

AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE ON CONFERENCE  
SPEAKING. HOW TO SECURE SPEAKING  
INVITES, SUBMIT SPEAKING PROPOSALS  
AND ALL THE THINGS YOU NEED TO  
KNOW BEFORE YOU WALK ON STAGE.

# BEFORE YOU SPEAK



JOHAN STEYN

# Before You Speak

## An Essential Guide on Conference Speaking

Johan Steyn

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# Introduction: Why this book?

There are many books and other resources to help us all become better speakers and presenters. If we want to present well, we must always endeavour to improve our skills. These resources can teach us about body language, slide layout, dress code, how to handle the microphone, and other vital issues.

I have been a conference speaker at international technology events for some years now. I have seen many of the world's beautiful cities and have been privileged to meet amazing people. At first I was desperate for someone to provide my first speaking opportunity, but I have to decline many invites these days. There is not enough time to get to all the conferences and as exciting as it is to travel to new cities and have new experiences, I realized that I also had to prioritize my family and career. Luckily most conferences are now virtual, and it is easier to accommodate many more invites.

Lately many of my friends and colleagues have been asking me how they could also get on to the conference speaking circuit. I have had the honour to mentor many people and to see them become sought-after speakers. I teach them the principles and lessons I wish I knew about before I started my speaking career.

That is what this book is about, and that is why I entitled it "Before You Speak." What will you get out of this book? I will give you advice on everything you need to do before you walk on to that stage.

It starts with identifying your intentions and building brand recognition. The next step is to identify the kind of conferences you would like to speak at and submit a proposal to speak. If conference

committees accept your submission, they would often wish to interview you. How do you ensure your speaking request and interview is a success? What are the conference organizers and delegates looking for? And what are you to do when your submission is not successful?

What are all the crucial aspects to keep in mind if you are successful? Think about travel arrangements, visa applications, expenses, and hotel arrangements. Or even if it is a virtual event, what do you need to remember? Think about timezone differences, the conference program, the virtual platform, sound, light, and posture. Once you get momentum and had your first successful conference presentation, how do you build on that success to receive more invites in the future?

So what will you get out of reading this book? I will help you take the right steps to ensure you become a recognized speaker in your field of interest, build your brand and network, and increase your prospects of future employment. This is an exciting journey! Any person, irrespective of interest or personality, can be an authentic and successful conference speaker.

**I created a summary checklist of the main points contained in my book. It can be a valuable resource for all the things you need to keep in mind as you prepare your conference submission and in-person and virtual events. [Click here to access the document](#)<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.aiforbusiness.net/checklist-before-you-speak>

# 1. Conference speaking is for everyone

Welcome to the world of speaking at conferences! Becoming a speaker at conferences is one of the more exciting things you can attempt in life.

Most of us have attended conferences and have benefited from the information we acquired and the opportunities to network. For me, attending conferences relevant to my career and interests has been invaluable. I have gained knowledge that helped me specialize in my career, and I have met people who became life-long friends and colleagues. I have often had to call on many of these people to help me with projects, give me advice, and have experienced their valuable guidance.

Networking is a process of giving and taking. As you network with others and learn from them, they can also learn from you. You have something to say! And this brings me to the main reason you should consider speaking at conferences: you have knowledge and experience that could benefit others. As I will discuss in this book, your motivation and intent to speak at conferences are very important, and it will help you on your journey.

Most people have a great fear of public speaking. Many of us are simply not naturally gifted to speak in public. I am certainly one of those people. I am not a naturally talented speaker and have been quite shy most of my life. However, we all have been speaking in public all our lives! Humans are a story-telling species, and since the dawn of civilization, homo sapiens have been relaying their experiences as stories around fires at night or through using art on cave walls. We are born with an inherent desire to tell stories and endowed with a natural ability to do so.

Just think of the countless times since early childhood that you have been telling stories and sharing your experiences with friends. My favourite time of day is in the afternoons when I collect my son from pre-primary school. I usually try to sneak into the school grounds without him noticing me so that I can watch him laugh and play. Since he was a tiny toddler, I have been amazed watching him and his friends chatting and telling stories.

And then in the evenings before bedtime, we both get a chance to tell a story. I often smile when I listen to his stories and wonder where he gets his ideas. As a small child, he naturally lives in a world of myths and imagination. As he grows older, his ability to string together coherent storylines with compelling characters is a great joy to listen to.

Joseph Campbell was a renowned academic and mythologist from the previous century. He is best known for his *Hero's Journey* analogy. Also called the *Megamyth*, Campbell relayed how all human stories across cultures and time shared a few basic similarities.

There is the call to an adventure where the hero is challenged to leave her ordinary life in order to embark on a great quest. Often initially rejecting the call, the hero embarks on her journey. Facing many trials and tribulations, the hero goes through several stages in the journey and ultimately meets the dragon. The dragon is a metaphor for internal darkness to overcome, and eventually, the hero completes her quest, is a changed and better person, and returns to everyday life. The hero brings back with her the lessons from her journey for the benefit of her community.

I am sure you recognize these elements in many great stories from our various religious traditions, children's stories, and many movies. It is as if something in our shared psychological DNA is wired to learn from stories following this pattern and to tell many of our stories in the same way. As social beings, we often tell our friends stories with great enthusiasm, standing up, using dramatic gestures, and leading our story to a grand finale.



Have you ever experienced debilitating angst when you know you will be seeing your friends? Have you woken up in the night facing the darkness with horrible anticipation knowing you will be meeting your friends and that you will be speaking with them? Most of us do not. Some may have a social phobia for whom connecting with people is a great challenge, but it is the most natural thing to do for most of us.

One day a good friend of mine attended a conference where I was speaking. Afterwards, he gave me a compliment that made me think. He said that the Johan he saw on stage that day is the same Johan he experienced as a friend in a relaxing social setting.

And here is the first great secret to public speaking: be yourself! I can only offer one thing to my audience: my true self, the person I am. Yes, I can learn public speaking and audience engagement skills, which will be a lifelong discovery and improvement journey. But I am not Steve Jobs or any other famous and inspiring speaker. Even if I try, I cannot speak like them, and my audience will sense that I am not authentic.

Just like I am relaxed and my true self when I speak with my friends, I am comfortable and confident speaking in public. Because I am the one thing I know best: just myself.

I know it is not that simple. It is more daunting to speak to a large audience of strangers than to a small group of close friends. I expect that in time, as I grow in my ability and experience to speak in public, that the anticipation and nerves would dissipate. But I learned that it would never go away. So am I still nervous before speaking at conferences? You bet! Over time, I have learned to deal with the nerves and realized that I could utilize it to keep me sharp and prepared. Being nervous is now a benefit that serves me and no longer a millstone around my neck.

This book is not about the art of speaking in public. There are already many great books and online resources about public speaking, and I encourage you to learn continually as much as possible about

the art of speaking in public. It is undoubtedly more a skill that we can learn than it is a natural gift.

This book will help you with the steps you need to take to become a conference speaker. I will guide you to qualify your intent and motivation to speak and make the first steps in speaking at a conference. Once you receive that first speaking invitation, you will need to be aware of several things to consider before you walk on to that stage.

## **2. A brave new world: The pandemic & new opportunities**

Early in 2020, I was planning a trip to Moscow to speak at a software conference. I was in the same city the year prior, and I could not wait to see that beautiful and mysterious city once again. I planned my flight from Johannesburg via London where I had lived a few years, and the idea was to visit good friends and hire a car and drive to all the places that I loved in England.

Then came lockdown with travel restrictions. We have all read of the so-called “new normal.” We live in unprecedented times caused by the global health pandemic, and most of us had to get used to working from home. I was very disappointed. I was also scheduled to speak at several conferences in different countries, and now there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future of travel and conferences.

We realized that working from home can work. Many people have been telling me they are much more productive working from home. With less travel time needed to go to the office every day, we found more time to work. But like many, I also found that the difference between work and home time became blurred. Many suffered burnout. We all had to learn to find that difficult balance between working and leisure and family time.

Conference organizers realized that virtual conferences could work. It is easier to organize with fewer costs and arrangements around venue hire, hotel and flight bookings. They learned that they could still monetize their events by selling tickets or allowing virtual attendance for free, which opened events to many more delegates

and therefore, better sponsorship opportunities.

Thus entered a brave new world for conference speakers and delegates. In the past, I had to decline some speaking invitations as I either did not have available time for travel or because sometimes they ask speakers to cover some or all of their expenses.

I once was invited to speak at a technology conference in Riga, Latvia. I was excited to visit that beautiful city, but I learned a big lesson on that trip. I had to fly from Johannesburg to Paris with a layover before my flight to Riga. It was almost exactly 24 hours since I left my house before I wearily walked into the hotel. I was there for only two days, barely had time to explore the city and then had to travel another 24 hours to get home. I was exhausted, and it took me a good two weeks to fully recover. I promised myself that I would never do this again. Unless I can spend a bit more time in a city and at least enjoy some of the scenery and cuisine, and of course have some time to rest, I would never repeat that mistake.

I am sure that many readers who have travelled for business would agree with me: business travel is not that much fun. Over the years, I have seen much of the world through business travel. It was at first something I looked forward to. Now I wouldn't say I like it much. It may be that I am growing older, and I'm not too fond of time away from my son and family. In 2019 I took six trips overseas to speak at conferences. I doubt that I would even consider more than 1 per year from now on.

Luckily the brave new world of virtual conference speaking came to my rescue. I can apply to speak and accept invitations to many more international events. There are no flights and visas and lonely hotel rooms anymore. I can change my t-shirt to an office shirt 10 minutes before I speak!

I can not write a book about conference speaking without addressing this brave new world. In-person events will continue, albeit to a limited extent, depending on where the global pandemic and access to vaccines will take us. I will still be covering the essential things

to consider when you have to travel to speak at in-person conferences. But I will also provide guidance around virtual conference speaking.

We live in unrepresented times. But we are also offered unrepresented opportunities to speak at conferences, grow our skills and authority as speakers, and expand our network and influence. These are uncertain but also exciting times!

### 3. What do you have to say: How to get others to listen?

When people ask me to give them guidance about entering the conference speaking circuit, I usually ask them this question: “What do you have to say?” It seems like a relatively simple question, but many people have to think about this. For me, this is an essential starting point on this journey. You have to know what it is that you want to speak about.

Another way to think about it is to ask “What do you want to be known for?” You are most likely a very experienced and talented individual who can speak about many different topics. But you must decide on one main topic for now. I say *for now* as we can pivot our journey in time. You may learn new things, work in other fields in your career, or simply form other interests. This is good. Later on, you can add to your repertoire of topics to speak on. When you start on this journey, however, you need to be as focused as possible.

Focus is needed as you will have to put in a lot of effort to get going initially. Focus on only one topic at the start. It will help you with conference selection and building your brand (more about your brand later). It will not help you if you try and speak on too many topics. As the saying goes, this is like “throwing mud at the wall and hoping something sticks.”

How do you initially decide on your main topic? It comes down to interest and experience. If you are interested in a topic, you will be passionate about it. Passion for your subject will take you far on this journey. It will give you the needed momentum to go the

distance. A topic you love will inspire you to learn as much as you can. The more you know, the easier it is to share it with confidence to others. Audiences respond well to a speaker who shows passion for their topic. It can be like electricity in the air when you show enthusiasm and passion, igniting others to grow an interest in you as a speaker.

Knowledge about your topic is essential. But more important is experience. Without experience, you will be an “echo” who simply repeats what you have read in books or have learned from others. To be a “voice” and avoid merely echoing what others have said, you need real-life experience. Audiences are drawn to story-telling, and the best story you can tell is about your personal journey, the lessons you learned, and the mistakes you made. Experience will also allow you to have authority which will entitle you to your own opinion.

A few years ago, I set myself a goal for the year: I wanted to speak at two local conferences and one international one. At that time, I was working in the field of software quality management at a bank. I attended a local conference the year before and then asked myself “Why can I not speak at the next one?” At that time, I had no knowledge about the conference circuit and how to get a chance to speak. I submitted my proposal on the conference website and forgot about it. I was not very hopeful of getting a chance as I was not known as a speaker.

To my surprise, I received an invite to meet the conference organizers. They were interested in my topic, but they wanted to “check me out” for themselves as they did not know me. I will address the issue of talk proposal submission later in the book, but they liked what they saw and were excited about my proposal. I finally had my chance.

The talk at that conference was a success, and I received much welcomed positive feedback. I focused on story-telling, relying on my experience, and on being my authentic self. People are drawn

to authenticity. They are also drawn to us sharing about our own mistakes and failures.

That same year I was invited to speak at four other local conferences. One of the speakers at the first conference heard me speak and invited me to speak at a conference he was arranging in Portugal. In time more invites followed. I learned then that conference organizers look out for events similar to what they want to organize to find speakers for their events. They look at the speakers and their brands and often invite them based on what they see at other events.

When you focus on a topic to speak on and find your first opportunity, others may follow quickly. This brings me to the next important point: What are conference *organizers* looking for?

Some organizations may arrange a conference for reasons that are not financial. They may want to draw people to their brand. They may be an industry body that facilitates conferences for the sake of expanded knowledge in their field. But there are always costs involved, even if the main focus is not on making any profit. They may simply want to be able to cover expenses.

Most conferences, however, are about profit. Full-time professional conference organizers aim to make a profit from their conferences. It is their full-time job, the way through which they earn a living. It is essential to keep this in mind. This should then let you ask “why would they want to invite me to speak?” The organizers are looking for topics and expert speakers who will draw as many paying delegates or corporate sponsors as possible.

You have to ask yourself what you can do to make yourself an attractive consideration by organizers as your presence at the conference will inspire people to pay for the event. The answer to the question is all about your personal brand.

Along with the essential questions around conference organizers’ goals and motivation, we have to ask ourselves another question: What are conference *delegates* looking for?



Many of you who read this book have been delegates at conferences. We may all have different reasons for attending a particular conference, but I think the main reasons people want to participate in such events are the following:

We go to a conference to *gain knowledge*. We are drawn to the event's topic or to some of the speakers who are considered experts, and we aim to learn something new. Depending on the nature of the conference, we may want to learn new things relevant to an interest or a hobby, or we may like to learn to advance in our careers (or to pivot to a new career.)

We attend conferences to *network*. As these events attract many others who share our interests, we can meet many people who could contribute to us somehow. Sometimes I find more benefit in meeting new people at a conference than listening to some of the speakers. You are only as strong as your network. As the saying goes "it is not what you know but who you know."

These two considerations will help you as you prepare to approach conference organizers for a speaking opportunity. Your brand, knowledge and experience need to be positioned so that it will motivate delegates to register and attend your sessions. Your approach needs to align to delegates' motivation to learn something.

Always keep in mind the needs of others to network. If your presentation went well, many delegates would like to meet you and add you to their network. You will also benefit significantly in adding many of these delegates to your network. From this network could come invaluable knowledge sharing, future speaking invites or even future job opportunities.

## 4. Your Brand: What do you want to be known for?

In the previous chapter, I wrote about two important things: what are conference organizers and conference delegates looking for? In both cases, it comes down to the brand and credibility of the speakers.

Your personal brand is all about how others perceive you. People will listen to you if their perception is that they will benefit from listening to you. Often time conference speakers believe that their topic in itself may draw people. If you are an expert in your field with great wisdom, insight, and experience to share, it would still come down to how people perceive you.

If you are not known as a speaker, conference organizers have very little to rely on when considering your application to speak at their event. They would want to know about the other events you have spoken at, but this is a challenge when you first start this journey. It is the proverbial “chicken and egg” situation: they want experienced speakers but may not want to allow a newbie speaker to gain experience at their conference. The risk may be perceived as too high to give you a chance. So you need to be smart about how you position yourself and the brand perception you position to them.

In the previous chapter, I wrote about “What do you have to say?” and “What do you want to be known for?” I can not overemphasize the importance of these points. The first step to building your brand is to work on creating the ideal perception of that brand. Unless you have decided what you want to be known for it will not be easy to

build your brand perception.

I have already referred to *authenticity*. Creating a perception of your brand, of what you aspire to be known for, does not have to be inauthentic. The word “perception” sometimes carries a negative connotation. For some, it may mean the same as “deception”, and that is not at all what I am advocating. You have to have *substance*, as perception without substance will inevitably fail.

Substance, in this context, is about your authority and experience in your chosen field of expertise. For all the conference organizers know, you could be the best speaker they could ever invite to their event. But how would they learn about your substance if it is not clear through the perception you have created?

A few years ago, when I worked in software quality assurance at the bank I mentioned, I was first exposed to *Artificial Intelligence (AI)*. At that time, I knew nothing about the topic. We were working with an international consulting firm on our first proof of concept. I was fascinated by the subject and consumed many books and online videos. It felt like I discovered the “thing” I would be most interested in and went on a quest of self-education.

I started attending AI conferences and networking with as many people as possible who work in the field. It became an obsession for me. Then something strange dawned on me: I do not know much less than the many experts who presented at conferences and whose books I have been reading. I do not mean this arrogantly, and I am indeed still on a continuous quest to gain more knowledge in this fast-changing field. I always feel I do not nearly know enough about the topic. But my journey of education has been paying off. I have learned a great deal about the subject and could speak with authority on it.

I also realized that to learn as much as possible, I had to “put myself out there.” I mean that the best way to learn about a topic is to aspire to teach it. At this time, I decided to pivot my career toward AI, and I also had to change the brand perception I had spent years

creating. Luckily I had an excellent foundation to build on. I was already somewhat known as a speaker, but this time I applied to speak at an AI event. It was daunting! But I knew I had something to say.

Early on in this new quest, I discovered a niche. I am not a very technical person as I did not study computer engineering like many of my colleagues. My field of study as an undergraduate - and still, my life-long passion - was *philosophy* (and aspects of psychology, sociology, and religion). Due to circumstances that today seem providential, I ended up in a technology business development career.

By far, the books I read and the conferences I attended on AI were technical in nature. My training in philosophy and my experience in business development allowed me a unique lens through which to view the topic of AI and the advancement of technology. So I decided that I would build my brand perception accordingly. I applied to speak at AI conferences, focusing on the philosophy of this new kind of technology coupled with its business application.

Very few other speakers at the time were focusing on the same things. I had found my niche. I had found the answer to the question of “What I want to be known for?” and hence on “What do I have to say?” I worked on my brand perception as a thought-leader in the philosophical and business application of AI.

In time the conference speaking invites started streaming in.

## 5. Building your brand perception

In the previous chapter, I wrote on creating the perception of your brand. I wrote about my journey and how I became interested in AI, how I did everything I could to learn as much about it as possible, and that I pivoted my personal brand perception toward becoming a thought-leader in the field.

In this chapter, I aim to provide you with the practical steps you can take to build your personal brand perception in order to enter the conference speaking circuit. I want to focus on *networking* and on your *online presence* in particular.

One of the best ways to become a conference speaker is through your *network and recommendations* if you are not well known. The first step is to determine if some of your contacts speak at conferences topical to your area of interest and reach out to them, asking if they would recommend you. Remember that others will not easily recommend you if they don't know you well and if they do not think you are ready to speak at conferences. When someone recommends you, they place their reputation on the line.

You may want to start with reaching out to current or previous colleagues. If you worked closely with them, they would know your area of expertise and your ability to speak well while presenting. Ask them about any events where they may have been speakers in the past or future events they have been invited to. They can then send a message to the relevant event organizers asking them to consider you. A recommendation removes you from the “totally unknown” category to the “person of possible interest” category.

Another consideration is to ask your contacts if they would be willing to mentor you. Keep in mind that people have limited time,

but you may also be surprised about some people's willingness to assist you. If you do not ask, you will not know. You can agree on the duration and format of such mentoring. For instance, you could decide on the approach and arrange to meet once a week for a few weeks. When your mentor is confident about your suitability to speak at a conference, they will most likely be happy to recommend you.

The other tool at your disposal is *your online presence* and in particular social media. When you approach conference organizers, they will most likely Google you to see if you have a website and appear in searches related to articles or video content. They will most certainly search for your profile on LinkedIn.

I recommend these steps to create an online presence that will give you success with conference organizers:

### **LinkedIn profile**

It is essential to have a good LinkedIn profile. It is good for networking and when you search for a new job. And it is vital if you wish to speak at conferences. Keep in mind that people who view your profile can quickly make up their mind, so it is essential to create a good impression. Make sure you have a good profile picture. It is worth considering a professional photographer. You will need profile pictures for your social media channels, for your website, and when you submit your speaking proposal.

Your LinkedIn background photo (banner) should be professional and contribute to the perception you create. I would advise against using one of the default images. It is relatively easy to create a background picture with the right dimensions using a free service like [Canva.com](https://www.canva.com)<sup>2</sup>. The image should be pleasant to look at, contain imagery relevant to the target perception, and contain your website URL.

Many think that LinkedIn is simply an online resume, so their focus is to list their employment history and add a lot of detail - most of

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<sup>2</sup>[www.canva.com](https://www.canva.com)

it usually not relevant - to every job they list. Keep in mind that recruiters or in this case conference organizers will only view your profile for a few seconds before they will decide to look further or to move on to other things.

More important than your career history is that your first and last names are capitalized (I know this is common sense, but I am often shocked at how many people do not do this. It is very unprofessional!) Next in importance is your headline description. You only have limited space here, so you need to make sure that it is dynamic and catches the eye. If the headline is the only thing a recruiter or conference organizer will look at you better make sure it is perfect. Remember: it is all about perception. If the conference organizer only spends a few seconds looking at your LinkedIn profile, what will they think? Will they be left with the impression that it is worth looking at the rest of your profile as this person seems like a good candidate speaker for their event?

Other important elements relevant to your LinkedIn profile are your connections base and the topics and articles you share. All of these contribute to the perception you wish to create. There are many good books and resources about a good LinkedIn profile, and I encourage you to investigate this. Ensure your profile is excellent and that it will make an impression.

There are other social media platforms to consider, but LinkedIn is by far the most important. I have had great success with this platform but somewhat limited success with others like Twitter. Here you can view my [LinkedIn](#)<sup>3</sup> and [Twitter](#)<sup>4</sup> profiles.

### **Your website**

From a perception creation perspective and next to the importance of a good LinkedIn profile, is the value of a suitable website. You can do a lot with a website, and you can keep it reasonably simple. There are many free and easy to use platforms to consider. I have

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.linkedin.com/in/johanosteyn/>

<sup>4</sup><https://twitter.com/AlforBusiness>

built [my website](#)<sup>5</sup> with [Wix.com](#)<sup>6</sup>. There are many things about my site that I think can be improved on, but for now, it is doing the job.

What do I use my site for? It is a central space where people can view my bio and some of my pictures. I have a blog where I post articles I have written and published with various technology platforms and news services. I have an option for people to subscribe to my [newsletter](#)<sup>7</sup> and a page where I frequently update all the different past and future [conferences](#)<sup>8</sup> where I have been or will be a speaker. I also have a page where I post [videos](#)<sup>9</sup> of some of my conference speaking events or videos that I have created myself.

You may think that you may not have much to add to a website as you have not published articles, do not have a newsletter and can not list any conferences where you were a speaker. You can still start small, even if you have a 1-page site with your pic and bio. I always encourage those I mentor for conference speaking to create a few short videos where they speak in camera on various topics relevant to their field of expertise. These are relatively easy to record, as long as you have adequate light on your face (the best is natural light from a nearby window), decent sound (most PC or laptop microphones will do at first), and a good, clean background (a wall at the back is a good start). Keep it as simple as possible. You do not need professional video editing software or music fading in and out.

Why is it useful to have a few videos on your website? Well, if you have not spoken at conferences before and therefore can not exhibit video recordings of your talks, you have nothing to show conference organizers. They want to see that you look presentable and can speak well. So just make a few videos yourself. It will help create the perception that you need in order to attract interest when you apply to speak at a conference.

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.aiforbusiness.net/>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.wix.com/>

<sup>7</sup>[shorturl.at/LAPW4](http://shorturl.at/LAPW4)

<sup>8</sup><https://www.aiforbusiness.net/speaking>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.aiforbusiness.net/talk-videos>



## 6. Launching out: Aiming for your first conference

You are finally ready to submit your application to speak at a conference. Let us briefly recap what we have covered up to now.

We looked at why conference speaking is important and what it could mean for your career. We looked at the brave new world and the speaking opportunities we have now that many conferences are virtual. We looked at the things conference organizers and delegates are looking for in potential speakers. We also discussed the creation of your brand and the perception you wish to convey. In the previous chapter, we looked at some practical steps to create and grow your brand perception utilizing social media and an internet presence.

You are now ready to apply to speak at your first conference. Or if you have done this before, you are prepared to expand your reach: maybe you have spoken at local events, but now you are ready to enter the international speaking scene.

The next step in your journey is to find and shortlist the conferences you would want to apply for. If you are new to conference speaking or still somewhat unknown on the circuit, start small. You will learn valuable lessons when you speak at smaller, local events. Remember, I also mentioned the benefit of recommendations. It is an excellent benefit if someone you know who is a conference speaker can provide you with a personal recommendation. This is a good place to start when aiming for your first conference.

Here I wish to provide a focal piece of advice: *Small is not always bad*. Even if you are a seasoned conference speaker, you may find that some of the smaller, lesser-known conferences can be of great

benefit to you. You never know who you may influence or who you may meet at the event. It may just be someone who will play an indispensable part in your future.

A few months ago, I was invited to speak at a local technology conference. A few days before the event, the organizer contacted me to inform me that they have not successfully secured enough attending delegates. I was informed that they would understand if I would no longer wish to participate in the conference. My response was that I had made a commitment and that I would honour my speaking slot.

I arrived at the event an hour before I was due to speak. It was late in the day, and after the tea break, when it was my turn to speak, there were only seven people in the room. It was the organizer, the sound guy and five of the other speakers. I was introduced and walked up to the podium to deliver my prepared talk with passion and professionalism as if I was speaking to a large audience. Scanning the faces in the room, waiting for you to speak, you may never know the importance and future potential of those left to listen to you.

In attendance that day were two conference speakers who did not previously know about me. They ended up inviting me to speak at their very prominent and well-attended events. Also in the audience was a representative of a large insurance company that I have been trying to secure as a client. He came to me after the event and invited me to meet with him and his team.

### **Finding a conference to speak at**

It is relatively easy to search for and find conferences that could be of interest to you as a speaker. By now, I have a list of conferences where I have spoken at before and where I would like to speak again in the future. I know from experience that these are well-organized events, and I know the event organizers. I also have a list of events that I would never again apply to speak at due to bad experiences. I will write more about this later in the book to discuss

event organizers' maturity and professionalism and the pitfalls to avoid.

If you are not known as a speaker, start by looking for local conferences aligned to your topic of expertise and experience. Look at their past events and the people who spoke at these events. If these are people you know or know about, and if they are of good reputation, you know it is an excellent place to start. If you know some of the past speakers, you could ask them to write a short recommendation and use it as part of your speaking submission.

Once you have identified a conference where you would like to speak, look at their past programmes. Most conferences have a keynote slot: this is usually reserved for a well known and reputable speaker, and it is generally for the start of the event or the beginning of each day of the event. The keynote speakers are a priority for organizers as their profile and brand perception will play a big part in the marketing initiatives for the event.

If you are not a known speaker, it makes sense that you do not apply for the keynote slots. The organizers will most likely reject your application outright, or they may suggest another speaking slot on the programme. Either way, you risk your reputation if you go this route. Rather start small.

Many conferences provide opportunities for junior or unknown speakers in the form of a *Lightning Talk*. This is usually a 10-15 minute slot and a great opportunity to get your name on the programme. Frequently there are panel discussions moderated by a seasoned speaker. Applying to be part of the panel is also a fair consideration. You will not have the pressure of speaking on your own and your name will be listed among other experts on the panel. Both lightning talks and panel discussions are great opportunities to aim for when you start your conference speaking journey.

Before we look at the topic of speaking proposals in the next chapter, it is important to touch on future planning. When you look to identify events where you would like to speak, start by looking at

the events advertised over the next year. I usually aim for 10-15 events on an annual basis, and before I even submit my applications, I ensure that my work and family commitments for the year will accommodate it. I block off time in my diary, taking into account travel time for in-person events before submitting any applications. You do not want to receive the confirmation invite that you had worked so hard for, only to realize that you may not be available.

Conference organizers usually aim to secure speakers months before the event. They want to have most of the event programme finalized before marketing the event, securing delegate bookings on sponsor commitments. As a rule, I usually plan for at least three months between my speaking application, the approval process and the actual event.

## 7. Your proposal: Applying to speak at a conference

Now that you have identified the conferences you plan to apply for and have ensured that you have reserved your diary for the year for these events, it is time to submit your speaking proposal.

Different conference organizers have various submission methods. Some will simply list an email address on their websites, asking you to send them your proposal document. This is not a very effective method as I know from experience that it could result in many emails between organizers and potential speakers. To avoid all these delays, I submit all the details I know they would typically ask for in my proposal:

- My name, surname, company name and job title
- My bio (the same bio from my website and LinkedIn profile, also available on my website)
- My contact details (mobile phone number, email address)
- My profile picture (I have placed several photos in a DropBox folder, and I add this link so that the event organizers can choose the most suitable image for their use. Here I placed a few colour, black and white head and shoulder shots and upper body shots)
- A list of past events where I was a speaker (I add a [link to my website](#)<sup>10</sup> where I always add my speaking engagements. If you have not been a speaker at conferences in the past, you can include a link to some of the videos on your website as we discussed in a previous chapter)
- Links to my social media profiles (notably LinkedIn and Twitter)

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<sup>10</sup><https://www.aiforbusiness.net/speaking>

- Links to videos of your previous talks (if available) and also links to any articles you have written or have been featured in
- The kind of talk I am applying for (keynote, other, and/or panel discussion)
- The duration of my talk (most conference slots are 40 minutes followed by Q&A for 10 minutes. Aim for 40 minutes if the organizers have not specified it on their website)
- The intended audience (if the organizers do not specify this, indicate whether your talk is technical or non-technical, and also if it applies to beginners or experts)
- The title of my talk (keep in mind the general theme of the conference, and make sure it is a “catchy” title: something that will play well in the marketing of the event)
- The intended outcome (what will delegates get out of your presentation?)
- An intro paragraph (one paragraph that “sets the scene” - a few words that summarize your talk)
- The body of the talk (a few bullet points - short sentences only)
- A link to a short video. This usually is not needed, and organizers will not request it when you first apply. However, I have found that, as the saying goes “a picture is worth a thousand words.” I usually record a short video (less than 5 minutes) where I speak about my motivation to speak at their event, the points I will cover and the intended outcomes. Organizers really like this, in my experience. This is a worthy consideration, especially if you are not a known speaker or not known to the organizers.

The more professional and experienced conference organizers will provide potential speakers with a template - either to download, complete and submit - or as a template form on the event website. If their template does not cover all the points listed above, submit it in any case. They are bound to reach out to you and ask for these at some stage during the process.

Experienced organizers will also provide potential speakers with other important information. These may be listed on the site where

you submit your talk, or they will provide it later to the shortlisted speakers. These are things they may mention to you should they choose to arrange an interview with you, but either way, make sure you ask for this info:

- What is the target date for you to send them your presentation slides?
- Will they be providing speakers with a presentation template or can you use our own?
- Who is your primary contact (event organizer), and what are their contact details?
- Will they require a promo video from you to use as part of the event marketing?
- If it is an in-person event, make sure you ask for details about the costs they will cover, flights, hotel, visa (if you need a visa they will need to send you a letter of invitation.)
- If it is a virtual event, make sure to ask about the platform. Many organizers use Zoom, Microsoft Teams or webinar platforms, such as WebinarJam. It is vital that you are familiar with the chosen platform and that you are able to access it on your PC/Laptop. (The last thing you want is to realize a few minutes before you are due to speak that you cannot access the platform. This may be due to your computer specs or things like admin rights.) Also, check if the organizers want you to use a virtual background provided by them.
- In the case of a virtual event, it is always good to request a “run-through” session a few days before the event. This will ensure that you can access and use the platform. It is also a good time to ask any other questions that the organizers have not answered at that stage.

One last and very important point: *Always make sure you have permission from your employer to speak at these events.* Some companies are not very strict about this and will allow you to speak at any conference on their behalf. It should be stated in your employment contract, but whether it is the case or not, always make sure you obtain the needed approval in writing. Other companies

are more stringent, and they would want to review the conferences you are aiming for and sometimes demand to approve your application and/or slide deck. Sometimes an employer will permit you to speak but insist that you do not use their logo and that you need to state at the start of your talk that you do not officially represent them and that therefore your views and opinions are your own.

If it is an in-person conference, keep in mind the company policies around leave and travel. You may be required to submit a leave request for the days you will be away from the office. Ensure that you secure approval as early as possible. Some companies have strict regulations around travel, particularly if your intended destinations are countries posing health risks or you may be endangered due to current or potential political or military conflict. (It may also apply for the countries you will travel through en route to your final destination.)

Provide your employer (and for that matter, your close relatives) with your itinerary, the airline and hotel contact details, and that of the event organizers. Familiarise yourself with your nation's embassy contact details in the country you will be travelling to.



## **8. Receiving feedback: What if your proposal is declined?**

In the previous chapter, we discussed the process of submitting your talk to conference organizers, and the essential questions you need to obtain answers for from the outset. You also need to ensure that you understand their approval process and the target date for feedback.

As mentioned earlier, some event organizers require that you send your proposal via email, but others have a portal for submissions. In my experience, the more mature event organizations have a portal that acts like a “one-stop-shop” for the complete process. Such portals provide you with visibility on your progress through the approval steps.

The desired outcome is, of course, that your application is approved. In some cases they may tentatively decline your submission, asking you to make changes to your proposal and/or slides. In other cases, you may receive a message stating that your submission was declined.

I have often been frustrated with this process. In a later chapter, I will write about the maturity of event organizers and avoiding some pitfalls. I have unfortunately often seen how unorganized and unprofessional organizers can be. I have several times sent a message stating that I no longer wish to be part of their event due to the amateurish nature of their conduct and communication.

It is never a nice feeling to be unsuccessful. Some people deal better with perceived failure than others. Failure is often a wonderful

opportunity to learn in life, which is certainly true as it applies to conference speaking. Professional event organizers will provide you with the reasons they did not approve your submission, but if they fail to do so, you need to reach out to them to obtain the reasons. How else would you know what you could improve in the future?

My speaking submissions have been declined several times, and I have come to learn that this is simply part of the process. More often than not, the reasons were logistical rather than about my profile or the topic I proposed to speak on. Some of these reasons were because I submitted my proposal too late and that the program has already been filled.

Other times it is around costs. As I live in South Africa, the flight costs to destinations in other countries are very high, but I have also found ways around this issue. As a rule, I never speak at conferences where my costs will not be covered, but if I was declined simply on costs and it is a conference I aspired to speak at, I may propose to cover some of the costs myself. It requires a discussion and agreement with the event organizers, but you could commit to paying for the hotel if they would pay for the flights or pay a portion of the combined costs.

A few years ago, I received an invite to speak at a conference in Eastern Europe. I had also applied to speak at a conference in Portugal that was to take place a few days prior. The Portugal conference committee declined me based on the flight costs. I arranged a call with both event organizers, and we reached an agreement that the Portugal people would pay only for my flights to and from Lisbon and that the other event paid for the rest. In both cases, they achieved savings, and I was able to speak at both events.

## 9. The maturity of event organizers

If there were chapters in a book about conference speaking that I wish I could have read years ago, then it would be this one and the next: *The maturity of event organizers* and *Pitfalls to avoid*. Here I want to share some of the main lessons I have learned over the years, and hopefully, this will help you avoid some of the pitfalls around conference speaking.

Some event organizers are what you could call “fly by night”. They are in it for the money only, and they aim to make as much money as possible. They do not care much about the event’s professionalism, and they certainly do not care about the speakers’ interests and reputations. They want to arrange an event as quickly as possible, involve as many speakers as they can and sell delegate tickets like it is an auction.

Earlier, I wrote about the brave new world where virtual events’ popularity and growth have opened many more opportunities to speak. It has unfortunately also led to an increase of event organizers of a low reputation looking to make a quick buck. Now they do not have to concern themselves with booking and paying for the venue, and they do not have to invest in travel and hotel arrangements for the speakers. With a virtual platform and a little bit of social media marketing, almost anyone can arrange a conference. These people typically aim for potential speakers who are not known and who may be desperate for an opportunity to speak at a conference.

Involvement with these events can be damaging to your speaking career. I would strongly advise prospective speakers to have patience, spend time determining the event organizers’ credibility

and ask others for their views. Instead, wait for the right event to launch your speaking career, which will increase your credibility and positively contribute to your brand perception.

You may be looking for events to speak at or an organizer may approach you to speak at an event they are arranging. The natural place to start is to look at their website and the organizers' social media profiles. If they are not known for organizing reputable events and if their website is unprofessional (especially if there is no website for the event), kindly decline and stay away.

Another thing that should make you think twice is when you receive an invite on short notice. I have many times received invitations to speak at events only a few days before the conference. This should always make you wonder about their professionalism and organizational ability. It should also make you ask "why the short notice?" Many times it is because they could not secure enough speakers or that some speakers have declined. Do you really want to be part of such an event? Something is wrong. Stay away.

I have received speaking invites where the minimum criteria are that I need to secure a certain amount of paying delegates. They may also demand that your employer sponsor the event or some aspect of it for you to speak. The organizers are not primarily interested in your ability to speak, your reputation as a speaker or the content you can deliver. They want money out of you. Later on, I will write about how you can help event organizers promote the events you will be speaking at, but remember that it is not your responsibility to get people to attend. I will not prostitute myself out in this way. Stay away.

Any sense that event planners are not organized makes me think twice before committing to speak. The way they treat prospective speakers is a good indication of their level of professionalism. Too many emails from them, asking for info or content I have already sent them, or the involvement of too many people from their side, contradicting each other, makes me doubt. If they struggle to get

me on board as a speaker due to communication issues, I wonder how they will arrange the event. Stay away.

## 10. Pitfalls to avoid

In the previous chapter, we discussed some vital considerations applicable to conference organizers. These were lessons that I have learned over the years, and I wish someone had told me about them before I embarked on my journey as a conference speaker.

There are several other essential things I discovered. Whereas the previous chapter was all about conference organizers and the things to look out for before committing as a speaker, I want to discuss some other important things to always keep in mind.

### **Be professional, not perfect**

At the outset of my speaking career, I used to place myself under unnecessary pressure. I wanted my talk and presentation to be perfect. I will always support the idea that we should be proficient. We owe it to the conference organizers and delegates to add value as experts and professionals.

When I wrote my first book, I learned an important phrase: “Published is better than perfect.” As a writer, you will never write a perfect book. Even months after publication, you may notice errors that may embarrass you. But this is part of the growing experience. Do the best you can and put your work out there to benefit others. If you aim to write a perfect book, or for that matter to deliver a perfect presentation, you will never get it done.

The point is that you know you have something to say, you have experience and expertise to help others. Always focus on the people who will benefit from your presentation and stop worrying so much about yourself. In a sense, a good conference speaker is someone who “got over themselves.”

Once I delivered a talk to an audience in Germany. It was a two-hour presentation at the end of the first day of the conference. The

delegates have been sitting in sessions all day long, and you could sense the fatigue in the room. All through my talk, the audience looked at me with stone-cold faces. They showed no emotion, did not make a sound, and I was sure that my address would be a disaster.

To my surprise, I received a standing ovation at the end of my talk, and many people lined up to speak with me. Some wanted to take selfies with me, and others requested that I sign their conference programs. I felt like a celebrity! Many commented about how my talk made them think differently about things (my presentation was about Artificial Intelligence and the future of work), and how the principles I conveyed would benefit their careers.

I learned many important lessons that day. Firstly, do not worry too much if the audience does not respond as you hope they would neither if they do not seem to show much enthusiasm during your talk. Secondly, and the most important lesson from that day, was that others could learn and benefit from what I had to say. I can help people, even if I am imperfect and even if I am my own worst enemy by being over-critical about myself. It is not about me. It is all about them.

### **Nervous every time?**

This realization will also help you with the nerves. I have never not been nervous before speaking at a conference, and I doubt it will ever change. It is a very human emotion. It can be debilitating, causing you to fear it so much that you never do it, or it can be to your advantage. Over the years, I have learned how to deal with being nervous. I expect it now every time, and I use it to help me.

I also learned how my body responds to being nervous and how to handle it. You have most likely heard about our “fight or flight” response to danger. When I walk through the African bush and hear a branch break, I will instinctively freeze. My breathing will become shallow, and my hearing will be heightened. I will start to sweat as my body gets ready to run or to fight. When you feel

nervous about your talk, you will experience the same things. Your body does not know it is a conference in a safe venue and not a lion stalking you from behind.

I have learned that my body responds in this way - and always will - before I walk on to the stage. I know I will sweat. I usually wear white or black shirts as it does not show sweat marks. Ladies (and some guys) wear makeup so the fact that your face will be sweating is a consideration when you choose the makeup you will be using.

I have also learned to control my breathing. Early in my speaking career, I would walk up to the podium to find that I was out of breath. I struggled to get through the first few minutes of my talk. I now know that it is a normal response (remember the African bush?) So what I do now is to make sure I take deep breaths in the few minutes before being invited on to the stage. I control my breathing and ensure I am not out of breath.



# 11. In-person events: Important considerations

In the previous chapter, I have spent time discussing the challenges around wanting to be a perfect speaker and dealing with nervousness. There are some other important things to keep in mind. These may seem simple and somewhat straight-forward, but I have learned to keep these in mind the hard way:

## **Keep your slide presentation simple**

Back to the earlier point on perfection, you may be tempted to make your slides look amazing with lots of colours and animations. Remember that people are not likely to remember your slides and all the information they contain. People will be left with only with an *impression*.

I always design my slide deck, starting with the last slide. What is the final slide I will present, and what is the primary impression I want to leave with the audience? You have already submitted your talk proposal which was approved by the conference organizers. Stick to your submission and do not be tempted to change things before you speak.

Avoid using too many words on your slides. You do not want people to spend all their time reading your slides while not listening to what you have to say. I always use the least amount of words possible and rather use a picture on every slide. We remember images more than words. The images on my slides help me remember what I wanted to say on each slide, and it allows me to flow naturally through my slides. Your presentation should not provide information, but it should be one of a story that people can resonate

with and one that they can remember.

Always keep in mind that the way your presentation looks to you on your laptop will most likely not be exactly the same on the projector screens.

Avoid using animations or embedded videos in your slides as these may not flow well. Remember that colours like yellow may project as white which may mess up your slides. Always keep it simple. You should not impress your audience with your slides, rather impress them with your presentation's simplicity and natural flow.

I would strongly advise against slides that need an internet connection. You may want to stream an online video but never assume there will be a good internet connection. This may be a particular challenge when you want to do a demo. Check with the organizers beforehand on internet availability and quality, and test it before you speak. Test your slides on the projector before your talk to make sure they look the way you planned. You can do this in the morning before the start of the event or between sessions.

### **The sound team**

Introduce yourself to the sound team as soon as you arrive at the event. These guys are working under pressure, and they can make or break your presentation. Check with them on microphone options. Sometimes you do not have a choice around the one you need to use, but often you may have a choice. Some speakers are comfortable holding a microphone in their hands, and others would prefer a lapel microphone.

### **Laptop use**

Confirm with the organizers in advance about the use of your laptop. In many cases, they will ask you to send your slides before the event or provide your slides on an external drive on the day of the event. It is another reason to keep your slides simple as your slides will sometimes display differently on different laptops.

### **Unforeseen issues**

Keep a copy of your slides on an external device in case there

are issues with your laptop. Save an additional copy on a cloud folder like DropBox. I usually send a copy of my slides to the organizers before the event (whether they ask for it or not.) As an extra measure, make a printout of your slides to have on hand if you cannot present your slides at all due to technical issues (the laptop or projector may malfunction or there may be a power failure).

### **Monitors and timing**

At some events, you will have monitors on the stage at floor level where you can see your slides as you speak. These are called *comfort monitors*. These are a great help to follow your slides as you talk while facing the audience throughout your session. Sometimes there is a countdown clock displayed on these monitors or a separate one somewhere in the room so that you are aware of the time left before your session should conclude.

### **The speaker's lounge**

At some conferences, you will have access to a speaker's lounge. This is a good place to meet with the event organizers and the other speakers. It is a space where you can relax or do your final preparations before your talk.

Do not spend too much time here. It is advisable to attend some of the other sessions as a sign of support and to get a general "feel" for the audience. Use the breaks between sessions to speak with some delegates. You will be meeting interesting people, and you can ask them about their experience thus far and about what they are expecting from your session. If you had already presented, you could ask them for feedback.

### **Other important things to remember**

A last few valuable points to keep in mind for in-person events: Always keep on hand copies of your travel itinerary, hotel bookings, passport, visa, and make sure that you have a transfer arranged from the airport to the hotel. Leave nothing for assumptions.

Keep in mind any timezone differences. Ensure you informed your bank about your trip so that your bank cards will work in the

countries you are travelling to (or travelling through). Have some cash on hand in the relevant currencies. And make sure your mobile provider is notified if needed so that you can use your phone while roaming.

# 12. Virtual events: Important considerations

## Slides in a virtual world

Now we turn our attention to *virtual events*. Many of the points in the previous chapter relate to virtual events, such as those around your slides. I have found that some webinar platforms do not share the slide deck very well, and there can be a lag between your slide transitions. This is frustrating and makes it challenging to present well. Some platforms allow you to upload your slides, which I have found to be a better option. Investigate the conference platform and check with the organizers.

## Pre-recording your presentation

Some conference organizers may request that you pre-record your presentation. In a way, this is better as it minimizes potential problems on the day of the event. However, I find it somewhat more challenging to do a recording than speaking at a live session. For me, there is something about the thrill of the live event that makes me communicate better. Others may prefer to do a recording as you can do multiple takes and get your presentation as good as possible.

The easiest way I found to do a recording is to use Zoom. You can present your slides and speak in-camera as you present. My only issue with Zoom (and some of the other platforms) is that the slides take up most of the recording screen and the video with the speaker occupies a small little space in the corner. The delegates have a good view of the slide deck, but the presenter is relatively small.

What I found works best for me is to use a green screen behind me and record myself as I go through the slides. I then use iMovie to

overlay my face on the slides. I create my slides keeping enough space on the image where I can insert my video. This is a bit more complex, and not all speakers have access to or knowledge about professional video editing software. Here is an example of a [video I submitted previously](#).<sup>11</sup>

### **Sound, lights, action!**

Whether you do a live virtual presentation or submit a recording, it is vital to keep the following in mind. An excellent virtual presentation needs good sound, good light, and a suitable background. The speaker's posture is critical. Most laptops these days have good microphones, so as long as you sit near your computer and limit background noise, your audio will be suitable. I use an app called [Krisp.ai](#)<sup>12</sup> to eliminate background noise.

The best option for good lighting is natural light. Move your desk to face a window so that you have an appropriate amount of light on your face. Keep in mind that the time of your presentation may be when you do not have adequate natural light (such as late afternoons or in the evening) so you have to invest in good lights.

Keep your background simple. A lot of detail in the background, especially movement like people walking behind you, can cause a distraction. I use a white wall behind me. Most platforms have virtual background options, but I have found that it does not display well if your actual background is cluttered or if there is movement.

### **Posture & multiple screens**

Consider your posture and your relation to the camera. Some keep their laptops flat on the desks, resulting in them looking down at the camera. I use a shoebox on my desk with my laptop on top of it. My camera is directly in front of me as I sit up straight. It looks more professional.

I use two screens in my home office. Keep in mind that when you share your screen, it may share as “presenter mode” and not the full

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<sup>11</sup><https://youtu.be/VkKrhRDrKHk>

<sup>12</sup><https://krisp.ai/>

screen. Test this beforehand, considering the conference platform in use. It is better to unplug your second screen to avoid this issue.

### **Calendars, timezones and links**

Conference organizers should send you a calendar meeting invite containing the link to access when presenting. Sometimes the link is only available on the day of the conference so it may be shared with you a few hours (or minutes) before your speaking slot. Keep this in mind as you do not want to beg them for a link a few minutes before speaking, as organizers may forget about it. Remember they are swamped on the day of the event, managing the logistics and moderating the various sessions.

I have found that many times organizers may not send me a calendar invite, but still, I will reserve the time in my diary. A key thing to keep in mind here is time zone differences and time changes at certain times of the year due to daylight savings. It is better if the calendar invite comes from the organizers as it will be booked correctly into your diary.

# 13. Other vital things to keep in mind

In the previous two chapters, I wrote about essential things to keep in mind regarding your slides and about in-person and virtual events. In this chapter, I will share other important things that I have learned over the years.

## Planning and timing

Be realistic with the time needed to prepare for your presentation. I have never been someone who managed to complete tasks far ahead of time. In high school, I did not complete homework or prepared for exams until the last moment. I have always admired other students who did their work diligently ahead of time. But I learned that it is just how I work. I need the pressure.

As a public speaker, I tend to do the same. My work with clients and self-study fills my head with ideas, but it is as if I need it to gestate before I can use what I have learned for a presentation. Leading up to a conference, I start planning my talk in my head, and sometimes I will make notes. But I usually finalize my slides and my presentation's storyline only a few days before the event.

It is how I operate best, but I sometimes place unnecessary pressure on myself. Things can happen before your talk consuming more of your time than you thought it would, like project delivery work. Now you find yourself with much less time to prepare than you had planned.

It is better to give yourself more time than you think you need to prepare for your talk. I have also learned that the more I gain experience as a conference speaker, the easier it is to prepare and the less time I need. Because I know my topic well, I can speak at



any given moment without planning or slides and deliver a good presentation. Only experience and practice will result in this.

### **Travel and fatigue**

If you need to travel to an in-person conference, you should plan your travel carefully. Never let conference organizers book your flights before they check with you. I have found that good organizers will send several itinerary options to consider. Pay attention to any layover time and airport options. I like to fly via Rome or Paris as I know the airports well with lounges that I can access to rest and refresh. The layover time via these airports is also shorter in my experience than with other airports. Be reasonable with the organizers. They are trying to keep their costs low and may not accommodate your request for alternate travel options.

Even if you do not have to cross timezones, you may be exhausted when you arrive at your destination. I always plan my arrival a day before I am due to speak to rest and be at my best when it is my turn to speak. I allocate at least two days to play tourist and explore the city. If it is a multi-day event, this is easier. Some organizers will arrange tours for the speakers. I may offer to pay the hotel costs for additional days to avoid being unreasonable.

### **The day of your talk**

Make sure to greet and thank the event organizers on your arrival. Meet with the sound team to check out audio and microphone options. Project your slides before the start of the event or during one of the breaks to ensure the colours and dimensions are similar to your slides on your laptop. See if there is a lounge for speakers so that you can meet your fellow presenters. Attend some of the other sessions and meet and chat with as many delegates as you can.

I have a rule where I never review my slides on the day of my talk. By then I would expect to be as prepared as I could be and I may be tempted to make last-minute changes to my presentation, adding to the nervousness already growing in me as my timeslot creeps closer.

**Duplication and contradiction**

You may find that another speaker addresses many of the points that you have in your presentation. This is why I say that it is good to sit in on some of the other sessions. Do not be tempted to change your presentation. You may acknowledge that the other speaker touched on some of the same points, adding your perspective. It is okay to disagree or even contradict other speakers respectfully. Speakers and delegates learn when different views are considered.

Event organizers may ask whether you have presented the same talk at a previous conference. Always be honest and discuss this with them, as I do not see it being a problem. All speakers have a niche, and many of our presentations will to a smaller or larger degree touch on similar points. I would advise against using the same slides from an earlier conference. Try to change things around and add what you have learned since your last presentation.

**Self-criticism**

We can be our own worst enemies, as the saying goes. After your talk, you could fall into despair as it did not go as well as planned. You may continuously play a movie in your head, focussing on your mistakes. Remember that no one will know this. You are the one who planned your talk and if you veered off course somewhat, or if you said things that you afterwards may think as silly, relax. Only you will know about your mistakes.

If my a video or audio recording my of talk is available, I always review it later. I do this so that I can learn how to do things better next time. Many of us loath seeing or hearing ourselves, as we are often very self-aware. Do not be a critic to yourself. Look for things that you can do better but also give yourself a break. Your presentation may have helped more people than you could imagine.

**Never do a sales pitch**

If you speak on behalf of the company you work for, it is natural and right to reference your products and services. But people did not come to your session so that you could sell to them. Instead, use

real-world examples from your world as it relates to your topic. You should never share company or client confidential information.

You may also be tempted to “sell yourself”. No one likes a *know-it-all*. Yes, you are an expert in your field, which is why people came to listen to you speak. Convey the accounts of your failures with humour. It is okay not to know everything. People are drawn to authenticity and humility. I received some of the best comments from delegates after my talks because they are glad to realize they are not the only ones who make mistakes. Your audience will love you for your honesty and humility.

### **Don't overextend yourself**

As you grow in experience and reputation, you could be receiving more speaking invites than you ever anticipated. Do not commit to too many events. Keep in mind your day-job, your family commitments and your health. It is okay to decline an invite graciously.

I feel a particular loyalty to some of the event organizers who had invited me several times in the past, especially those who took a chance on me when I first started out. For me, it is a priority to support them and speak at their events as often as they would have me.

### **Help with the marketing and ticket sales**

In an earlier chapter, I wrote about your brand as a speaker and the perception you wish to create. I discussed essential tools such as social media and establishing your website. One of the best ways conference organizers promote their events and drive delegate ticket sales is through the invited speakers' efforts.

Remember I also wrote earlier that ticket sales is not primarily the responsibility of the speakers. I mentioned that some organizers would demand several confirmed delegates per speaker before adding them to their programme. Steer away from these events.

Many speakers have a strong brand and following. It is good to help spread the word about the event via social media, your newsletter, and through personal invites. Sometimes the event organizers will

allocate a few free tickets to every speaker. Use these to invite some of your customers or colleagues.

The organizers selected you as a speaker due to your brand perception and the quality of your proposal. Delegates will want to hear you speak. Always do what you can - for your brand and for that of the event - to attract delegates.

Sometimes event organizers will ask speakers to record a “sneak peek” short video to be used as part of the marketing effort. This is a great idea, almost like the trailer for a movie. You can use 1 or 2 minutes to highlight your talk and what delegates could get from your presentation. Even if this is not a requirement from the organizers, it is a great way to promote your brand and the event. The organizers of other events may see your video on your website or on social media which could convince them to approach you to speak at their events.

# Conclusion

This brings us to the end of this book. Thank you for joining me on this journey. I aimed to write a book with the needed principles and practical advice you will need as you venture out on your conference speaking journey. I hope and trust that I reached my aim and that you found this book of value. I purposely set out to write a short book that would get to the point.

**I created a summary checklist of the main points contained in my book. It can be a valuable resource for all the things you need to keep in mind as you prepare your conference submission and in-person and virtual events. [Click here to access the document](#)<sup>13</sup>**

I would love to hear from my readers. I need your feedback on how the book may have benefited you and your input on improving it in future editions. I also invite you to sign up to my [newsletter](#)<sup>14</sup> to stay informed on future books and blog posts. You will find my contact details, social media links and the newsletter subscription link at my website: [AiforBusiness.net](https://www.aiforbusiness.net)<sup>15</sup>

I wish you all the very best as you go forward from here. Remember that it is *not about you*, but about the people who need to hear what you have to say.

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<sup>13</sup><https://www.aiforbusiness.net/checklist-before-you-speak>

<sup>14</sup>[shorturl.at/LAPW4](https://shorturl.at/LAPW4)

<sup>15</sup><https://www.aiforbusiness.net/>

# About the author

Johan Steyn<sup>16</sup> is a technologist and management consultant. Over the last two decades, he was involved in computer hardware distribution, software development and mobile phone technology. He held senior roles in global consulting firms.

He is an Artificial Intelligence enthusiast and speaks globally at conferences on the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Emerging Technologies. He is the 2019 award winner: [Best AI & Robotics Management Consultant by Wealth & Finance magazine](#)<sup>17</sup>.

He is a published author who regularly contributes articles on thought-leadership to well-known publications. He is the Chair of the [Special Interest Group on Artificial Intelligence and Robotics](#)<sup>18</sup> with the IITPSA (Institute of Information Technology Professionals of South Africa).

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<sup>16</sup><https://www.aiforbusiness.net/about>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.wealthandfinance-news.com/winners/iqbusiness-south-africa/>

<sup>18</sup><https://www.iitpsa.org.za/ai-and-robotics-sig/>

