

## Chapter 96

# What Do Library Workers Want From Professional Conferences?

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### ABSTRACT

*What do library workers want from professional conferences? This question was the subject of a nationwide online survey administered to a randomly selected audience of library workers. Survey results showed that most library workers attend conferences, and their preferences were for face-to-face, topical events. The primary consideration for event attendance according those responding to the survey was the content presented. Issues of cost were also highly important to respondents, although funding for professional development was reported to be generally stable or even increasing. Of lesser interest to potential conference attendees were issues of location, vendor interaction, or the opportunity to perform committee work. Some future trends predicted include a growing acceptance of virtual events, a declining importance on location-based events like state library association conferences, and a need to review the roles of vendors and exhibitors in conferences.*

### INTRODUCTION

As the recent past president of a regional, international library association, I and the other members of the library association's executive board faced many challenges during the current economic downturn. One of the largest challenges dealt with the association's conference. Some years the conference provided the association with an influx of funds, but in other years the conference drained the association's coffers. Several factors influenced the financial outcome, but I was intrigued by the questions involved in providing an attractive conference for library workers.

What do library workers want from professional conferences? What use do they provide? Why do library workers attend the conferences they attend? Why do they not attend others? Some research has been done, but given the economic downturn these questions deserve another look. I hypothesized that virtual/online conferences have become more welcome due to funding restrictions, and that topical conferences such as the Special Libraries Association conference, or Internet Librarian are more welcome than geographically- or association-oriented ones such as the Montana Library Association annual conference, or the Pacific Northwest Library Association annual

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conference. I determined that an online survey sent to a randomly drawn population of library workers would be the best way to gather data to support these hypotheses.

This chapter will describe the methodology and examine the results of my survey, and draw out conclusions about what library workers look for when making decisions about which professional development events to attend, including predictions of future trends. Information gathered included demographic information, information about professional development funding, and questions about actual and ideal conference and other event attendance. The results are of interest to conference planners, library managers, and those developing or approving conference programming.

## **BACKGROUND**

Most literature regarding conference attendance is proscriptive, including tips on how to make the most of the experience or how to get involved. Some of these are highlighted in the “Additional Readings” section of this chapter. Among more academic writings, the most thorough and recent examination of the topic was conducted by Robert Vega and Ruth Connell in 2007. An invitation to respond to an online survey regarding conference attendance was sent to a broad selection of listservs, and the quantitative and qualitative results analyzed. They found that the majority of their respondents attend at least one conference a year, and were primarily reference librarians or administrators. The most important factor for conference attendance among their respondents was professional rejuvenation, with networking a close second. Exhibits were also viewed as important. The intellectual content of conferences (papers, posters, sessions, and the like) were not as valued. Service in the form of committee work was primarily valued by academic librarians who had been in the field for a few years, but

was otherwise not seen as important. The major detractions of conference attendance were the costs and the travel.

The role of conferences in LIS professional development was examined by Rachel Harrison (2010), who found that conferences did provide unique opportunities primarily with regard to networking and exhibits, echoing Vega and Connell’s findings. She mentions subject-specific conferences outside of the library world as particularly useful for librarians with a disciplinary focus outside the general practice of librarianship, as well as those who focus on a narrower segment of librarianship (Harrison, 2010, 268-269).

The concept of attending conferences outside of librarianship is explored in depth by Robert Tomaszewski and Karen MacDonald, who emphasize the value of these conferences in multi- and interdisciplinary research and instruction (Tomaszewski & MacDonald, 2009, p. 585). Texas A&M fostered a program formally supporting their librarians’ attendance of subject-specific conferences for networking and educational reasons (Hankins, Melgoza, Seeger & Wan, 2009, p. 99). The benefits of such a program were echoed in a 2011 study of ten librarians’ membership in associations outside librarianship, which included conference experiences outside librarianship (Bennett 2011, p. 51). Lucy Lyons (2007) examined the value of disciplinary conference attendance versus library conference attendance for collection development opportunities, and found that both types of conferences have clear advantages for subject selectors. Cynthia Tysick (2002) examined all of these benefits but also came up with some substantial additional benefits to the profession of librarianship from librarians’ attendance in outside conferences, such as promoting technological innovation and raising the visibility of librarians to those outside the profession (79).

Kelly Blessinger and Gina Costello (2011) took a look at recent changes in funding for professional development in ARL libraries and

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