



EDITORIAL

Editorial

Conference contrasts

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Abstract

Purpose – This editorial seeks to compare the German Bibliothekartag, the American Library Association Annual Meeting, and the International Federation of Library Associations meeting.

Design/methodology/approach – The method relies mainly on anthropological observation.

Findings – Conferences in cities with public transit, good restaurants, and decent technology, including wireless internet and projection in the meeting rooms, offer better opportunities for the social bonding that encourages repeat attendance.

Practical implications – Conferences at locations without these features risk losing regulars as technology increasingly enables communication without travel.

Originality/value – Interaction with the conference environment is not the only factor in making a conference experience successful but, without positive interactions, the option of doing business electronically becomes far more attractive.

Keywords Conferences, Facilities

Paper type General review

Introduction

In my various roles as editor, professor, and director of the Berlin School of Library and Information Science (BSLIS), I visit a number of conferences each year. In part this is School business, in part I am searching for interesting topics and new authors for *Library Hi Tech*.

In my research persona as an ethnographer I try also to observe the interactions between participants and the conference environment. In this editorial essay, I discuss these interactions at three conferences that I attended during the summer of 2008. The first (3-6 June) was the German Library Association conference, called the Bibliothekartag. The second (27 June-1 July) was the American Library Association (ALA) Annual Meeting. The third (9-15 August) was the annual conference of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). The intellectual content of the conferences is a topic I will leave for another time.

Venue

The choice of venue matters for a conference. The Bibliothekartag met in Mannheim, Germany. ALA met in Anaheim, California, and IFLA in Quebec City, Canada. Mannheim is a mediumsized city in the Rhineland near to scenic Heidelberg, Anaheim is a town southwest of Los Angeles known for being the home of Disneyland, and Quebec City is the capital of Quebec province and among the oldest cities in North America. None of these cities is particularly large, though Mannheim and Anaheim both belong to significant conurbations. All have tourist attractions, depending on individual preferences. Language and cultural tradition obviously varies: German in



Mannheim, French in Quebec, English in Anaheim. None of these cities hosts a major international airport, though none is especially far from one either.

The venue has little to do with the official program of a conference. The schedule of meetings tends to remain stable over multiple years, regardless of location. Location has an effect on voluntary attendees – those who see conferences as a kind of working vacation – but for an active core membership, location has little significant effect on the decision to attend, unless a location is unusually attractive or problematic. An example of the latter occurred in 2003, when Toronto (Ontario, Canada) suffered from the SARS epidemic and many libraries refused to allow employees to attend meetings there – quite unnecessarily, as it turned out.

My attendance at conferences is mainly meeting driven. Although I strongly considered not attending Anaheim because of Disney's copyright policies and a personal dislike for the resort character of the place, I went nonetheless, as did a number of other people who threatened not to go to yet another Disney-dominated city after unpleasant experiences in Orlando in 2004. ALA makes almost a third of its revenue from conference fees and caters to the voluntary attendees in the hope of maximizing attendance. Clearly the meeting planners think resort cities will draw more of them than they will alienate regulars.

Venue matters in two other key aspects: travel to meetings and transit while at the meeting. Given IFLA's international membership, Quebec was probably the hardest to reach, since non-Canadian members all needed to fly and reasonably priced flights to the small Quebec airport filled up fast. Mannheim, for the large German majority of Bibliothekartag attendees was probably the easiest to reach, because it is a major rail center.

Transit while at the meeting is particularly a problem for large conferences. Both IFLA and the Bibliothekartag were small enough to fit into a single conference center. The fit was not always perfect, but the conference facilities in both Quebec and Mannheim were well-designed, well run and adapted easily to the conference needs. For ALA transit is always a critical question, because no single conference center suffices. Many ALA meetings take place in hotels rather than at the convention center. The more scattered the hotels, the more impossible it becomes to get to places on time. ALA always organizes private buses running fixed routes from the convention center to clusters of hotels. The buses probably work for those with few meetings. Anyone who is scheduled tightly must rely on walking, running, or taxis. At Anaheim I had to skip meetings or accept the fact that I would arrive late.

Scale

Size differences among these conferences is a significant factor. The Bibliothekartag drew 2832 attendees in 2008, mainly from Germany with a scattering of visitors from other countries (Deutsche Bibliothekartag, 2008). IFLA drew about 4000 attendees from all over the world, though with proportionally more coming from Europe and North America than from Africa or Asia (*Le Journal du Quebec*, 2008). The ALA Annual Meeting had 21,063 visitors, mainly from the USA, but with hundreds of visitors from other parts of the world. Anaheim was smaller than the Washington conference in 2007, which had 27,962 attendees (Oder, 2008). Having a critical mass matters. Everyone complains that ALA is too large, but its advantage has traditionally

been that everyone is there and that creates economies of scale in planning meetings. When everyone is not there, this advantage vanishes.

While a number of factors affect attendance size, including travel costs and funding, habit also matters heavily. The social relationships formed during early years in the profession play a role in whether people use their travel money (or their private funds) to come. If these social relationships weaken, attendance slips.

An example comes from the Library Hi Tech Editorial Advisory Board meeting. When I became editor in 1997, the majority of the Board members came to breakfast meetings at ALA Midwinter and Annual. In those days the overwhelming majority of the Board members were Americans. Over the years the Board has become significantly more international, but a majority remains American. Nonetheless attendance at Board meetings has fallen to a handful of members. Travel funding seems not to be the problem, but rather competing conferences. People involved in library technology can now meet at other gatherings with a more pronounced technology orientation. ALA has not changed, but it has ceased to be a primary conference for technology-oriented librarians. The social bonds have migrated, not vanished. Communication among board members now increasingly relies on technology, conference calls, videoconferencing, and above all e-mail. This may be a trend for the future.

Food

Food represents a critical part of the conference-going experience. The restaurant descriptions for the conference venue in *American Libraries* are valuable and widely read. Food is not merely to sate hunger between meetings. It defines the ambience and sense of social well-being at the many breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Good food, attentive service and pleasant surroundings create an atmosphere that encourages meetings to go well.

Anaheim was a food disaster. Not that good food was unavailable. The Hilton hotel restaurant offered pleasant meals well-supplied with vegetables and vegetarian options – but only if one could find a seat. It and the restaurant in the Marriott were the only really good restaurants within walking distance. Otherwise fast food dominated, or fast-food equivalents in a sit-down setting at so-called family restaurants.

As *American Libraries* said, good restaurants could be found half an hour's drive away, but most of the 21,063 attendees had no car at the conference. Taxis were available for those who could afford them. Since public transit essentially did not exist, many librarians and most students were condemned to eat locally, which essentially segregated the rich and poor. Access to public transit appears to play no role in ALA's choice of conference sites.

The dining experiences in Quebec and Mannheim were better. Quebec benefits from its French heritage and the conference took place in easy walking distance to the old town with many good restaurants. Those who wanted to walk a little farther had a wider choice, including a restaurant that offered a multi-course fixed-price meal that even students could afford, which enabled them to join with others at dinner gatherings.

Although Mannheim is not a city known for food, meals there had a consistently high quality. A vegetarian restaurant less than ten minutes by foot from the conference site drew more and more colleagues, including many non-vegetarians, because of its innovative entrees. Students and directors had no problem finding places to eat together.

Technology

Some 15 years ago technology at conferences meant having a cluster of internet-connected machines to let people queue to check their e-mail. The lines always became frustratingly long during any break. People would skip meetings to get the chance to get online and felt a natural reluctance to give up the machine once they finally reached it. The growth of wireless internet for laptops has put pressure on conference organizers to provide access, preferably for free. All three conferences did this successfully, though ALA managed it for free only at the convention center.

Today the technology problem tends to be the strength of the wireless signal and the ease of logging in. Open systems are the most common and easiest to use, but are also the most vulnerable to overload by non-participants. Both ALA and the Bibliothekartag provided open systems. IFLA offered a system with a public password – one listed on the web site itself. It was easy to overlook the password, since it is unusual to expect to find it so publicly displayed. The password also changed every day, but the passwords for each day were all listed and easily predictable. It would be interesting to have empirical evidence about whether this very transparent security offered reasonable protection against outsider use. It would mean, at least, that computers searching for unsecured systems would overlook it.

Because digital slides have become so integral to presentations, projectors have become an essential element of any conference venue that involved a prepared talk. ALA requires session chairs to request a projector on the once reasonable theory that business meetings and discussion groups would not normally need them and that projectors were expensive. Today projectors are much cheaper and virtually every gathering of over 5 people tends to want a projector to share information. Projectors are also much cheaper now. In Anaheim none of the sessions I attended lacked projectors, including one where the chair requested a projector after the deadline. The Bibliothekartag and IFLA had projectors in every room that I visited.

Prizes

Prizes are a reason to attend conferences, both for the winners and for those involved in giving them. *Library Hi Tech* sponsors a prize at two of these three conferences. The *Library Hi Tech/LITA* (Library Information Technology Association) award has been given each year since 1993 at the ALA Annual meeting. In recent years the award ceremony has taken place in conjunction with other LITA awards at a LITA reception that lies well-timed between the popular “Top Technology Trends” session and the LITA President’s program. An independent panel selects the winner. This year the winner was Helene Blowers, the Director of Digital Strategy for the Columbus Metropolitan Library in Columbus, Ohio, who won for a variety of activities “her role as the architect and developer of “Learning 2.0: 23 Things”, an online discovery program designed to encourage library staff to explore new technologies.” (LITA, 2008)

The German *Library Hi Tech* was presented this year for the first time at the Bibliothekartag. The ceremony took place in a lounge at the conference facility with a select audience of library leaders from around Germany. The winner this year was Frank Scholze, who was one of the leaders in developing the OPUS repository software. As part of the award he was also offered an opportunity to write for *Library Hi Tech*. His article appears in this issue.

Replacing conferences

Conference attendance is typically less attractive for regulars, whose schedules often preclude much sight-seeing and whose professional life may include so many trips that one more long distance flight seems unattractive. Can technology replace conferences?

Technology increasingly enables people in far distant places to see and talk together. Videoconferencing is one of the best alternatives, since it allows video and audio for multiple participants. The cost is all up-front from an investment in a camera, computer, microphone and internet connection. These costs add up to no more than a single international trip, depending on the quality of the equipment. The costs can be very low if the videoconferencing is done via a laptop with a built-in camera and microphone (the MacBook series, for example). Skype also offers free videoconferencing between two locations and free voice-only conferencing between more than two sites. Within Germany these options are used heavily.

It would be bad news for conference organizers if technology replaced the meetings, since the conference fees often contribute substantially to the annual revenues: for example 24.9 percent for ALA in 2007. (ALA, 2008a) This appears to be no great danger at the moment, in part because many libraries have not thought about or invested in the necessary technology, but cost-saving measures in this time of fiscal stress may well make the option more attractive.

If that happens, how will the social bonds fare that make organization-membership and conference attendance desirable? In principle the amount of one-on-one contact could be greater, but the loss of shared experiences may well counteract any gain. Travel to and experiences at conferences offer similar shared frustrations. Meals offer shared pleasures. Those are not technologically replaceable.

Physical presence may matter less than many people believe. The ubiquitousness of mobile phones has changed family relationships. Cost-effective electronic alternatives may well transform conference attendance too if the same intellectual content can be delivered virtually without the trouble and cost of travel.

Conclusion

As I look forward to the next season of conferences, a few noteworthy factors emerge. I am more likely to attend conferences in cities with effective public transit, good restaurants, and decent technology including wireless internet and projection in the meeting rooms.

ALA in Anaheim was a disappointment, but ALA in Chicago will certainly have good transit and food. IFLA will be in Milan, Italy, and the Bibliothekartag plans to meet in Erfurt in 2008. On my last visit to Erfurt in 1970 the East German border police wanted to arrest me over a passport technicality (President Nixon had just automatically extended all US passports for two years without requiring a stamp). This visit should be more friendly. ALA has a number of future conference locations that I will almost certainly skip, including Anaheim (2012) and Las Vegas (2014). (ALA, 2008b) IFLA does not plan quite so far ahead. The next meetings are in Brisbane and Puerto Rico, neither of which I know. After Erfurt the Bibliothekartag will return to Leipzig, as it does every third year. The facilities there are near to ideal.

The human interactions between conference facilities, conference venues, and conference technologies are critical for ongoing attendance. Setting aside external factors such as travel funding, the choice of whether to attend a conference depends

heavily on the social networks that continue to draw people. The conference environment is not the only factor in making a conference experience successful, but without positive interactions, the option of doing business electronically becomes far more attractive.

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