

Report on the 44th International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval (SIGIR 2021)

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Abstract

ACM SIGIR 2021 conference was organized as a fully online event, with more than 1,000 attendees from dozens of countries, a large technical program, and several activities and initiatives not seen at SIGIR before. This conference report provides some of the important details of how the organizers navigated through changing environments – political, social, and public health – moving the conference from NYC to Montreal and then to online. In addition to that decision process, the report also highlights several new and renewed initiatives around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Written by the conference General Co-Chairs and the DEI Chairs, this report is meant to inform future conference organizers as well as the SIGIR community at large.

Date: 15–21 July, 2021.

Website: <http://sigir.org/sigir2021/>.

1 Introduction

Back in 2018 when we got SIGIR’s blessings to host the SIGIR 2021 conference, the proposal was for New York City. But as we found visa and travel to the US for citizens of several parts of the world getting harder, we contemplated moving the conference outside of the US. As one of the general chairs (Diaz) had recently moved to Montreal, we decided to bring that as an option to the SIGIR community. During the business meeting at SIGIR 2018, there was a lively discussion about pros and cons of NYC and Montreal, and even a straw poll. In the months after that and

having considered many factors, we decided to move SIGIR 2021 to Montreal. We thought that was going to be the most significant change for our conference. And then the pandemic happened.

Even when SIGIR 2020 went fully online, we were still hopeful that in another year, things would change and that we could host SIGIR 2021 in Montreal. Thus, we entered into contracts for a conference venue in Montreal, secured quotes from hotels, and started planning social events such as reception and banquet. By the fall of 2020, it was becoming apparent that even if things are better by the summer of 2021, many people would still have difficulty traveling to the conference. And just as we had decided to move from NYC to Montreal for inclusivity, we felt compelled to move SIGIR 2021 online. This was not an easy decision. Fortunately, our contracts allowed us to cancel the venue with loss of just a small deposit. However, it quickly became clear to us how much effort organizing an online conference would require, and the challenges in delivering a good experience to all attendees.

We adopted the Underline platform to provide a single portal for all presentations and panels. Authors presented posters in a persistent, dedicated Gather.Town instance. In addition to discussion occurring in individual sessions, attendees used the SIGIR Slack instance and Gather.Town for socializing and networking. These platforms and their use in running a major conference were not tested. We discuss their use for SIGIR 2021 and the effects on conference attendees' experiences in the next section, followed by some details and the highlights of the technical program in Section 3. One thread that was always running through these considerations of using various tools was that of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). In fact, DEI became one of the most important aspects of the conference organization for us. Section 4 provides details of how we thought through and implemented several ideas and initiatives related to DEI. In addition to these DEI efforts, SIGIR 2021 had several new initiatives. These are discussed in Sections 5 and 6. Given the online format of the conference and the attendees situated in many time zones, it was important that we carefully coordinate how and what we communicate to these attendees. Section 7 provides some of our thinking around communication and examples of how we carried it out. We hope these details, pointers, and insights are helpful to future conference organizers and attendees.

2 Conference Platform, Format, and Budget

We now discuss our choices of the online conference platform and presentation format, and the budget impact of going online. After considering several possible platform providers, we decided to go with Underline¹ as the main conference platform, with social events being hosted on Gather.Town but facilitated via Underline.

For selecting the right platform, we considered three aspects, from most to least important: (1) the quality of the final product for attendees; (2) the amount of work organizers had to do before and in particular during the conference; and (3) the cost of the platform. The last aspect was considered less important as pricing did not vary by too much between providers, and was in all cases well within our proposed budget. In fact, we strongly recommend that organizers spend more on the online platform and associated design and management services (e.g., by asking for more support staff to be available during the conference) if this improves aspects (1) and (2) in any way.

¹<https://underline.io>

We will not attempt to perform a review of our chosen provider here. However, we believe that the final conference experience for attendees was fairly decent and that SIGIR 2021 was an overall success. This success did require a very significant effort by the organizers before and in particular during the conferences, with a lot of trouble shooting around the clock, and a few occasional issues impacting some attendees. Of course, this is to some degree to be expected for any major event, and in some instances also reflected the fact that organizers were learning on the fly how to run an online conference.

For conference and presentation format, we decided to have all regular presentations prerecorded by the authors and submitted a few weeks in advance. During the conference, authors were expected to attend their session to give a brief two-minute pitch for their paper and to address any questions. On the other hand, invited talks were given live, and then recorded for later playback. For associated events such as workshops, SIRIP, etc., we gave more leeway to organizers to run things as they prefer, as long as it fit into the overall setup. Each session of the technical program (with a few exceptions such as invited talks) was then repeated about nine hours later, to allow attendees from different time zones to participate at a reasonable time. At least one author of each paper was expected to attend each of the two sessions in which the paper appeared. While in some cases this was difficult due to time zones, most authors managed to do so.

For social events, we followed the lead of other online conferences that have used Gather.Town with some success. Here, it appeared that participation in such online social events was very uneven – many participants enjoyed them and attended them extensively, while others mostly stayed away. We also contracted with a third party event running organization – TeamBuilding² – for the main social event. This event was offered twice to accommodate people in multiple time zones. These events were attended by dozens of attendees and deemed to be highly successful.

Moving a conference online results in a huge reduction in costs and thus greatly impacts the budget. An in-person SIGIR conference has a budget in excess of half a million dollars, or about \$800 per participant. Going online reduces costs by maybe a factor of four to five, with the major remaining costs being the conference platform and management, registration and credit card fees, ACM fees, and other miscellaneous expenses that would not show up much in an in-person budget. This allowed us to greatly reduce registration fees and still run a decent surplus. Sponsorship income was also reduced as we had to lower the rates for the different sponsorship levels. However, this reduction was more moderate, and as a result sponsors contributed a larger fraction of the budget than usual, more than one third.

We close this section with some recommendations for organizers of online conferences. Some of these may of course not age well as we are moving back to in-person, or even hybrid, events.

- **Reach out to learn from other events:** Normally, SIGIR conference organizers would get most of the necessary knowledge from the organizers of the preceding ones. In this case, since SIGIR 2019 was still in person, while SIGIR 2020 was very early during the pandemic and thus somewhat unique in its circumstances, we also reached out to organizers of other online events that had worked well. We received invaluable advice from the organizers of RecSys 2020, and in particular Rodrygo Santos, on how to run sessions and social events, and a detailed conference budget provided by CIKM 2020 organizers gave us a good idea

²<https://teambuilding.com>

of the budget impact we should expect. We are of course happy to help organizers of other events that reach out to us.

- **Planning for round-the-clock staffing:** An online conference has to accommodate participants from many time zones, which means it has to run almost around the clock. This means planning to have at least one senior organizer available at all times. For this reason, SIGIR 2021 had two virtual chairs, Bhaskar Mitra and Jian-Yun Nie, who greatly supported the three general chairs and basically became chairs #4 and #5. Similarly, the platform and management company needs to have enough staff available around the clock – this needs to be raised early when selecting the company. If available, we recommend to pay extra for more staffing.
- **Allocate additional preparation time for prerecorded presentations:** Preparing prerecorded presentations require additional effort and time from all presenters, significantly more in comparison to a fully in-person conference where they can show up on the day of the presentation with their slides and give a live talk. These prerecorded presentations also need to be submitted in advance for the online conference platform provider to perform appropriate preprocessing and to make them available through the online platform. In light of these additional requirements, we recommend that for future online and hybrid conferences, we should revisit the timeline for the review and publish process and allocate a large chunk of time to presenters to prepare and submit their prerecorded content.
- **Making the event affordable and accessible:** Registration fees at SIGIR 2021 were just \$50 for students and \$100 for ACM members for the main conference. This probably boosted participation greatly, to over 1,000 attendees, which in turn increased income with almost no increase in costs. In hindsight, we would probably further lower the rates, say by half. Student authors received free registration from the SIG, and we also gave a lot of free registrations to others who had a need.
- **Miscellaneous:** A good full-service event platform provider will work closely with event organizers over many weeks, and will provide a detailed timeline of when certain information needs to be provided to them. Thus, a platform provider is not just a vendor to whom certain operations are outsourced, and organizers should carefully listen to their advice and concerns. We recommend organizers to work closely and early with ACM on approving the platform provider, and on ironing out any intellectual property issues arising from uploading and distributing video content on the platform. Accessibility in other countries, e.g., China, is also important – even if the platform is available in a country, there might still be issues with lower layers of their software stack (i.e., Vimeo as a video platform) being blocked, and workarounds may be needed.

3 Technical Program

In addition to the traditional technical program familiar to the SIGIR community, SIGIR 2021 successfully launched two new tracks: Resource and Perspectives. Across all tracks, the conference has continued to grow in terms of the number of submissions, as shown in the table on the next page.

	Valid submissions	Accepted	Acceptance rate (%)
Full papers	720	151	20.9
Short papers	526	145	27.6
Demo papers	39	21	53.8
Resource papers (new track)	60	27	45.0
Perspectives papers (new track)	11	3	27.3
SIRIP papers	20	9	45.0
Doctoral consortium papers	13	11	84.6
Workshop proposals	9	6	66.7
Tutorial proposals	12	9	75.0

Valid submissions came from a total of 6,335 authors from 54 countries. In response to these high-quality papers, 976 reviewers provided reviews and meta-reviews, resulting in a total of 4,241 reviews and meta reviews. The accepted papers and proposals are contributions from a total of 2,454 authors from 40 countries.

SIGIR 2021’s technical program is highlighted by three invited keynote presentations and the 2021 Salton Award keynote. The keynotes were given by Salton Award winner ChengXiang Zhai (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA), Eszter Hargittai (University of Zurich, Switzerland), Hang Li (ByteDance, China), and Helen Nissenbaum (Cornell University, USA).

This year’s conference program also included presentations for 37 papers from the ACM Transactions on Information Systems (TOIS), Volumes 37 and 38, continuing the tradition of supporting knowledge transfer.

4 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity

ACM considers Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) as central to its mission.³ ACM SIGIR has three volunteer DEI co-chairs (Bárbara Poblete, Hussein Suleman, and Suzan Verberne), who coordinate the DEI activities in SIGIR-related events. For SIGIR 2021, we appointed Bhaskar Mitra to serve as the DEI Liaison to work closely with our three ACM SIGIR DEI co-chairs to plan and execute several DEI-focused initiatives. While the SIGIR DEI co-chairs serve in their role over multiple years, the role of the DEI liaison was to specifically focus on this year’s conference and coordinate with all relevant stakeholders to meet this year’s DEI objectives. This includes, but is not limited to, the following key efforts listed below.

Checklists and policy awareness. In 2020, the SIGIR DEI co-chairs authored a DEI Checklist⁴ that enumerates several important guidelines for ensuring inclusivity and accessibility that all SIGIR conference and event organizers should consider during planning. This year we also com-

³<https://www.acm.org/diversity-inclusion/about>

⁴<http://sigir.org/conferences/diversity-and-inclusion/>

posed a list of recommendations⁵ for more inclusive conference presentations. In subsequent SIGIR conferences, one of the responsibilities of the DEI Liaison is to communicate these resources to all conference chairs and organizers of co-located events, including workshops, to ensure that everyone is aware and tracking themselves against these checklists and recommendations. In addition, the DEI Liaison is also responsible for ensuring that the ACM code of conduct⁶ and anti-harassment policies⁷ were communicated broadly and also displayed prominently on the conference website. The DEI Liaison also serves as bridge between the SIGIR participants (speakers, attendees, and students) and the local organization, facilitating for the former to voice their concerns and DEI-specific conference needs.

DEI grants. Improving diversity of participation and inclusivity for all participants is a key goal for ACM SIGIR. Towards that goal, this year we implemented several DEI grants to encourage and support attendance from under-represented and historically marginalized groups. This included: (i) Discounted registration rates for attendees from least developed countries (LDCs) as designated by the United Nations⁸, (ii) Need-based partial or full registration fee waivers, and (iii) Caregiver subsidies to lower barriers of access to the conference. A registration discount of 75% was automatically applied to those participating from LDCs by the conference registration system. In addition, we set up an online form⁹ that attendees could use to apply for the need-based fee waivers and caregiver subsidies. We received only a few applications this year. Every application was reviewed and subsequently 12 full registration fee waivers and 2 caregiver grants were approved jointly by the DEI co-chairs and the DEI Liaison. We hope that in future SIGIR conferences we will find ways to publicize the availability of such financial support programs more broadly and increase the volume of applications. Finally, we note that these financial assistance initiatives were provided separately from—and in addition to—registration fee waivers for students presenting as authors.

DEI event and other affinity group events. At SIGIR 2021, we hosted a DEI event which consisted of two live 75-minute panel sessions to discuss new positive actions and interventions the SIGIR community can pursue to make progress on DEI. The session was scheduled twice to accommodate participants joining the virtual conference from different time zones. The following panelists were invited to both sessions (although Mallory Knodel could only make it to one of the sessions):

- Benjamin Carterette (Senior Research Manager at Spotify and ACM SIGIR Chair)
- Nazli Goharian (Clinical Professor of Computer Science at Georgetown University and co-chair of the Women in IR community)
- Mallory Knodel (Chief Technology Officer at Center for Democracy & Technology)

⁵<https://drive.google.com/file/d/14TCY2F-C60CXMfTrXo71dDx2NqLw476b/view>

⁶<https://www.acm.org/code-of-ethics>

⁷<https://www.acm.org/about-acm/policy-against-harassment>

⁸<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category/ldcs-at-a-glance.html>

⁹The application form template is available here and can be duplicated for future conferences: https://forms.office.com/Pages/ShareFormPage.aspx?id=v4j5cvGGr0GRqy180BHbR5pThK23NAJHvEn_8cdWyt5UMkpJQORIVT1RV11JMFVITVVHQ1Y2N0g3RS4u&sharetoken=yd1UJ71IaWeNsARJpvmj

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- Douglas W. Oard (Professor at College of Information Studies at University of Maryland)
 - Luca Soldaini (Applied Scientist at Amazon and Queer in AI organizer)

The two sessions were chaired by Hussein Suleman and Bhaskar Mitra, respectively. Each session began with short input from each of the panelists, followed by an open discussion.

A range of topics were discussed¹⁰. Among them were calls for more explicit enumeration of specific DEI goals for ACM and the SIGIR community. Some of the discussions focused on specific dimensions in which our DEI efforts should be expanded. This included a proposal for creating a SIGIR working group for People with Disabilities (PWD), possibly in conjunction or coordination with the DisAbility in AI¹¹ community. Representation from different national origins and identities were also discussed. Specifically, the question of continuing existing programs like AFIRM¹² at a time of severe travel restrictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic was brought up. While this year's SIGIR conference was virtual because of the pandemic-related travel restrictions, attendees highlighted the importance of continuing the virtual attendance option in future conferences in the context of being inclusive to those for whom traveling to the conference is not an option, either financially or otherwise. Some attendees pointed out systemic barriers in the review process that biases towards topics of interest to the current community members while being exclusionary to papers authored by and of interest to under-represented groups. Specifically, the need to encourage and incentivize research on under-represented and low-resource languages was highlighted. The topics of mentorship and sponsorship were discussed in the context of inclusion and retention of members from under-represented groups. Among other things, sponsoring can take the form of invited talks, promoting the work of others publicly, and research collaborations. It was pointed out that invited talks are currently pretty low-cost due to travel restrictions and the corresponding move of most invited talks to the virtual format. There was also support for open calls for chairing positions in conferences for people from underrepresented groups and for widening initiatives from the natural language processing community, including the BIG directory¹³, with speakers from underrepresented groups. There was positive feedback from the attendees on this year's Caregiver Grant initiative and a call for similar future programs. Finally, the importance of considering Intersectionality¹⁴ in all our DEI efforts was also emphasized.

SIGIR 2021 also hosted a Women in IR event (two sessions to accommodate participants from different time zones) and a Queer in AI event. While these two events were not organized by the SIGIR DEI Chairs, they were critical component of the broader DEI conversation at SIGIR this year, specifically providing a platform to discuss: (i) gender pay gap and other forms of gender-based discrimination, and (ii) lack of representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in IR and the impact of recent AI/IR technology on the Queer community, including representational harms. The Women in IR event was organized and co-chaired by Nazli Goharian and Hannah Bast¹⁵ while the Queer in AI event was organized by Luca Soldaini and Avijit Ghosh.

¹⁰Thanks to Shiri Dori-Hacohen, Hussein Suleman, and Suzan Verberne for sharing notes from the discussion that we consulted when authoring this report.

¹¹https://elesa.github.io/ability_in_AI

¹²<https://sigir.org/afirm2020>

¹³<http://www.winlp.org/big-directory>

¹⁴<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersectionality>

¹⁵More details about Women in IR this can be found in a separate report published in this issue of SIGIR Forum.

Technological acknowledgment. Often presented at the beginning of ceremonies and public events, land and territory acknowledgements are a way that people insert an awareness of Indigenous presence and land rights. Such acknowledgments recognize the history of colonialism and a need for change in settler colonial societies, and are common practice in many parts of the world, including Canada. Technological acknowledgments broaden that practice to also reflect on the role that technology plays in both colonial and decolonial practices. For SIGIR 2021, we authored the following technological acknowledgment that was presented at the conference opening ceremony, as well as displayed on the conference website.

SIGIR 2021 is a virtual conference. We welcome everyone joining us virtually from across the world this week, using a suite of technological platforms and solutions to connect and engage. As we gather to discuss, envision, and build future information access technologies, let us recognize that these platforms and tools exist in the real world, and have serious impact on real people and real lives. The technologies we employ to connect and communicate during the conference did not emerge out of the ether, but were built by institutions and individuals and using infrastructure and materials physically located on multiple territories around the world that is home to often-marginalised Indigenous populations. The systems we build make daily choices about what information is accessible and what voices are heard, which in turn influence the stories we tell of ourselves and of our land, and decide our history that remains in collective memory and what is forgotten. Let us recognize that these technologies connect us and at the same time replicate and entrench the inequities and divisions from the real world into our virtual spaces and alienate us from the aims of restitution, justice, and reparation for Indigenous and other marginalised peoples. So, let our endeavours as an information access research community be grounded in the recognition of the relationship between technology and the peoples and the lands we occupy; in both celebration of new knowledge and simultaneous acknowledgment of all the Indigenous knowledge that has been undervalued; and let us work towards the goal of a just and equitable future.

Before going fully virtual, SIGIR 2021 was planned to be located in Tiohtià:ke, also known as Montréal, and the island is called Mooniyang in Anishnabemowin. Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is situated on unceded Indigenous lands and traditional territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka and Anishnaabe Nations. We, the organizers and the conference attendees who are based in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal, recognize the Kanien'kehá:ka nation as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we stand. Tiohtià:ke has historically served as a meeting place for many First Nations. Today Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is home to a diverse population of Indigenous and other peoples. We again welcome our diverse group of attendees from across the world to join us virtually and to simultaneously acknowledge their own physical location and share their respective land acknowledgment, using tools like <https://native-land.ca>.

(We are grateful for the [technological acknowledgement](#) from The Feminist Media Studio and the [territorial acknowledgement](#) from Université Concordia which we consulted and heavily derived from for the above acknowledgment.)

In addition to recognizing that many of the organizers of this year's virtual SIGIR conference were located on unceded Indigenous lands, the technological acknowledgment specifically aimed

to interrogate the relationship between the technologies being researched and developed by the SIGIR community and social movements for Indigenous rights and decolonisation. We hope that these practices, such as technological and territory acknowledgments, will continue to be adopted in future SIGIR conferences as appropriate, and more importantly that the community would continue to engage more closely with questions of social equity and justice.

5 Perspectives Papers

For the first time at SIGIR, we introduced a new track for Perspectives Papers. Such a track has been in place for CHIIR conference since its inception in 2016. The CHIIR community speaks very highly of perspective papers. These papers have been found to generate a substantial amount of discussions at the conferences. The perspective papers at CHIIR have ranged from presenting foundational ideas and theories to envisioning a different practice for existing systems. Often, some of the views presented are controversial, but such an aspect provides one of the strong justifications for having a perspectives papers track.

For SIGIR 2021, while we wanted to model the perspectives track after CHIIR and other conferences that have run such tracks for years, we were still mindful of how it might work for the diversity of the IR community that SIGIR represents. Two of us (Diaz and Shah) assumed the role of co-chairs for this inaugural track. After some discussion, we settled on what a perspectives paper at SIGIR could have: (1) it could describe an open problem in IR research; and/or (2) it could present a critique of IR research. Of course, this is still casting a wide net, and may not be very helpful to potential authors or the reviewers. We, therefore, came up with the following points for writing and assessment regarding the perspectives papers:

- Relevance to SIGIR: Who from the SIGIR community might this problem be directly relevant to?
- Conceptual leap: How does it change our way of thinking about a problem, a method, or its execution? How much will research in this area advance our state of knowledge?
- Depth of impact: How many supporting subproblems requiring foundational research might arise from the observations in the submission?
- Breadth of impact: What stakeholders inside or outside of the SIGIR community are impacted?
- Novelty: Are people already studying this problem in the information retrieval community? In other communities?

One way we thought about the ‘depth’ aspect is how many potential PhD dissertations could come out of the presented problem. A common question we got from potential authors is if we have examples of what may be a good perspectives paper. This was a tricky question for us as we did not want to limit ourselves to some specific type, and at the same time, we wanted to provide some helpful suggestions to the authors. Therefore, instead of answering that question directly, we came up with a few points about what makes a good or a bad perspectives paper. For example, a perspectives paper should not be simply a review of literature, or opinions expressed without scientific justifications.

The next challenge we faced was regarding the reviewers. We began listing potential reviewers a long time before the paper deadline. We wanted to make sure the reviewers were distinguished scholars in their respective fields. We organized the reviewers based on various topics, ensuring that we would have enough topical representation and expertise. The reviewers were provided with the same guidelines as the authors as a way to explain what we were looking for in this new track. A new EasyChair form for assessment was set up that incorporated the criteria listed above.

We received 11 submissions. There was one more that was deemed to be not appropriate for this track, and after some discussions with the authors, it was removed. As we started doing the track chair and reviewers assignments, we quickly found that we needed a different definition of what may be considered as a ‘serious’ conflict. This is because if we were to apply the usual rules (e.g., conflict with any organization where one worked at in the last three years), we would be conflicted out of most of the submissions. We, therefore, came up with a ‘sensible’ set of rules around this, defining soft, semi-soft, and hard conflicts. We discussed these with the program chairs as well as the SIGIR executive committee to make sure these were viable and fair criteria.

In the end, we were able to accept three very strong submissions as the perspectives papers for this inaugural round. This was possible due to an outstanding program committee (all very distinguished scholars in IR) and of course, the authors who took their chances in submitting their seminal works to a new track. The future authors and track organizers should now have a good set of examples and guidelines to work with.

6 Many Firsts at SIGIR 2021

In addition to the Perspectives Track, there were several other new initiatives at SIGIR 2021. Another new track was the Resource Track, which is not new to several other conferences. In fact, we drew heavily from those conferences. For SIGIR, we decided to focus on four factors while inviting and reviewing resource track papers: novelty, availability, utility, and predicted impact.

While not a new event, SIRIP (the industry track) at SIGIR 2021 received a renewed focus. With three co-chairs at its helm, a number of strong submissions, invited talks, and an industry-student interactive panel, SIRIP was spread out over two days.

Similar to SIGCHI, SIGIR launched the SIGIR Academy to honor and recognize individuals who have made significant, cumulative contributions to the development of the field of IR. While not organized by us, the SIGIR Academy’s inaugural class of inductees were introduced during the conference. Every year there will be new inductees, but we are honored to be the launching pad for this distinguished effort.

For the first time, ICTIR 2021 conference was co-located with SIGIR 2021. It was held at the same day with tutorials and doctoral consortium.

Finally, Queer in AI, which unlike Women in IR is not affiliated with ACM, reached out to us to explore the possibility of organizing an event at the conference. We readily agreed and included it as a part of the main conference program. The event was heavily attended and highly successful. We are grateful to Queer in AI for taking this initiative and hope that they return for future conferences.

7 Communication

One of the changes we made this year, in consultation with the SIGIR Executive Committee, is to have a unified Twitter handle for SIGIR conference instead of creating a new handle every year. We started with taking over SIGIR 2020 Twitter account and changing the handle to @SIGIRConf.¹⁶ We had a dedicated position of Social Media Chair (Johanne Trippas), who took responsibility of tweeting various messages, CFPs, and important information through Twitter as we approached the conference. During the conference, both Johanne and our webmaster, Matthew Mitsui, took responsibility of maintaining Twitter account throughout the clock as they both were in very different time zones (Australia and North America).

As the conference approached, we had to start coordinating our messaging to the potential and the already registered attendees. We used a combination of emails through the registration site, Twitter, and Slack.

During the conference, given that we were running two rounds of programs with complex schedules every day for attendees in different time zones, we found it important to orient them every day by sending a daily email. We constructed these emails very carefully as we wanted them to carry important information for the day, but also not be overwhelming. To make people actually open and read them and feel a sense of connection with the conference, we included some fun and insightful facts about the conference experience and SIGIR. Below is an example of such a snippet from one of the daily emails.

Gather.Town hint of the day: want to add some fun to your avatar? Keep pressing the 'z' key to have it dance. A heart will appear on the avatar while you're dancing. So let us see you bust some moves today at the conference!

SIGIR info of the day (courtesy of Ben): ACM SIGIR first took place in 1971 in College Park, Maryland. It wasn't until 1978 that it became the Annual International ACM SIGIR conference, which took place in Rochester, NY. A subtle, but an important difference for ACM. The current conference is the 44th instance of it. See if you could find out who attended that 1978 (or the 1971) conference. Share your responses or guesses on Twitter/Slack.

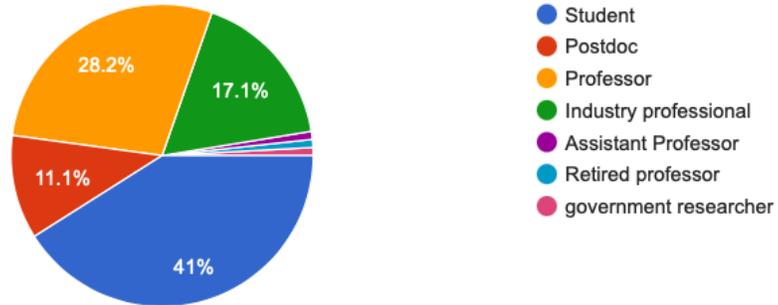
8 Attendees Feedback

After the conference, we conducted an online survey to elicit some feedback from the attendees about their experience with the conference. An additional objective was to gather some data for future conferences, especially SIGIR 2022. We received 117 responses. They are organized and presented in the figures on the next pages. Like any survey with a limited response rate, these data points should be taken with a grain of salt.

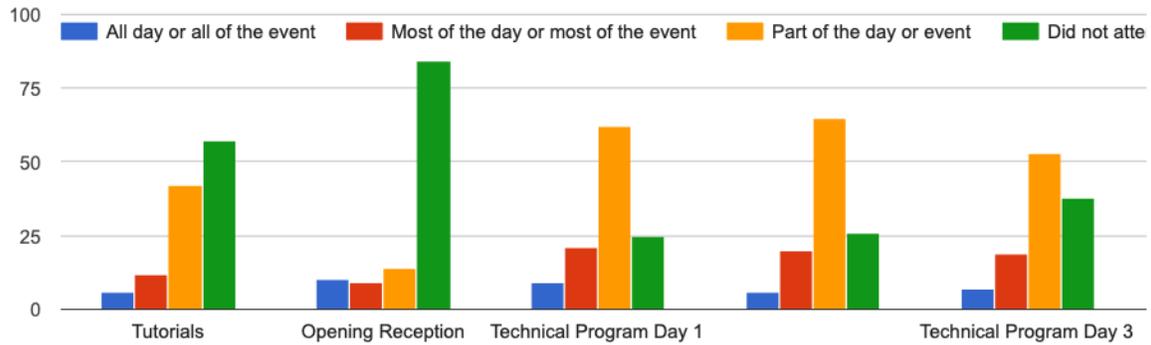
¹⁶This account is now with SIGIR 2022 organizers.

What best describes your current role

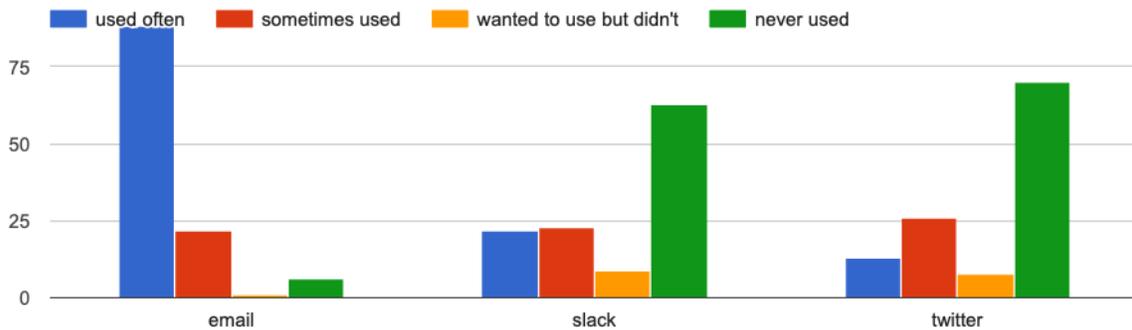
117 responses



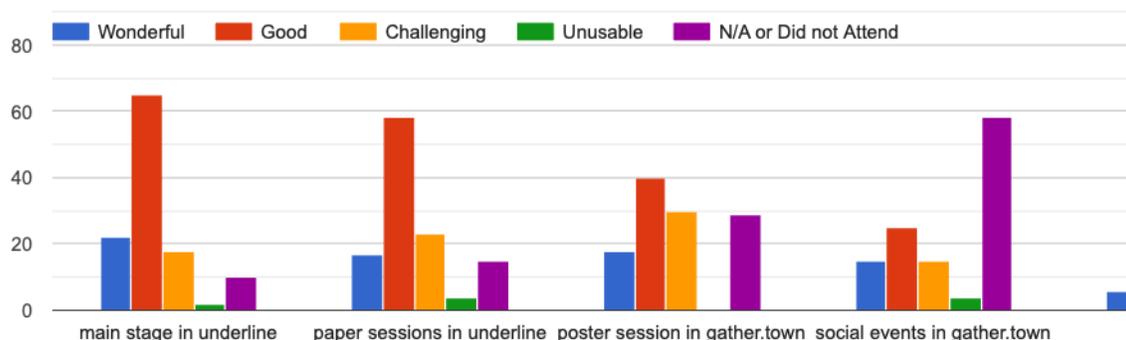
To what degree did you attend the following SIGIR events?



What were the ways you received information from the organizers during the conference, or you contacted the organizers?

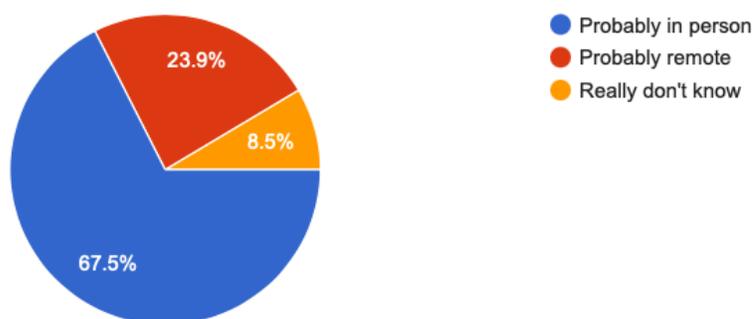


How do you feel about the technologies used for the conference platform?



SIGIR 2022 next year is planned to be an on-site event in Madrid, with support for remote participation (i.e., a hybrid event). If you join the conference next year and assuming it will be safe to travel, if you had to give your best guess now, how do you think you will attend?

117 responses



9 Conclusion

SIGIR 2021 was attended by more than 1,000 participants from many parts of the world. We believe this wide participation was possible primarily due to the online nature of the conference as well as generous support provided under various DEI initiatives. So while an online conference lacks several elements of a traditional, in-person event that many of us love and enjoy, there are definitely several positive aspects of going online.

We underestimated how much effort the conference platform would take up, despite it being professionally managed (Underline and Gather.Town). The General Chairs had to be on-call, constantly resolving issues of access and registration during the conference. We also found that while we had various channels of communication with our attendees, there was still some confusion about event times, format, requirements, etc. For instance, it was not until the first full day of the conference that we found that the live streaming of plenary events on Underline was not accessible to those in China without VPN, as it utilized the blocked vimeo video streaming system at a lower level. We had to immediately start working on a work-around based on Zoom and to communicate the change clearly. Similarly, Underline had created two sites for the conference, one for the main

conference and one for auxiliary events (tutorials, workshops, etc.), with attendees who only signed up for auxiliary events only getting access to their site and vice versa. Often an attendee tried accessing an event from the wrong site and could not easily figure out the issue. We needed more education and training for us as the conference organizers, as well as for the attendees.

It was clear to us before this conference, and is certainly very clear to us now, that a conference is not simply a collection of talks and events; it is a platform for shared experiences for a community. Whether a conference happens in-person, online, or in a hybrid format, we should never forget that.

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