

A Simple Model for Distributing Meal Payments to Conference Attendees

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Notes de réunion est un espace pour les organisateurs et organisatrices d'événements de partager des pratiques et expériences exemplaires avec leurs collègues. Les commentaires et les suggestions sont les bienvenues. Veuillez les diriger à l'éditrice de la section:

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The [2020 Cascadia Combinatorial Feast](#) was held online on 21 November 2020, without advance registration. Meal payments of CAD 25 / USD 19 were made to each of 47 participants on the day via electronic transfer, without requiring receipts, funded from the NSERC Discovery Grants of six faculty members at Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria. This note describes the rationale for the meal payments, how they were implemented, and how effective this model was. I hope other Canadian funding agencies will consider adopting a similar model for online conferences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Why distribute meal payments to conference attendees?

A key aspect of conferences is to provide social and networking opportunities, especially for early career researchers. This aspect is greatly diminished during the current period of online-only conferences, which might plausibly continue for another 12–24 months. A relatively small meal payment allows participants to order their favourite

takeout food, to be eaten during the online social events of the conference, thereby enhancing networking opportunities.

How can the traditional paperwork be avoided?

The traditional support model involves collection and submission of individual receipts for food expenses. It can be very time-intensive and onerous for conference organisers to manage the associated paperwork, which might not be completed until months after the conference ends.

However, for this conference the Tri-Agency (NSERC, SSHRC, CIHR) agreed that meal payments could be charged to the NSERC Discovery Grants of faculty members conducting research in the area of the conference, without requiring individual receipts. I am happy to supply on request the precise conditions specified by the Tri-Agency, but principally these were:

- payments are not to be used for alcohol
- the payments must contribute to the direct costs of the research for which the funds were awarded, with benefits directly attributable to the grant
- all policies and processes of the Discovery Grant holder's institution must be followed.

How were funds distributed?

At the end of the first talk, the organisers invited participants to send a simple email from a university/college email address, stating full name, institution, and whether a student/postdoc (as in Figure 1). Those with a Canadian bank account sent email to me, and I made 34 payments of CAD 25 each using [Interac](#). Those with a US bank account sent email to a US-based organiser, who made 13 payments of USD 19 each using [Zelle](#).

During the second talk, we two organisers made the transfers from our personal bank accounts and emailed an individual password to the participants. The fees for making these transfers are small or zero, depending on the type of the sender's bank account. Collecting the payment is straightforward, free, and instant. About half those requesting payments had already collected the funds before the lunch break.

The organisers were keen that the early career researchers, many of whom did not appear to be familiar with the ease of Interac/Zelle transfers, could be confident of having received the promised funds before placing a takeout order. Even without advance registration, I was able to process payment from my bank account in about one minute each (enter name and email address, request payment, enter security question and answer, send answer to participant by return email). I then cross-checked the list of transfer requests shown by my bank against the email requests, discovering and rectifying an error for 2 of the 34 requests where I had mistakenly moved on to the next request with completing the final step of actually sending the payment.

What safeguards were used against abuse of the model?

The organisers considered two possible abuses of the model:

1. Fraudulent requests from people outside the target academic community. The safeguards against this were that the scheme was not announced publicly in advance, and all payment requests had to originate from a university/college email address.
2. Participants contacting friends without a real interest in the conference after hearing that meal payments were available; or participants requesting and receiving money but then not attending the social event. To deter these, the organisers made clear that acceptance of payment was to be considered a commitment to attend the social event, and stressed that this experimental model would not be repeated if there was irresponsible behaviour.

There was no evidence of even a single instance of abuse of either type.

How was the model received?

The meal payments were enthusiastically received, especially by early career researchers for whom meal payment of \$25 is apparently an unusual and significant event. Attendance during the day fluctuated, with over 80 distinct Zoom logins. Of these, 47 requested and received meal payments. A small number were ineligible because they had neither a Canadian nor a US bank account, and presumably some knew they would not attend the social event and so did not send a request.

The social event was attended by over 55 participants. The organisers asked each of the early career researchers to introduce themselves briefly during this event. Many participants stayed to chat online several hours after the official end of the conference. This was a very definite success.

What advice do you have for future conference organisers wanting to follow this model?

Most banks impose limitations on electronic transfers in a single day. My bank limits the total amount of Interac transfers to \$3000 in 24 hours; the US organiser's bank limits the number of Zelle transfers to 10 in one day. Therefore multiple distributors might be needed.

Early career researchers should receive priority if there is insufficient funding to cover all participants. The early career researchers should also receive priority for processing payments because they might be reluctant to buy food before receiving payment.

Advance registration would simplify the electronic transfers by allowing names and email addresses and passwords to be set up in advance. This would also reduce the chances of a minor error (forgetting to complete the payment to an individual) or a major error (transferring the wrong amount).

Conclusion

This is a simple, fast, and effective model for distributing relatively small meal payments to conference participants. Straightforward safeguards and clear communication appear to have been sufficient to avoid abuse of the payment model. I hope that other Canadian funding agencies will consider adopting a similar model for online conferences during the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to enhance networking opportunities. This is especially important for early career researchers, who are most disadvantaged from the current restrictions on academic meetings.

2pm Networking & Socializing Event

We invite you to network & socialize, and receive
CAD 25 / USD 19 towards the cost of food (no receipts needed)!
Accepting this invitation commits you to joining the networking event.

Email by 11:00am from your university/college email address stating
full name, name of institution, student/postdoc?

Canadian bank account (Interac): email xxx@xxx.ca
US bank account (Zelle): email xxx@xxx.ca

We aim to send all money transfers and passwords by noon.
Preference to students/postdocs.
Transfers must be redeemed by midnight tomorrow.

Thanks to discrete mathematics faculty members at SFU and UVic,
and to NSERC for making this possible!

Figure 1. Example of a slide announcing the payment model.