Citation:
Fisher, J (2017) A Kudos Deficit? Observations On Differing Library Workplace Attitudes Towards Conferences and Webinars. Collaborate: Libraries in Learning Innovation.

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Document Version:
Article (Published Version)

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# A Kudos Deficit? Observations On Differing Library Workplace Attitudes Towards Conferences and Webinars

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**Abstract: This article highlights some personal perceptions regarding workplace attitudes towards the attendance of virtually delivered webinars and physically attended conferences. It argues that even with the development of reliable and interactive technology, there still appears to be more professional kudos attached to attending events in person. It will briefly examine the differing types of web hosted events and conferences there are available, and explore what benefits and drawbacks can be gained from each type of event. It will conclude with some personal observations gained from the recent years of a career as an Information Services Librarian.**

## Definitions

For the purposes of this article the terms 'webinar' and 'conference' will be taken to mean events in their generally understood form. For webinars this will refer to any seminar styled event delivered over the internet, and a conference will refer to any gathering of people in a physical place with the intention of learning more about their industry, profession, or area of practice through the use of speakers, workshops and face-to- face contact. Segar's (2010, pp. 3-9) pointers on definitions show that within these two terms there are a vast number of variations of both what is delivered and what is expected from these events, but for the purposes of this article it is adequate to say that the focus is on whether short virtual sessions consumed in the workplace are overshadowed by physically attending conferences.

## A fair comparison?

It could be argued that comparing those conferences attended in person with virtual events is somewhat disingenuous. On the whole, webinars focus on single targeted subject matter whereas delegates usually attend a conference in person to experience a wide range of events spread across at least one day. By their very nature webinars are usually a maximum of two hours in length, as people have shorter attention spans for content delivered in this way (Winter, 2014).

Generally speaking, a library webinar will not attract a casual audience. As Molay (2017) argues in his description of webinars, "People are not sitting around waiting to be surprised by the next topic and the next speaker. They have made a commitment to listen to a very specific topic and presenter." In contrast, there may be a handful of events which attract a library professional to physically attend a conference but there is always the chance of a serendipitous discovery in another session.

The social aspect of learning is also only fully available at a physical conference. Socialising and professional networking cannot be experienced on the same level during a webinar simply because people are not in the same room. Two recent definitions of library events illustrate the difference. The UKSG conference, which took place in Harrogate, UK, in April 2017, promised, "...high quality plenary presentations, lightning talks and breakout sessions with a major trade exhibition and entertaining social events" (UKSG, 2017). As this was a physically attended event the description was careful to include the sociable nature of the event alongside the practical learning. Contrast this with the description of a webinar titled How to Implement Things When

People Hate Change, hosted by SirsiDynix in January 2017, which described the subject matter as follows; "Change is a powerful force; Inertia is too. Learn how you can overcome resistance and get your team smooth-sailing on a path of progress" (SirsiDynix, 2017). The focus here is on the learning outcomes of the session, and this is essentially one of the key differences between the mediums of delivery.

Consequently, with these two types of learning so seemingly different, is it fair to make a meaningful comparison? The salient point in this particular context is how both webinars and conferences are perceived with regard to continuing professional development. Any library professional, and particularly those at the beginning of their careers, will be looking to advance their skills and record their achievements to maximise their employability and their standing within the profession. Does attendance at a webinar carry equal professional weight to the attendance of the same session at a conference?

### Continuing Professional Development

For many years the library profession has pushed the idea that attending relevant conferences is one of the best ways to contribute to your continuing professional development. For example, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) website encourages delegates to attend their annual conference with eleven reasons, one of which is, "...by attending you will be contributing to your continued professional development too, and you can discover new skills that will have a positive impact on your role as an information professional" (CILIP, 2017). Other key words used in the eleven reasons are "face to face", "network", "talk", "fun", "relaxed", "informal surroundings". It is fair to say that a webinar cannot provide the majority of these, and the perception that business connections are made by face-to-face meetings is hard to shake off.

Has this perception filtered through the ranks of the library profession for so long that it is difficult to shift? It could certainly be argued that most library managers will be encouraged to attend conferences, or at least demonstrate they have been to relevant events in the past. This ethos will most likely trickle down, and the cycle begins again for aspiring managers and professionals who believe that conference attendance is a requisite of continuing professional development and career progression.

If webinars are to break into the psyche of the library profession and stand on equal ground, there perhaps needs to be a perception shift.

### Workplace perceptions

As already illustrated, webinars by their nature target specific measurable outcomes. As Mulryne (2013) succinctly argues, "If a webinar isn't necessary, don't have one." This usually means that the short, sharp nature of a webinar allows it to comfortably fit into an ordinary working day. Coupled with that fact that many webinars can be viewed at your normal desktop PC, to the outsider it may not appear that anything other than an ordinary working day is taking place.

Most webinars are free of charge, usually because there is the expectation that content on the internet should not be paid for (Molay, 2008). This allows a workplace to save on the costs of both a conference place and travel, and effectively their only monetary outlay is for staff time. Again, this can mean that webinars are somewhat invisible to the wider library staff as the attendee will be carrying out their normal duties around their attendance. Publicity for the event will probably also be low key when compared to physically attended events. Usually an email invitation, social media and website presence will be how the webinar is advertised, and the ability to comment via Twitter during the session can be difficult due to the need to fully concentrate on the screen.

Contrast this with a typical approach to conference attendance. The event may well be advertised in library publications. Trade publications may also carry features on their upcoming attendance. Speakers will use their own advertising channels. Staff will notice a colleague's absence on conference day and managers will almost certainly be aware as they will have signed off the paperwork and committed money from their budget. Twitter hashtags will be created, and delegates will comment throughout the day both during and after sessions. Once back in the workplace there will probably be a requirement from the delegate to report back on their findings, possibly with an additional

requirement of a written summary for dissemination.

This will cement in both colleagues' and managers' minds the impression that the conference was a 'must attend' event. Managers will be keen to know that they have received a return on their outlay, and delegates will usually have found something of use out of an entire conference schedule. Delegates may also have benefited from 'bleisure', the practice of combining business and leisure in one trip (Mintel, 2016).

### Counting the cost

Whilst it would be impossible to quantify the benefits of attending a day's conference events when compared to an equivalent number of webinars, it does focus the mind on the true costs of sending a single delegate to a conference. Most libraries, whether academic, public or specialist, would rarely be able to afford to send more than one or two staff to a conference. For those colleagues who miss out, a webinar on similar topics may be their only option to contribute to their continuing professional development. However, if the conference delegate is seen to have the professional edge due to the factors associated with conference attendance outlined above, this is where a kudos deficit can begin to emerge.

The cost of a conference, and people's subsequent impressions of its value, may have parallels with the psychology of perceived value. Bloom's (2015) work on the reasons why people buy luxury brands outlines why people often believe a product is better simply because it costs more. Plassmann et al (2008), conducted a study where wine drinkers were asked to sample wines according to price, and those which were a greater price scored higher even if the wine itself was the same as the lower priced options.

The physical act of sending someone to a conference, with all of the administration it entails, could well produce a perception that the day must be of inherent value. This could almost be self-perpetuating as neither the delegate, nor the manager who authorised it, would want to admit that the conference produced little value for either the individual or the library. Consequently, delegates will continue to be sent to future events, producing the irrefutable idea that conferences are integral to continual professional development.

However, it is unlikely that a webinar audience will ever be as committed. Segar's summary of the pitfalls of online conferences show one of the main problems is, and always will be, commitment: "It's true that online conferences offer a convenient and low-cost way to receive content, and they can provide limited interactivity. Yet you can also abandon one with the click of a mouse. Online conferences provide little commitment, so it is harder to successfully engage participants when the cost of leaving is so low" (2010, p.6).

Of course there is nothing to prevent a conference delegate from leaving a session early, or indeed attending the session at all, but the temptation to log out of a webinar, or be distracted by other tasks is strong, particularly when you are in a familiar working environment.

### Conclusion

Both webinars and conferences will continue to serve a purpose for library professionals, and a blend of the two will undoubtedly enhance most people's continuing professional development. However, this article has attempted to highlight that webinars can be just as useful to both an attendee and their workplace as attending a conference in person, and that a greater emphasis should be placed on them in the context of defining career goals and recognition of their value. There are undoubtedly good and bad conferences, just as the same can be said of webinars, but the cost difference in both time and money between attendance of the two can be significant. It also has to be borne in mind that static presentation and a lack of audience interaction can just as easily be a problem with delivered face to face conferences (Segar, 2010), so many of the criticisms of webinar limitations can also apply to physically attended conferences.

The 'conference circuit' can be a big pull for both speakers and delegates. It is not unusual to see the same people delivering content, and familiar delegates, at several events throughout a year. Whilst this can breed a feeling of kinship and camaraderie amongst speakers and delegates alike, it can also lead to stale content. In contrast a webinar presenting stale content will have a more brutal outcome; people will either not

register in the first place, or log out in the middle of it.

In many ways the irony of library webinars is that they have been touted as the real alternative to face-to-face gatherings for over a decade, yet much of the content which could be better served by a webinar is still presented on a big screen in a conference hall. It is this mind-set which has to change within libraries, just as the benefits of short, targeted, virtual sessions need to be seen as the equal of larger face-to-face gatherings. If this is achieved, it may finally mean that every librarian's professional portfolio can contain a mixture of learning that is recognised as valuable by everyone.

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