 3rd Ferenc Farkas conference could be held with personal participation. Most of the participants chose to appear in person and were happy to finally be able to meet their colleagues again after the closures.

For the conference held on 3-4 June 2022, 94 speakers and 35 participants registered, who kept their registration up until the start of the conference. Most of the participants registered with a presentation in Hungarian. The organizers defined 13 conference sections based on the submitted topics, breaking with the tradition of looking for lectures for sections - instead, sections were created based on the received abstracts. The presentations were held in one day using a hybrid solution: a plenary session in the morning, and thematic sessions in the afternoon. Both the plenary session and the sessions allowed online or physical participation. The speakers could also give online presentations through the Microsoft Teams software. With this online option, it became possible to hold lectures that would not have taken place due to travel problems or illness. At the plenary session, the recently issued book prepared in honor of Dr. Ágnes Borgulya was also presented (Konczosné et al 2021). Between the plenary lectures, the University of Pécs Pannon Children's Choir held a short music concert. Among the afternoon sessions, some sessions were entirely in Hungarian, others entirely in English, in order to provide fully English-language sessions for foreign participants.

The abstract volume of the conference, containing the abstracts of 85 presentations, was completed before the conference and sent to the participants electronically (Benke et al,

2022a). The preliminary publication of the electronic abstract volume received a positive response from the participants.

51 articles were published in the electronic conference volume (Benke et al, 2022b), and another 20 articles were intended for journals, several of which have since been published. All articles went through a double anonymous review process. During the organizing process, some participants decided not to submit an article and only wished to appear in the abstract volume. The organizers provided them with this opportunity in view of the fact that they can still participate in the conference. The majority of the articles published in the conference proceedings were in Hungarian.

On the evening of the day of the conference presentations and the morning of the following day, the organizers provided cultural programs for the participants: a Pécs city tour and a visit to the Zsolnay district in Pécs (Bajnóczi et al, 2021), with the help of Hungarian and English-speaking guides.

5. The Check Phase

At the end of the program, the conference was evaluated according to the basic idea of the PDCA cycle. As part of the check phase, after the end of the conference, the organizers asked the participants to fill in an online, anonymous post-conference satisfaction questionnaire. This was done as a method to measure customer satisfaction (Ambrož & Praprotnik, 2008). 59 respondents answered the questionnaire, which represents a response rate of 42%. The main results of the satisfaction survey are shown below.

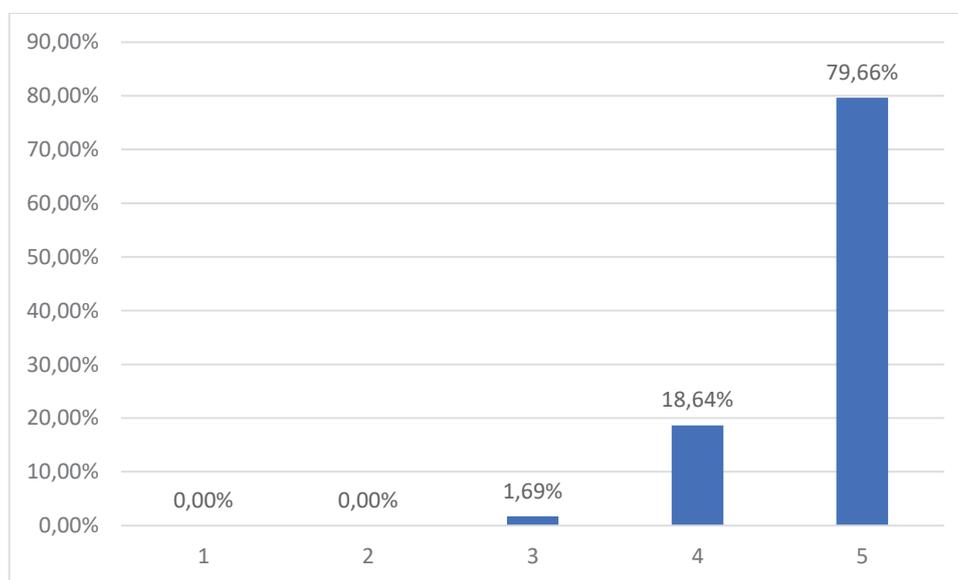


Figure 2. Overall satisfaction with the conference. Rate between 1-5, where 5 is the best. (own research)

Feedback from the conference is generally positive as shown in Figure 2. The respondents of the survey rated the conference an average of 4.78 on a 1-5 Likert scale, where 5 was the best

value. 79.66% of the respondents rated it as 5. The plenary session received an average rating of 4.35, and the afternoon sessions received an average rating of 4.73. Among other things, the participants emphasized good organizing, the diversity of topics, and a good atmosphere. Organizing activities received a rating of 4.78, which is the highest of all factors evaluated in the survey.

81% of the respondents considered the length of the conference adequate, while 14% considered it short. Typically, they would have organized section presentations for the second day as well, which would have increased the chance of visiting more the sections considering that fewer sections would have run parallel to each other. However, according to previous experiences with two-day conferences, some of the participants only come for one day, which reduces networking opportunities. Only 29% of the participants registered for the cultural programs on the second day, and even fewer took part in them.

The determination of the conference fee can be said to be successful by the survey, 79% were satisfied with it, and only 14% considered it too expensive. In accordance with the goals, the conference reached the break-even point. The organizers used electronic communication, sending proforma invoices and final invoices electronically to the participants. It was possible to receive paper-based certifications at the conference.

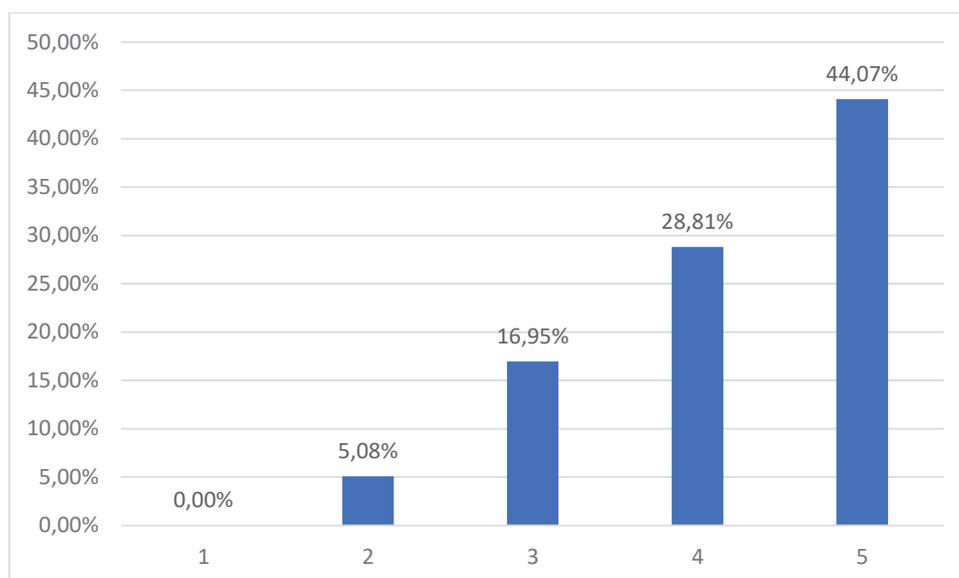


Figure 3. How would you evaluate the conference in terms of networking? Rate between 1-5, where 5 is the best. (own research)

Regarding the length of breaks and meals suitable for networking, 96% were satisfied with the length of slightly more than a one-hour lunch break, while 25% considered the length of the 15-minute coffee break too short. In the case of free text feedback possibility, many people mentioned that the time for discussion after the lectures was short. Perhaps because of this, the conference was rated 4.18 from the point of view of networking, which is the weakest of the surveyed aspects as shown in Figure 5.

The question “Would you recommend the next Ferenc Farkas conference to your colleagues or friends based on your experiences this year?” received an average rate of 4.77 as shown in Figure 4.

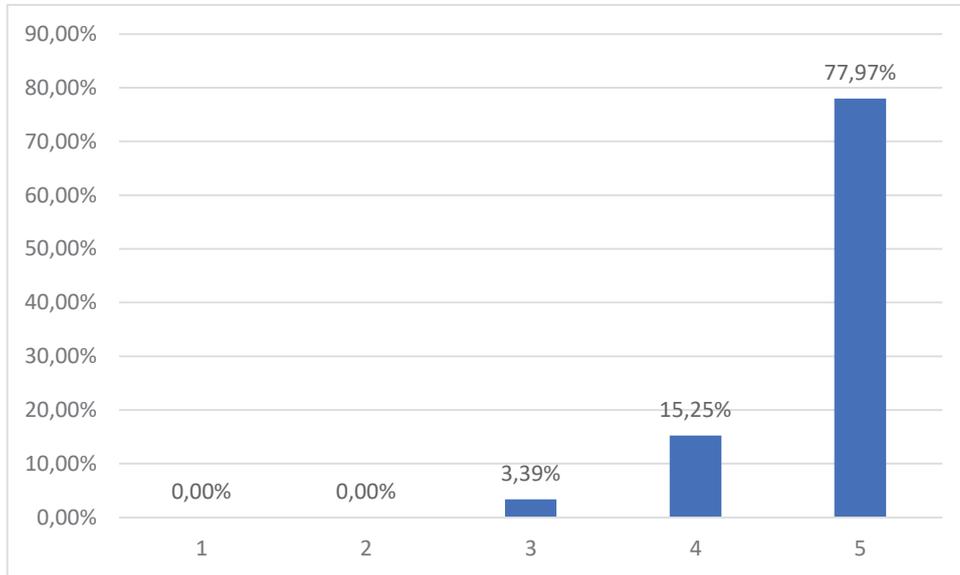


Figure 4. Would you recommend the next Ferenc Farkas conference to your colleagues or friends based on your experiences this year? Rate between 1-5, where 5 is the best. (own research)

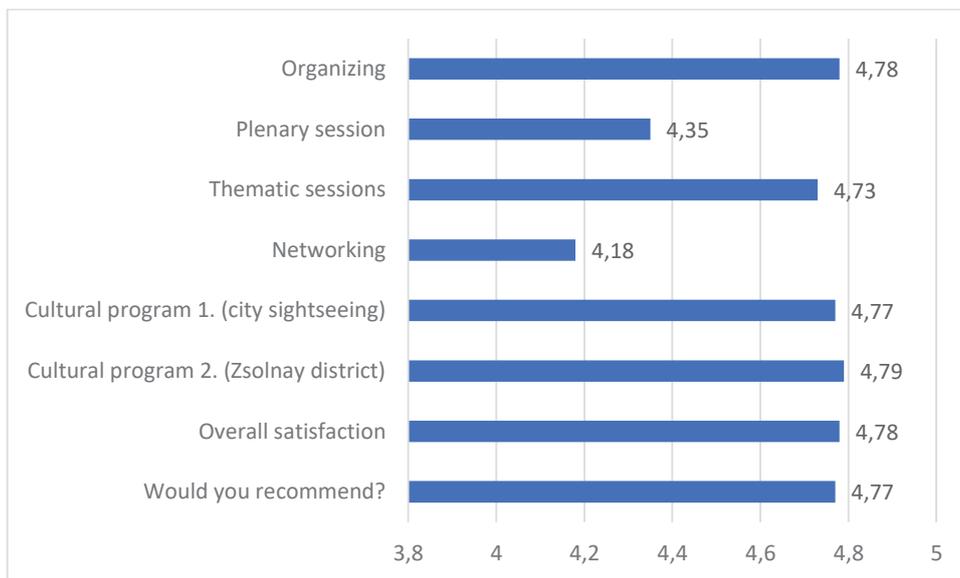


Figure 5. Summary of the post-conference satisfaction survey. Rate between 1-5, where 5 is the best. (own research)

6. The Act Phase

The act phase is for making corrections and improving the overall process for the next cycle, which is in this case the 4th conference in the biannual Ferenc Farkas International Scientific Conference series. This paper is part of this phase summarizing the process and making conclusions. The summary of the post-conference satisfaction survey is shown in Figure 5.

The conference was built on previous experiences of the first two conferences of the Ferenc Farkas International Scientific Conference series, and generally received good feedback, but there is always a place for improvement. The weakest rating was given for the networking possibilities. A considerable part of the respondents would prefer longer coffee breaks and more time for discussion. When organizing subsequent conferences, it is worth taking this feedback into account and providing longer coffee breaks and more networking opportunities in addition to scientific presentations.

The results also highlighted that the participants were more satisfied with the thematic session than the plenary session overall. Rethinking the plenary session and its contents should be done the next time.

Summary

The paper showed the organizing process of the 3rd Ferenc Farkas International Scientific Conference, which was a management-topic conference in Pécs, Hungary. The organizing process was done according to the PDCA principles. A post-conference customer survey was done after the conference which was discussed in detail. The summary of the survey is shown in Figure 5. As many continuous improvement programs fail because of the lack of studies and concepts (Sánchez-Ruiz et al, 2019), this paper is useful in practice for organizing better conferences and the customer satisfaction overall with them. The paper can be used by future conference organizers to gain knowledge and learn from previous experiences. As the PDCA cycle never ends, the research can be continued later with post-conference surveys of future conferences.

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