

Library conferences: why bother?

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A former colleague of mine, a staff training and development co-ordinator at a further education college I was employed at many years ago, wished me well when I left and said to me *"I hope your new place lets you go on as many courses!"*. It took me a while to fully process what she had meant by this comment, but I soon realised that she was referring to the quite often numerous and substantial requests that I submitted for attending external staff training and development events.

As library and information professionals learning and development, in any format, is essential and fundamental to being able to operate in an up to date and professional manner. For me this has always been the case and professional engagement in training and development has been something I have always valued for myself and encouraged in the teams that I have been responsible for over the years. The above comment from my staff development colleague was quite telling though, in that as someone responsible for booking *all* staff from the college onto training courses, programmes and conferences, as well as arranging for travel and accommodation, she simply regarded them all as 'courses'. These 'courses' for me included a variety of CPD opportunities such as external workshops and conferences, library management system training days, attendance at committee meetings and regional networking events. None of them really matched what I thought a 'course' to be, and perhaps what was really meant was *"I hope that your new place allows you to continue with your professional development!"*.

And it is this commitment to continuing professional development that has always been a priority value for me. A recent [themed issue of SCONUL Focus](#) concentrated on staff development for UK academic library staff and as a collection of articles neatly illustrates many of the ways that are available to develop library staff with the knowledge, skills and attributes required in our changing library and information profession. These included features on collaborative staff development partnerships such as the [CPD25 programme](#) from the M25 Consortium of Academic Libraries, internships and graduate trainee programmes, reflective writing practices and blogging, and the staff competencies focus of the [JISC Digital Capability Framework](#).

As a champion of a varied approach to staff training and development I would encourage engagement in as diverse a range of staff development opportunities as possible, but one of the most stable, and often reliable CPD platforms available to us all is the tried and tested 'conference'. In the academic library and scholarly publishing sectors, we have an abundance of professional conferences available to us and they provide many different and innovative learning opportunities.

As both a researcher and a practitioner I personally get the opportunity to present at and attend a variety of excellent professional library and information conferences. This year alone, I have had the good fortune to be present at the [UKSG conference](#) and the [SCONUL conference](#) and to present

at the [M25 Consortium Conference](#), the [International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries](#), the [Information, Interactions and Impact \(I3\) Conference](#), and the [UCISA Digital Capabilities Conference](#). This is just a small selection of the conferences available to us as library and publishing professionals. Indeed there were many more that I would like to have been able to attend, but simply did not have the time to do so in amongst the day job and other professional commitments and activities. I always take so much out of conference attendance and participation and encourage others to do so as well, and to cascade what they learn back to their teams and work colleagues. The problem can often be that with so much on offer, it is often possible to become overwhelmed with conferences and I often hear of people suffering from conference fatigue, particularly during the early summer months where our sectors' conferences seem to be weighted.

I am sure that most of you reading this issue of *UKSG eNews* are extremely engaged professionally and perhaps you also suffer from conference fatigue, so I thought it might be useful to put some perspective on the situation and consider what it is that we get exactly from our persistent engagement with professional conferences. Do they have a real use? Or are they more of a necessary evil and a drain on our time and resources? On reflection I would say not, and that, with careful selection, they benefit our development immensely:

- Developments in emerging library and scholarly communications technologies are occurring all the time and it is important for us to keep up to date with this. At conferences, vendors, suppliers and service providers have their latest and best offerings on display in the exhibition, so a conference can be a great opportunity for librarians to meet suppliers and discover new products and services.
- Learning about best practice in your field or sector complements that which you discover within the exhibition. This can be from discussion with vendors or through selecting a theme of interest to you and finding out how others are dealing with particular trends, activities or developments. It is often reassuring to know that you are managing your day to day workload effectively through this exploration and usually you will pick up an idea, technique or good practice which you can take directly back to your own workplace.
- If you don't attend conferences you can often find out about emerging trends and developments in your field or sector through reading and visiting websites, but it is the human interaction at conferences that makes the difference. At a conference you can hear first-hand, ask questions and interact with experts and it is this experience that will be invaluable when you take your discoveries and innovations back to your home institution.
- Similarly, engagement in the keynote presentations and breakout and parallel sessions and workshops at a conference often provides access to motivational and inspirational speakers and presenters, usually practitioners in their own right. A great way to learn directly from your peers and colleagues.
- If you are in the privileged position of being invited to present at a conference, or have your paper accepted for a session, then you are in a great position to 'give something back' to your community. After all, it is probably similar conference presentations which motivated you to become a presenter in the first place. Presenting at conferences is also a great way to develop and hone your presentation and communication skills in a safe environment, and subsequently develop your self confidence. It also allows you to test out your theories, ideas and innovations, through engaging with your audience and incorporating some participation.
- And finally . . . networking with colleagues and peers who are in the same types of role and situation as you are. This informal, 'chatty' side of conference attendance is invaluable and the learning and exchange of ideas which takes place here are benefits that are available to everyone at the conference. It is often through this that long lasting professional relationships are developed which will prove very useful throughout your career . . . and where there is a good networking platform available at a conference, there is usually excellent food and drink (which, let's face it, is another good reason for attending conferences!).

So, far from being a necessary evil, I would argue that attending and engaging in professional conferences is a fundamental necessity, both for your own CPD and for the greater good of your home organisation!

Don't forget that the autumn presents a mini conference season for UKSG (for all those of you who find themselves in a post summer conference slump) and we have both our [One-Day Conference](#) in London (15 November 2017 – 'Shrinking horizons? Scholarly communication in an anti-globalisation environment') and our [UKSG Forum](#) (16 November 2017 – 'Collaboration and adapting to change') the following day. I hope to see some of you there and that you take advantage of everything that any such event offers you.



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