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What Do We Learn at Library Conferences?

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Column Editor's Note: *Attending library conferences offers many benefits, including introductions to new products and technologies, information on best practices, and opportunities to exchange information with individuals from other institutions. — AF*

To a new librarian, learning is monumental. Going to a library conference presents learning possibilities that are endless. There are chances to hear about new and emerging technologies as well as best practices from other libraries. There are chances to network with new acquaintances and to reconnect with old friends from library school. Let's examine each of these benefits more closely in an attempt to understand how much we can learn by attending and participating in library conferences.

Emerging technologies are all around us. It seems like everywhere we go we are surrounded by all of the new gadgets that are available. In libraries, as we move increasingly from print to electronic resources, it is imperative to keep abreast of these up-and-coming, innovative ways of doing our work. At conferences, vendors have their best and most promising products on full display in the exhibits area. Although you may have read the blurb via email or seen a snail-mail flyer, nothing beats actually test-driving a new database or taking a new software package for a spin. Many times, conferences are the only venues to see new products. Without going to conferences, you'll have to wait for the company Website to offer a demo version, or arrange a Web demonstration at your library. A conference can be a great opportunity for librarians to meet with a vendor and examine a new product or service.

It is also a good idea to set up a time to get together with your vendor representative at the conference. Invite other librarians from your library so that everyone can take advantage of the opportunity to meet the vendor and see the new products and services available. This can be an excellent learning experience and gives everyone a chance to ask questions.

If you want a reference from another library before buying a new product, arrange to talk to a representative from that library while at the conference. This is a pleasant and informal way to find out if the product is indeed what your library needs and if it will meet your expectations. Often times, facial expressions can tell a great deal about both the product and the company. Emails and Web-exs simply do not present this level of detail. Exploring the options at the exhibitors' section of a conference is truly a treat and sheds light on library technology trends.

Learning about best practices goes hand in hand with examining new technologies. It is reassuring to go to a conference and find out that you manage some aspect of your day-to-day job in the way that most others do. Many times you'll find that others have had the same problems with certain vendors or with particular titles that you have experienced. The tactical and strategy sessions at **NASIG**, for example, offer a wealth of serials-related information. The pre-conferences and workshops are valuable hands-on learning opportunities that should not be overlooked. It is always interesting to find out what people are working on, and they are usually more than happy to share their knowledge and wisdom. This type of learning is pivotal both to new librarians and to librarians at later stages of their careers. The topics and presentations are well planned and give an excellent view of current trends and where the profession is headed. The visionary sessions give a "heads-up" to the future of serials within the next five to ten years. This type of program planning makes attendees feel that they are well prepared for whatever tomorrow may bring. It also gives them ideas of where they may want to go with their own careers in the years to come.

Without attending conferences, librarians can learn about trends and best practices by reading the literature. Conference attendance offers opportunities for direct interaction with people who are knowledgeable in the field and who can give

excellent insight on the best ways to perform job responsibilities effectively and efficiently. The camaraderie and daily interactions at conference sessions often lead to additional networking opportunities.

The opportunity to network with peers is valuable in any field, including librarianship. Conference attendance makes it possible to meet people who can help you make the best of your career. The person from another library that you meet at a conference could be a future co-worker or supervisor. You want to be sure to put your best foot forward in any social gathering so that you can make a good and lasting impression. Other attendees can also shed light on "tricks of the trade" and "do's and don'ts" of librarianship. It is always good to make friends and build relationships wherever you go, and it is especially rewarding when fellow conference attendees become life-long friends. It is always fascinating to see the diverse and electrifying personalities that are often drawn into librarianship, and going to lunch or dinner with new people can be a fun and relaxing way to wind down from the fast-paced conference days.

If the conference is held in a town you have never visited before, fellow conference attendees can give tips on where to go and what to do while there. Large conferences, like **MLA** or **ALA**, offer the chance to have informal meetings with former library school classmates during the conference. This is an excellent opportunity to reconnect with people you may not have seen since graduation, and to catch up on mutual learning and experiences. This type of interaction can help in the future, when looking for new job opportunities. A casual conversation may lead to a future job opportunity. This type of knowledge and experience is priceless as you move through your career. Library conferences really are a time for personal as well as professional growth.

In summary, the learning that results from going to library conferences is in many ways immeasurable if you look at the value and depth of the skills and learning opportunities offered. The topics covered at the meetings are varied, and right on target with the types of real life situations you will encounter day-to-day. Attending conference sessions provides preparation for almost every type of work situation. Connections made at a library conference can have a lasting impact. Much can be learned from building on the real-life examples that library conferences provide through various sessions and programs. In the end, you'll get out of the conference as much as you put in to it. If you take the initiative and grab all the opportunities that conferences present, the possibilities are endless! 🐘



Rumors

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their countries in the Armed Forces have the information services and resources they need both abroad and at home were honored. The 300-plus members of the **SLA Military**

Librarians Division were awarded the **2007 SLA Professional Award**, which recognizes a special event, major achievement, or specific significant contribution to the field of librarianship or information science.

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