

The associations continue to publish inaccurate information and imply that the loss of the World TA Conference is my fault. I am not offered any opportunity to put an alternative perspective via their communication channels. I very much regret making this information public but I have been left with no choice.

Julie Hay

I sent an email requesting support on 7 March 2020 - the content of that is shown below.

This is the content of the reply from EATA President on 11 March 2020, which was sent to the Presidents and the Chair of the Steering Committee and only copied to me.

"I am really very careful in this process because of a situation that keeps unclear to me. I appreciate Vladimirs ideas of taking responsibility for reducing the optional damage. I agree as well to Vladimirs statement: "It seems that she in her letter calls for someone to take a Rescuer role. I don't think that it's a good idea that EATA promise to pay all losses. It seems that situation with not using the Conference venue and paying all the losses at this case is not an option suitable for all associations and we should do every thing to escape it."

I am interested in a coming together of the presidents and their experts to assess the situation and discussing options and consequences. I would appreciate if Vladimir could take the lead in this coming-together process."

Only IDTA President has ever objected to him accusing me of initiating a psychological game. The Chair of the Steering Committee apologised on the grounds that it was a private conversation and he did not expect me to be told what he had said. In spite of that accusation, I continued working hard to present alternative solutions until ITAA/EATA/FTAA/UKATA/IARTA announced the cancellation and non-postponement of the on-site conference and withdraw their support for the online conference.

This is the email I sent on 7 March 2020.

Coronavirus and the Conference – Urgent and Extremely Confidential

To the Presidents (or equivalent) of ITAA, EATA, FTAA, UKATA, IARTA and IDTA

CC Chair Steering Committee

Apologies that this looks like a very long email. I need to share my thinking because coronavirus has presented us with an unexpected and very serious problem that I cannot solve on my own. You will see below some underlining in the text – you do not need to read beyond that if it will not be possible for EATA, in particular, to guarantee that they will be able to cover a significant amount of potential conference costs if we have to cancel for any other reason than that Birmingham is in lockdown in July. Please read on for my explanation.

The confidentiality that applies to this email is because, under UK law, I am obliged to take action that will involve refusing refunds to people if at any time I believe that the limited company set up to run the conference will not be able to meet its financial obligations. This will be the case if I become aware that the 5 associations, excluding IDTA, are unwilling to contribute enough to pay the fees due to the Hilton Metropole if we cancel the conference for any reason other than a lockdown of Birmingham. Our cancellation insurance does not cover infectious diseases. I say excluding IDTA because I already know the financial resources of that association, which would not be able to pay the UKP 18,000 that is required by the contract to cover 6% of the losses of the conference.

Therefore, if people start to discuss this matter and rumours spread that we may not be able to cover the financial liability because the other associations also do not have enough financial resources, I am legally required to cease trading and call in a qualified administrator who will expect to protect whatever money we have already with a view to paying creditors rather than refunding participants.

At the moment, I still believe that we will be able to run the conference because coronavirus will either have become less of a problem, or will have been accepted as a necessary risk if the world's economies are not to collapse. I also believe that EATA, ITAA and UKATA have, between them, sufficient resources to pay their share of the losses and we can run an online conference which will make enough additional income to cover the shortfalls if IARTA and FTAA are in the same position as IDTA.

I also need to point out at this stage that I have not yet sought legal advice. This will cost money and, in any case, I will probably just be told that my understanding of the situation is accurate and this will not move us on. It might even just hasten the moment at which I have to stop trading - if the contract between the 6 associations is not enforceable I must already start refusing refunds, even if they are not linked to coronavirus.

The contract is very clear that it is the responsibility of the Steering Committee "to ensure that the professional and financial needs of ITAA, EATA and FTAA are met" and of the Associations Committee to do the same for UKATA, IARTA and IDTA. As the IDTA member of the Associations Committee, I am already pointing out that IDTA would not be able to find UKP £18,000 so it would become insolvent and have to close down. I am, however, aware that EATA Treasurer has announced publicly that EATA has reserves of 256.942,35 Euros so at the moment I believe that those reserves could be used. I also believe that we could easily run an online conference with over 1000 participants that could generate some income that could be used to meet some financial obligations. I cannot, however, claim that I believe I could run an online conference that would generate the same conference fees as an on-site event, plus enough surplus to pay for the bedroom allocations that would not be used.

I am contacting you as Presidents rather than the Steering Committee because decisions are needed that cannot be made by that Committee. Also, I am assuming that the Steering Committee is not active apart from responding individually to emails – the contract calls for me to be added to their email circulation list and to attend any online meetings they have, and I have seen nothing apart from when they required the profit shares to be changed, except for responses to matters I have initiated. I am leaving it to Vladimir to decide what is shared with the rest of the members of the Steering Committee, particularly as I am no longer sure whether the mailing list we have been using does not include people who are not on that committee.

This email is coming from me rather than from the Organising Committee, because the issue I am raising is well outside the responsibility of the Organising Committee. I have not yet advised all of them about this problem anyway, as it is likely to have a considerable demotivating effect when we are relying on them to engage in so much voluntary activity. It also has implications for those of them who are now talking to potential volunteers for front of house and I do not want to put them in the position of having to keep a secret. The volunteer who had accepted the task of being the conference treasurer resigned after several months without being able to complete any of the tasks they were undertaking – and now it seems that coronavirus has interrupted what was looking to be a very straightforward and profitable process.

In addition to the legal issues, I am sending this email to you in confidence because if the content of it were to be known more widely, we will get many more people attempting to cancel their conference bookings and get refunds. I was preparing this email anyway when I saw the responses that were coming once we advised the plans for coronavirus. It has now become much more urgent because I have received the first request for a full refund from someone who is stating that the reason for cancellation is due to the likelihood that the conference will not run because of coronavirus. I think she is being very hasty but at the same time, as a director of the limited company that we set up to run the conference, I cannot give her a refund because that company is already potentially insolvent unless I can rely on the contract that calls for the 6 associations to cover the losses.

For instance, as the Executive Director of the IDTA, I am already fully aware that IDTA cannot possibly cover 6% of UKP 300,000, which would be UKP 18,000. The equivalent sums will be ITAA 43% UKP

129,000; EATA 47.5% UKP 142,500; ANZTAA 4.75% UKP 14,250; ATAA 3.8% UKP 11,400; UKATA 8% UKP 24,000, IARTA 6% UKP 18,000.

Unless I receive confirmation that the UKP 300,000 will be covered, I am legally required to act on the basis that the limited company is currently insolvent. This would not be necessary if I were able to be confident people would still pay even if the conference has to be run online. The only way that online would be necessary would be if Birmingham or the UK were in lockdown, in which case we are not liable for the UKP 300,000.

To clarify, we still have almost enough in the bank to cover the venue costs in terms of meeting rooms but if we cancel because our participants are cancelling, or not booking, we become liable for the bedroom allocations as well, which is about half of the UKP 300,000. If we do not keep holding these bedrooms, they may not be there when our participants want to use them. By participants, I also include those attending EATA Council and ITAA BOT meetings, the exams and the TEW - we are holding rooms to cover all the dates that attendees might need. These would normally be paid for by the individuals but if they decide to cancel, we are liable to pay unless the hotel can sell them again – which seems unlikely if coronavirus is still a problem. It also means that we need to make a decision now to maximise our chances of the hotel getting other bookings. This of course also applies to the meeting rooms.

Assuming that it is somehow possible for me to receive an assurance that the UKP 300,000 will be made available, then I think we move into the next stage of convincing people that we may well be able to run the conference – it is still 4 months away - and if not, they will still have a great online conference. We need to look at ways in which to publicise our contingency plans in a more upbeat manner.

At this point, you do not need to read beyond this paragraph unless it is going to be possible to guarantee the UKP 300,000. If that cannot be done, I will be in a position of no longer believing that we are solvent. Therefore we will not be able to give any refunds to those who have already paid as the money will need to be protected for creditors, and we will need to bring in a suitably qualified administrator to meet UK law. It will also, ironically, demonstrate the benefits of me having set up a limited company because, if the 6 associations are similarly unable to meet their commitments under the contract, the limited company can be liquidated i.e. closed down without paying its debts. Without the limited company, I suspect that the Hilton would sue the 6 different associations.

In the hope that the UKP 300,000 can be guaranteed, then the following is about the plans we will now need to make.

I had anticipated, when we announced the plan to shift to an online conference if coronavirus prevents an on-site option, that people would be supportive, would take into account that this conference is being run by volunteers, and would also realise that any profits go to the 6 associations. I have been unpleasantly surprised at how several people have emailed only to ask things like 'will they be able to get their money back', 'will they not have to pay for the food if we are online', or even to state they are 'just not interested in an online event'. I have also had several much more positive emails but my concern is about people cancelling and people not bothering to book now. And as mentioned above, I now have the first one demanding a refund because the conference may not happen. We need to convince people that an online conference will be a great experience.

I am satisfied that we have the capability within the organising team to implement the plans I have already suggested. If there is a lockdown in Birmingham or the UK and we run a totally online conference, we do not have to pay the Hilton Metropole and we could then give people substantial discounts, including complete refunds if they do not want to attend online. We would almost certainly also pick up more participants who would/could not have come to the UK anyway and who will be delighted at the opportunity to join in online. There is no way to forecast what this might do to our overall income and profit at this time as we have no idea how many people would opt out of an online

format, and those who are likely to welcome it are also likely to be in countries which get significant TAlent discounts. However, the key factor is that the UKP 300,000 would not apply.

Any other option is seriously problematic. If participants cannot travel from other countries, we could run with the 300 or so who have already booked within the UK but it would probably not be possible to make this on-site and online at the same time – we might well find that the Metropole IT system could not cope with so many streams at the same time so we would have to make recordings instead. Presenters from outside the UK would have to present online to an on-site audience. We might also find that some of those 300 would withdraw or expect a reduced fee. There will also be time changes to take into account. Our commitment to the Hilton would not change in any case – it would still be about UKP 300,000. Taking into account that most of the Early Bird bookings were made by people in the UK, our income from those 300 participants would probably be under UKP 100,000. If we assume that people would not expect to pay more than about UKP 100 for an online version of recordings, and that many would be claiming TAlent discounts, we would need about 3000-4000 participants to raise the additional UKP 200,000 that we would owe the Hilton Metropole.

This means that the option of a completely online conference actually becomes a more attractive option financially. We could run all of the sessions at the same time as they would have been run on site, or we could stagger them in such a way that we do our best to reflect time changes around the world. We might have to stagger them anyway as otherwise we would be expecting people to join in during their own night-time. We could use the system we already plan to use, which is to ask participants to indicate their preferences for what they want to attend. We were going to use that to schedule the size of rooms allocated so we could use it instead to allocate timings. We might have to apologise to some people and promise them a video recording if we really cannot match their local times but we could probably find times that work for many of them. We would have to ask the presenters to work online and some of them might refuse or be unable to do so, but for other sessions we would be able to take as many people as want to attend.

When we were considering what to do when the coronavirus issue became apparent, I had anticipated that there would be no problem by July, or that Birmingham or the UK would be in lockdown. Either we run a successful conference, cover our costs and make some profit, or lockdown occurs and we do not need to pay the Hilton anything and we run a very successful online conference. That was before I began to get negative sounding emails. It is therefore really important that we combat this by ensuring that all 6 associations are emphasising how wonderful an online conference will be if we are prevented from running on site.

Obviously we do not want the information to get out that we might end up with a bill for UKP 300,000. This would definitely lead to panic cancellations. Equally, we do not want anyone in positions of authority within the 6 associations expressing negative reactions to the idea of working online. We need somehow to make sure that everyone is talking positively about how we anticipate running the conference normally – it is after all another 4 months away – or having a great online conference that will allow even more participants to join in.

I can produce plenty of information about what will be possible, including ‘advantages’ of online working, such as allowing syndicate rooms to be used, interpreters to be involved without participants having to pay the costs of travel and accommodation for those interpreters, potentially setting up chat rooms for groups of participants to continue talking to each other after the sessions, and indeed the conference itself, is over.

We also need to think about the implications for the various meetings – which can easily be run online – and for the exams and the TEW. I know that CTA exams have been held online in the past, and I personally ran an online TEW with some other TSTAs, so we have plenty of expertise available if required. It would be very helpful at this point if EATA were to start issuing similar statements about their plans for running EATA Council, the exams and the TEW online – if that becomes necessary, and likewise for the ITAA BOC meeting.

We also need to consider ways of getting the message out to members in a more timely fashion. The positioning of the 6 page item in the EATA Newsletter was very disappointing (at the back with the TA Institute advertisements and not even mentioned in the editorial, plus a strangely coloured picture labelled Birmingham but no mention of conference) and there is not another due out until June. The recent Script had out of date information because of a problem publishing our exciting news item about planting a tree (because it could be seen as unfair publicity for me as potential President Elect) but maybe we could at least have an arrangement whereby updates can be sent in just before publication instead of at least 2 weeks beforehand. I have also now become aware that the ITAA ballots have not reached all members so presumably there is a glitch in the circulation system. We are doing our best to get the message out through social media, we have no problem with getting information out through the UK based associations and are hoping that the FTAA component are doing likewise (although I have not seen any examples of this). We need ITAA and EATA to start sending things directly to their members.

To close, an update about numbers. We have still filled over 600 places but now only just and 50 of those are free places. We have been chasing people who booked earlier for their payments – we still have 79 who have not paid in spite of repeated reminders so we can expect now that they will not pay. We had 48 cancellations before coronavirus became an issue, including one presenter who reacted very negatively to feedback from the Scientific Committee, and one TSTA who said it was too expensive (having just booked with a clear indication of the cost!). It seems as if many people made a booking without really considering whether they wanted to attend, and then cancelled or just ignored us when we asked for payment. I have not experienced this kind of behaviour previously when running conferences. People booking now are required to pay online at the time of booking.

We have only 10 bookings from Germany, whereas about 400 of them attended in Berlin. I have previously mentioned this in my reporting to the Steering Committee.

Best wishes

Julie

Note: The comment about bedroom allocations was incorrect because I had been misadvised; I corrected that later. It made no difference to my request to consider their moral obligations to cover the loss of members' money.