

Trip report: IFIP International Symposium on Local Computer Networks  
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The IFIP International Symposium on Local Computer Networks was held in Florence, Italy, on April 19-21, 1982. Two significant observations emerge:

1. Of the more than 400 attendees of this technical conference, at least 300 were users or potential users of local computer networks, rather than researchers, designers, implementors, or suppliers. This dominance of customers over suppliers confirms a previously suggested tremendously strong emerging demand for local communications. Most of the questions from the audience were therefore focused on customer concerns: how expensive, how compatible, how soon to be delivered, etc.
2. The technical program was exceptionally disappointing, containing only a handful of quality papers. The program committee for the conference reluctantly agreed that this was the case and that it probably is the consequence of too frequent conferences on networks, data communications, and local networks. It appears that the demand for conferences exceeds the supply of papers, a sure indication that it is time for entrepreneurs to increase the selling of educational lecture series on the subject.

The papers that drew the most audience interest were three presented by members of the IBM Zurich research laboratory, describing their 4 Mbit/sec. token ring network. The interest was great because the world is curious about IBM's as-yet-unannounced product plans in the local network area, and this particular research system suggests to many people that IBM may not follow the Ethernet path, but might instead do something of its own, such as this ring network. Speculation on this subject abounded. Interestingly, little discussion was heard of potential trouble in Ethernet marketing, which has been the subject of much speculation in the United States. Incidentally, although there was no official conference exhibit, Olivetti provided a set of small computers for information retrieval that happened to be linked with an Olivetti-built Ethernet, apparently to prove that they really are a member of the Ethernet supplier family. (The Olivetti-built Ethernet transceivers have been used interchangeably with 3COM-built transceivers, thereby proving the value and applicability of the Ethernet standard.)

There was a formal technical report on the progress of the IEEE802 local area network standards committee progress, which provided little information. However, corridor conversation provided some useful gossip on the subject: it appears that the parts of the proposed IEEE802 standard that apply to Ethernet-like structures are reluctantly but relentlessly being nudged into close agreement with the already existing standard defined by Xerox, DEC, and Intel. A corresponding movement of the parts of IEEE802 that would apply to token rings (in the direction of suggestions made by IBM) is being inhibited by patents (not IBM, but Swedish) that might apply to some ring configurations. The outcome of these discussions is not yet clear.

On a minor note, this is the first time in a conference on the subject of local area networks that I have seen a significant interest from Eastern-bloc countries. There were at least eight (out of 400) attendees from the other side of the iron curtain. There was also a small but noticeable attendance from Japan, and two of the 30 papers presented were by Japanese authors. These two developments also suggest that this area has matured beyond research and is becoming a vendor-customer arena of practical and economic significance.