Chapter 2

International Library Conferences: The Professional Development Benefits for Librarians, the Hurdles of Attending and the Potential Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides information on international conferences and the reasons librarians should consider attending and presenting at professional conferences outside of their home countries. There are significant benefits for libraries and librarians who choose to venture abroad for professional development opportunities. Professional rejuvenation, networking opportunities, dissemination of information and the ability to see new perspectives on librarianship are just a few of the reasons librarians choose to attend international conferences. Methods and tools for selecting conferences focusing on librarianship and other disciplines are discussed in detail. The difficulties of attending conferences in distant lands is examined, including ways to mitigate costs, get buy-in and support from colleagues and administrators, receive funding, and the planning needed to make any international conference venture satisfying, rewarding, and memorable.

INTRODUCTION

International library conferences offer significant benefits and unique professional development opportunities for librarians. First and foremost is the exposure to new ideas and methods of approaching librarianship. Librarians the world over face similar problems but we deal with those problems in various ways based on our resources, training, social norms and patron expectations. My personal experience, and the results of my research, has shown that the benefits of this exposure are

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significant and can impact the way we view and approach all aspects of our work. Our approach to how we serve our patrons to how we view and utilize our libraries resources can be impacted and forever changed through learning how our colleagues in India, France or Tanzania deal with the same issues. Simply being in the same room networking, speaking and learning from librarians the world over is, for many of us, a professional and personal life changing event.

The difficulties of attending international library conferences are similar, although greater in scope, to the difficulties of attending any professional development event that is held outside of our local areas. The first hurdle is, of course, the expense. Generally speaking, attending a conference in Portugal is more expensive then attending one in Baltimore, although if you do it right it can actually be comparable. Airfare is the single greatest expense and, again, international flights are generally more expensive than domestic, although surprisingly not as much as you might think. The burden of airfare, hotels and general travel costs can be mitigated and made comparable to the cost of a trip of a similar length in the US. I will provide methods and strategies for making the costs of attending international conferences manageable, or at least comparable to the costs of attending a domestic conference, for nearly all. In addition I will explain and provide ways for dealing with the other issues of attending conferences outside of the US including passport and visa issues, in country travel, navigating in an unfamiliar land and dealing with the inevitable language and cultural barriers.

The outcomes of attending international library conferences can be significant for both the attendees and, based on the knowledge and ideas they bring home, their institutions. Exposure to librarians, especially those in developing nations, who meet the needs of their patrons, manage their libraries and support their staff on overall budgets smaller than some libraries’ budgets for staff parties or printer ink provides a perspective and appreciation that cannot be underestimated. In addition the opportunities to network with colleagues from around the globe, who often are ahead of the curve from their US counterparts in areas like distance reference services and copyright, can give us ideas, allies and sources of information for how we can better develop those concepts for use in our own libraries. Of course this flow of information can go both ways. Our libraries’ services can also be exposed on a global scale which gives our libraries the opportunity to impact colleagues and their patrons in places that we may have never considered or had the ability to impact before. In very real and tangible ways, attending international library conferences can help bridge the information divide.

**BACKGROUND**

Conference attendance is a necessity for all professionals and librarians are no exception. For librarians working in academic libraries, conference attendance is often a requirement of the job and needed to advance one’s career. Given that librarians have a need to attend conferences anyway, international library conferences should be a consideration for all but especially for librarians new to the field and those working in academic libraries. For those new to the field of librarianship, an international conference can help them determine the direction of their careers and the overall impact they want to make. The exposure to the world of librarianship at the beginning of one’s career will inspire a librarian to think about the possibilities of their own life, the people that they can serve and the difference that they can make both locally and globally.

For academic librarians, the exposure to colleagues the world over can serve to invigorate and provide perspective on their own services, libraries and resources. In addition participation in international conferences reflects well on the librarian’s home university and on their personal
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