

An Examination of Perceptions of the Use of Virtual Conferences in Organizations: The Organizational Systems Research Association (OSRA) and The Association for Business Communication (ABC) Members Speak Out

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*This study examined four research questions: (1) Are virtual conferences a viable alternative to traditional academic conferences? (2) What are the perceived advantages to a virtual conference as opposed to a traditional academic conference? (3) What are the perceived disadvantages to a virtual conference as opposed to a traditional academic conference? and (4) Are there differences between member perceptions based on the mission of the organization (i.e., between a “soft” skill organization such as ABC and a technology based organization such as OSRA)? This study used a researcher created questionnaire to ascertain respondents’ perceptions. Using random sampling, two groups were selected from ABC and two groups were selected from OSRA.**

Analyses of the findings indicate that although virtual conferences are of interest to the membership in both organizations, neither is willing to allow them to replace traditional conferences. A favorable view of virtual conferences and a willingness to try one is present among both organizations’ membership, however. OSRA and ABC members do see virtual conferences as an option to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for professional development. On the other hand, the respondents indicated professional isolation and the lack of human factors to be a distinct disadvantage to this type of professional development.

An analysis of the two diverse groups, ABC and OSRA, revealed that both groups agree in most every area of the survey. The only significantly different response was in the area of ranking disadvantages of virtual conferences. ABC participants ranked the lack of training higher than their OSRA counterparts.

Lack of funding is, I would say, our biggest concern. We used to have travel money for everyone. Now you have to apply for it. It’s up to the chair to decide who gets it. I didn’t even apply this year. It’s too depressing (Wilger & Massy, 1993, p. 2B-3B).

The current climate in higher education is one of budgetary constraints and competition between colleagues and departments for available funding.

Previous studies have stressed “the importance of research in hiring, tenure, promotion, and salary decisions. Even as colleges and universities have

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* At the time of this study, OSRA was known as the Office Systems Research Association.

tried to emphasize or re-emphasize teaching, faculty still view research as the activity most rewarded by their institution” (Wilger & Massy, 1993, p. 2B). Since research does not occur in isolation, faculty must be members of professional organizations in their respective fields. Not only must faculty be members, but they must also actively participate in that organization through conference attendance and presentations.

Just as in industry, academia has recognized the need for networking through conferencing for decision making and professional development. However, unlike academia, industry has realized the need for alternative methods to fulfill conference outcomes. According to a recent poll conducted by Sony, “Eighty-five percent of Europe’s top 500 multinational companies now depend on video conferencing to replace executive travel requirements” (Bovee & Thill, 1998). Is academia ready to follow industry into using virtual conferencing as an alternative for professional development?

Review of Literature

Virtual Reality

Virtual reality has been defined as the “computer-generated simulation of a real or imagined environment or world. It can be graphics-based... or text based” (Auld & Pantelidis, 1999, p. 49). As students become more sophisticated in their application of technology, educators are faced with the challenge of adapting traditional courses into sensory events. For decades, educators have chanted the words of Confucius like a mantra, “I hear and I forget. I see and I understand. I do and I remember.” This theory has been the battle cry for active learning and delivery methods that address all learning styles.

Virtual reality is cutting edge technology that fits all curricula. “Virtual reality educates, clarifies, and reinforces because subject matter makes immediate sense to students” (Sykes & Reid, 1999, p. 62). Virtual reality is classified as “perfect learning”—creating a learning environment that is student centered where the teacher is the facilitator.

Barriers to the implementation of virtual reality in the classroom center around its cost and teacher adoption. Educators must practice using technology in order to feel comfortable in integrating it into coursework. Within the last five years, the availability of virtual reality programs as well as equipment to utilize virtual reality technology has become more evident in schools. The cost factor has “virtually” disappeared, leaving the educator as the sole barrier. And, full integration of technology is a distant goal unless educators are willing to adapt (Smith Wilkinson, 1997).

Virtual Conferencing

Virtual reality is allowing educators to engage in their own interactions—professional development conferences, electronic collaborative research and writing, and course development and modification. A trend in industry is to engage in virtual conferences. Moreover, educators are linking students to the business world by utilizing one part of virtual reality—the virtual conference (video conference).

“Initial teleconferencing systems were based on analog technology” (Sondak & Sondak, 1995, p. 2). Basically, this involved the use of sophisticated telephone systems. Advances in equipment and technical expertise resulted in video as well as audio transmission through the use of digital signal processing (Sondak & Sondak, 1995).

Through a review of the literature, one finds that the definition of virtual conference varies from journal to journal, article to article, and technology to technology. Most articles limit the definition of virtual conferences by the type of technology used. In most instances, that technology involves interactive television or interactive video. Common perception is that this method of delivery is just the “talking head.” However, research on video technology results in a broader definition of virtual conferences.

This study defined virtual conferences as meetings held via the Internet where communications occur by means of Web pages and attendance consists of access to those pages and the discussion of their content by electronic mail. Virtual conference technology involves many

different aspects of communication media. Interaction may be asynchronous or synchronous. “Asynchronous communication is linear and not interactive. In an asynchronous conference, one person makes a statement and posts it for the group to see. Group members, at their convenience, look at the message and post responses” (Engleberg & Wynn, 1997, p. 351). Asynchronous interaction provides

- freedom of time (learners are able to participate when, and if, they so choose);
- time for reflection;
- opportunities for research; and
- opportunities for global communication (no concern for time zones).

Synchronous communication (real time) occurs when a group holds meetings via computer and individual members type messages back and forth to each other (Engleberg & Wynn, 1997).

Synchronous communication provides

- immediate feedback; and
- rapid problem solving and decision making (Anderson, 1996).

Engleberg and Wynn (1997) proposed several advantages and disadvantages to synchronous and asynchronous communication (Figure 1), each having very definitive impacts on the success of virtual conferences.

Figure 1: Asynchronous vs. Synchronous Communication

Synchronous Communication	Asynchronous Communication
Advantages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group cohesion and synergy • Spontaneous and dynamic interaction 	Advantages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More time to compose responses • Facilitated document review and editing
Disadvantages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typing speed is slower than speaking speed • Messages might be received out of order 	Disadvantages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacks spontaneity • Linear rather than interactive

The terms “virtual conference,” “virtual group,” and “online group” refer to many technologies. They may be real-time activities—like video teleconferencing or audioconferencing—where people are in different places but participate at the same time; or, as with the PBS (Public Broadcasting Service’s Mathline) program, they may enable participants to join in from different places at different times (Kimball, 1995, p. 54).

Virtual Conferences and Industry

Anthony Gargano, Senior Vice President, Applications Systems of Sony Electronics, postulates “For as long as our industry has existed, experts and spectators alike have debated over its existence.... The debate has centered on one crucial issue—when will videoconferencing reach the mainstream” (1997, p. 1). The predominant use of virtual/video conference technology appears to occur in Europe. According to a poll conducted by Sony Corporation, companies indicate they are saving travel costs and increasing decision-making time. Due to the predicted widespread acceptance of this technology, Sony expected sales of videoconferencing systems to rise from 98,000 units in 1996 to over 1,000,000 by the year 2000 (Bovee & Thill, 1998).

Virtual conferences have been used in isolated situations in the United States. An example, Tapped-In, “is a shared teacher professional development workplace patterned after a real world conference center” (Tapped-In, 1998). It uses a technology called multi-user virtual environment that utilizes both asynchronous and synchronous interaction.

An organization known as “E-Conference, Inc.,” based in Boulder, Colorado, is creating Web-based presentations called “e-conferences.” An e-conference is defined as a “live leader-controlled presentation service that allows dispersed individuals to actively participate in a real-time presentation or meeting from their desktop via the Internet” (Scott, 1998, p. 18). During the course of the e-conference, the leader (or presenter) begins the presentation using his/her computer, displaying charts, etc., much as he/she would in a

standard presentation. However, the information being presented is transferred via the Web to participants in the e-conference. The audience has the option of asking questions, sending e-mail, responding to the leader's comments, and viewing geographic locations of other participants. Any visual materials such as photographs, pre-recorded audio or video, animation, charts, graphs, etc., can be included in an e-conference. The cost factor for using E-Conference: \$1,300 to \$1,500 for a one-hour presentation for up to 10 people.

When questioned about the future of business presentations, Bob Black, vice-president of Steelcase, Inc., an office furniture maker in Grand Rapids, Michigan, replied "Dedicated presentation spaces (such as conference rooms) will be a thing of the past. Presentations will no longer be crafted to suit the environment as they are today. Instead, the environment will mold itself to the nature of the presentation and the content of the information" (Scott, 1998, p. 21).

Reasons to Use Virtual Conferences in Academia

The Association for American University Professors in its Policy Documents and Reports states that

Professors, guided by a deep conviction of the worth and dignity of the advancement of knowledge, recognize the special responsibilities placed upon them. Their primary responsibility to their subject is to seek and to state the truth as they see it. To this end professors devote their energies to developing and improving their scholarly competence. (Renden, 1994, p. 2)

From this ethical charge, professional development was seen as a means for striving to obtain more knowledge, embodying the principle of lifelong learning. University administration has taken this charge as a requirement for promotion and tenure. In this manner, the development of a scholarly agenda has evolved from a personal decision to a professional requirement.

Faculty initially accepted this edict when funding was not a major concern (Wilger & Massy, 1993). However, the abundance of funding of professional development for faculty seems to be disappearing as the demand for the escalation of professional productivity is increasing. Faculty members are having to personally fund their own professional agendas for career survival. This lack of funding has led many to make difficult choices between a desire to model the principles of lifelong learning and a need to obtain promotions and tenure. Are there alternatives that answer the need for professional development as well as that efficiently use the funding available?

With the rising costs of "managing" the college and university community, travel expenses tend to be the one area where deans and administrators draw the proverbial line. Most faculty receive little, if any, financial support for attendance at professional meetings. However, these same faculty are expected to publish with regularity and to develop research agendas in their respective areas of expertise (Wilger & Massy, 1993). So, year in and year out, faculty reach deeper into their own pockets to cover the skyrocketing costs of registration, hotel charges, and dining expenses so that they may remain abreast of the latest developments in their chosen field. At the same time, faculty salaries do not continue to meeting inflationary cost of living increases in most areas of the country. Is there a solution to this problem available through the Internet? Could "virtual" conferences be the answer to attending conferences, rising costs, and diminishing resources?

"The advent of the electronic and digital communication has profoundly changed the way university faculty members conduct research, store data, and share information and insights" (Academic freedom in electronic communication, 1997, p. 1). Along the same line, technology offers an alternative to traditional conference attendance in the form of virtual conferences. Characteristics of the virtual conference are mediated, any time or any place or both, interactive, structured, and usually limited in time. In looking at these characteristics of a virtual conference, one could surmise that they "mirror" those of the traditional conference setting.

“Developers of virtual conferences attempt to create a stimulating and supporting learning environment without forcing participants to congregate at a particular location or time” (Anderson, 1996, p. 1).

“While expression in cyberspace is obviously different in important ways from print or oral communication; for example, in the far greater speed of communication and in the capacity to convey messages to far wider audiences—such factors do not appear to justify alteration or dilution of basic principles of academic freedom...” (Academic freedom in electronic communication, 1997, p. 1). Keeping this fact in mind, in addition to the similarities between virtual conferences and traditional conferences, virtual conferencing could be a viable alternative to professional development.

Purpose of Study

Based on anecdotal information gleaned from discussions with faculty from various disciplines concerning travel funding, and research (Wilger & Massy, 1993) a study was warranted in the area of virtual conferencing as an alternative to traditional academic conferences. Four research questions guided the study:

1. Are virtual conferences a viable alternative to traditional conferences?
2. What are the perceived advantages to a virtual conference as opposed to a traditional academic conference?
3. What are the perceived disadvantages to a virtual conference as opposed to a traditional academic conference?
4. Are there differences between member perceptions based on the mission of the organization (i.e., between a “soft” skill organization such as ABC and a technology-based organization such as OSRA)?

Method

The researchers constructed an instrument entitled “Virtual Conferences” consisting of two sections: demographics and opinions regarding virtual conferences. This instrument was initially reviewed by faculty from the Department of Technology

Support and Training at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in order to ensure content validity. Changes were made based on faculty recommendations. Samples were selected from OSRA and from ABC.

OSRA. Two groups from the Organizational Systems Research Association (OSRA) were utilized in the study. OSRA Group 1 consisted of those members of the organization who attended the 1998 national conference, and OSRA Group 2 was composed of members not attending the OSRA conference. Participants for the group of members not attending the conference were chosen randomly ($n=100$) from the OSRA Membership Directory. All attendees of the OSRA National Conference were surveyed to obtain data for the second group ($n=110$). To eliminate duplication, names of the conference attendees were removed from the directory list prior to random selection of non-attending subjects.

Each OSRA survey and return envelope was numbered. Distribution of the conference attendees’ surveys was achieved through placing it in attending packets at the conference which began February 25, 1998. A cover letter explaining the survey and its purpose was attached to all surveys. OSRA conference attendees were instructed in their cover letter to return completed surveys to the conference registration desk and to place them in the designated box. OSRA respondents who did not attend the conference returned completed surveys in self-addressed, postage-prepaid envelopes provided for that purpose. A follow-up letter was sent to the conference attendees and those not attending to encourage participation.

This sample included a total of 220 subjects. Return rate of the conference group was 31% with 33 usable surveys returned. Non-conference group return rate of surveys was 51% with 51 out of 100 usable surveys returned, for a final return rate of 40% for both groups.

ABC. Two groups from the Association for Business Communication (ABC) were also used in the study. ABC Group 1 consisted of those members of the organization who attended the 1997 national conference, and ABC Group 2 was composed of members not attending the conference. Participants for the Group 2 were chosen randomly ($n=200$) from the ABC

Membership Directory. Attendees of the 1997 ABC National Conference (Group 1) were chosen randomly ($n = 200$) from the list supplied at the conference. To eliminate duplication, names of the conference attendees were removed from the directory list prior to random selection of those not attending the conference.

Each ABC survey and return envelope was numbered. A cover letter explaining the survey and its purpose was attached to all surveys. Member participants returned completed surveys in self-addressed, postage-prepaid envelopes provided for that purpose. A follow-up letter was sent to both groups to encourage participation.

The sample included a total of 400 subjects. Return rate was 46% with 183 usable surveys returned (Group 1, $n = 95$; Group 2, $n = 88$).

All resulting data were examined using the SPSS package for Windows to compute correlations as well as to compare the two groups' responses.

Findings

Demographics of Respondents

OSRA. As shown in Table 1, the majority (89%) of the OSRA participants were affiliated with university/four year colleges. Seventy-four and seven tenths percent were housed in the College of Business, with the remaining 8.6% located in the Colleges of Education (7.2%), Humanities (1.2%), and Liberal Arts (1.2%).

Twelve percent of the participants classified themselves as Instructor; 18.1% Assistant Professor; 24.1% Associate Professor; and 38.6% Professor. Sixty-three and nine tenth percent of those surveyed stated that they had tenure, while 27.7% stated that they had not achieved tenure. Of the respondents, 19.3% stated that they were working toward tenure.

The remaining 10.8% stated that tenure was not an option.

ABC. Also shown in Table 1, 88.5% of ABC participants were affiliated with university/four year colleges. Of the respondents, 55.2% were housed in the College of Business with the remaining located in the Colleges of Liberal Arts (16.9%), Humanities and Social Sciences (8.7%), Education (3.3%), and Other (12.6%).

Additionally, 31.7% of the participants classified themselves as Professors; 25.5% as Associate Professors; 17.5% as Assistant Professors; and 16.9% as Instructors, while the remainder either chose not to answer or were classified as "other." Of those surveyed, 61.2% were tenured, while 26.2% stated that they had not achieved that status. Of those surveyed who did not have tenure, 13.7% stated that they were working toward it. The remainder stated that either tenure was not an option or chose not to answer the question.

Table 1: Respondent Demographics

Factor	OSRA Respondents		ABC Respondents	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Institution				
University/Four-year College	73	89	162	88.5
Community College	7	8.5	11	6.0
Private Consultant			2	1.1
Other	2	2.4		1.6
Department				
College of Business	62	74.7	101	55.2
College of Education	6	7.2	6	3.3
College of Humanities & Social Science	1	1.2	16	8.7
College of Liberal Arts	1	1.2	31	16.9
Other	11	13.3	23	12.6
Rank				
Instructor	10	12	31	16.9
Assistant Professor	15	18.1	32	17.5
Associate Professor	20	24.1	47	25.7
Professor	32	38.6	58	31.7
Other	4	4.8	9	4.9
Tenure				
Yes	53	63.9	112	61.2
No	23	27.7	48	26.2
Not Applicable	5	6.0	15	8.2
Tenure-Track Position				
Yes	16	19.3	25	13.7
No	9	10.8	21	11.5
Not Applicable	9	10.8	18	9.8

Conference Attendance

OSRA Respondents. As shown in Table 2, respondents in both OSRA groups revealed that their schools place a great deal of importance on attending conferences; 47% reported attending 1 to 2 conferences in an academic year, and 38.6% attended 3 to 5 conferences per academic year. In total, over 85.6% were involved in at least one conference. Is location a factor in conference participation? Yes. A resounding 67.5% of the respondents indicated that location affected their decision to attend specific conferences.

ABC Respondents. When questioned about conference participation, respondents in both groups revealed that their schools placed a great deal of importance on attending conferences; 66.7% reported attending 1 to 2 conferences in an academic year, and 24% attended 3 to 5 conferences per academic year. In total, over 90% of the respondents had attended at least one conference. Is location a factor in conference participation? Yes. A resounding 70.5% of the respondents indicated that location affected their decision to attend specific conferences.

Reimbursement of Conference Expenses

OSRA Respondents. The largest number of respondents (31.3%) indicated they received 91-100% total reimbursement for conference expenses. One factor considered was whether the reimbursement of conference costs hinged on presentation of a research paper. Of the survey respondents, 65.1% indicated that funding was based on acceptance and presentation. However, in a corresponding question, 57.8% of the participants indicated that they received reimbursement for conference attendance simply for professional development (i.e., officer in organization, committee member, etc.).

ABC Respondents. The largest number of respondents (25.6%) indicated they received 91-100% total reimbursement for

conference expenses. The data indicated that 15.3% of respondents received no reimbursement of conference costs. One factor considered by the survey was whether the reimbursement of conference costs hinged on presentation of a research paper. Of the survey respondents, 59.6% indicated that funding was based on acceptance and presentation. However, in a corresponding question, 56.3% of the participants indicated that they received reimbursement for conference attendance simply for professional development (i.e., officer in organization, committee member, etc.).

Table 2: Conference Factors

Factor	OSRA Respondents		ABC Respondents	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Conferences Attended				
None	7	8.4	5	2.7
1-2	39	47.0	122	66.7
3-5	32	38.6	44	24.0
6-9	2	2.4	7	3.8
Location Factor				
Yes	56	67.5	129	70.5
No	13	15.7	34	18.6
Not a Factor	6	4.8	15	8.2
Percent of Reimbursement				
None	6	7.2	28	15.3
5-20%	6	7.2	12	6.6
21-30%	5	6.0	6	3.3
31-40%	5	6.0	4	2.2
41-50%	2	2.4	12	6.6
51-60%	6	7.2	8	4.4
61-70%	3	3.6	6	3.3
71-80%	5	6.0	18	9.8
81-90%	6	7.2	18	9.8
91-100%	26	31.3	45	24.6
Other	6	7.2	18	9.8
Base of Reimbursement				
Yes	54	65.1	109	59.6
No	26	31.3	58	31.7
Don't Know	1	1.2	5	2.7
Professional Development Reimbursement				
Yes	48	57.8	103	56.3
No	28	33.7	67	36.6
Don't Know	1	1.2	5	2.7

Virtual Conference Participation

OSRA Respondents. Of the OSRA respondents, 77.1% stated they had no experience with virtual conferences. Given the option to participate in a virtual conference, 63.9% indicated they would try one, while 26.5% were not sure. If OSRA were to offer a virtual conference, 54.2% of the survey respondents indicated they would participate, while 34.9% stated they were not sure if they would participate. When asked whether or not OSRA should offer a trial virtual conference, 54.2% of the respondents said yes with another 33.7% not sure. Given the option of having a virtual conference run concurrently with the traditional one, 36.1% of the respondents said yes, OSRA should try this; 16.9% said no; and 45.8% were not sure. If given a choice between a virtual conference and a traditional conference, both requiring registration fees, 37.3% of the subjects stated they would not choose a virtual conference over the traditional; 42.2% were not sure of their choice; and 18.1% stated they would choose the virtual conference. In an attempt to determine if lack of appropriate technology would impede their participation, 88% indicated this was not a factor since virtual conference equipment was available.

ABC Respondents. Of the ABC respondents, 80.9 percent stated they had no experience with virtual conferences. Given the option to participate in a virtual conference, 51.9% indicated they would try one, while 29% were not sure. If ABC were to offer a virtual conference, 46.4% of the respondents indicated they would participate while 39.9% stated they were not sure. When asked whether or not ABC should offer a trial virtual conference, 52.5% said yes, with another 34.4% not sure. Given the option of having a virtual conference run concurrently with the traditional one, 35% of the subjects said yes, ABC should try this; 20.8% said no; and 40.4% were not sure. If given a choice between a virtual conference and a traditional conference, both requiring registration fees, 49.2% stated they would not choose a virtual conference over the traditional; 34.4% were not sure of their choice; and 13.1% stated they would choose the virtual conference. In an attempt to determine if lack of appropriate technology would impede the

participation of subjects in a virtual conference, 80.9% of the respondents indicated this was not a factor since virtual conference equipment was available to them.

Perceived Advantages to Virtual Conferences

OSRA Respondents. As shown in Table 3, 49.4% of the OSRA respondents indicated that lower costs to attend virtual conferences was their main advantage, and access to more professional development was the second highest advantage given by the respondents (16.9%). They (12%) indicated that virtual conferences eliminated the need to be out of the classroom for conference participation, and this was seen as the third major advantage. Respondents (10.8%) revealed that the ability to attract top names in the field for presentations was a fourth advantage in the use of virtual conferences. Increased participation of membership and ability to attend more sessions tied for the fifth advantage of virtual conferences according to the participants (8.4%).

ABC Respondents. ABC respondents (44.3%) indicated that lower costs to attend virtual conferences was their main advantage. Respondents cited that both not having to be out of the classroom (15.3%) and the increased participation by the membership (15.3%) were the second advantages to the use of virtual conferences. The ability to attract top names in the field was the third highest advantage offered (14.2%).

Table 3: Advantages to Virtual Conferences

Rank	Advantage	OSRA Respondents		ABC Respondents	
		Fq	%	Fq	%
1	Lower cost of attendance	41	49.4	81	44.3
2	Faculty development	14	16.9		
3	No need to be out of classroom	10	12	28	15.3
4	Ability to attract top names in the field for presentations	9	10.8	26	14.2
5	Able to attend more sessions	7	8.4		
5	Increased participation by membership	7	8.4	28	15.3

Perceived Disadvantages to Virtual Conferences

OSRA Respondents. As shown in Table 4, the major disadvantage cited by 43.4% of the OSRA respondents was professional isolation. Continuing with this idea of isolationism was the lack of human factors perceived as the second disadvantage (16.9%). The third disadvantage was the cost of facilities and equipment (12%). The planning and development of a virtual conference concerned respondents, and 9.6% indicated this to be a fourth disadvantage to their use. Rounding out the top five disadvantages was the lack of training for presenters and inability to participate (8.4%).

ABC Respondents. Of the ABC respondents, 53.6% cited professional isolation as the major disadvantage to virtual conferences. The lack of human factors was perceived as a second disadvantage (18%); and the lack of training of the presenters (15.8%) as the third disadvantage; and the initial cost of equipment and facilities as the fourth disadvantage.

Differences Between Groups

OSRA Groups. T-tests were used to analyze data to determine response differences between respondents who had attended the 1998 national conference (OSRA Group 1) and those who had not attended the conference (OSRA Group 2). As shown in Table 5, a statistically significant difference was revealed between the two groups in only two areas: (1) the desire to participate in a virtual conference if one were offered in the area of expertise, with Group 1 answering “yes” more often than Group 2; and (2) the perception of advantages of virtual conferences, with Group 2 ranking not having to be out of the classroom to attend conference sessions higher than Group 1.

ABC Groups. T-tests were also used to analyze the differences between respondents who attended the 1997 national conference (ABC Group 1) and those who had not attended the conference (ABC Group 2). As shown in Table 6, a statistically significant difference was revealed between the two groups in four areas: (1) the number of conferences attended each academic year, with Group 1 attending more conferences than Group 2; (2) the

percentage of reimbursement of travel costs for conferences, with Group 1 receiving a higher amount of reimbursement than Group 2; (3) the perception of advantages of virtual conferences with Group 2 ranking the ability to attract top names in the field higher than Group 1 and Group 1 ranking not having to be out of the classroom to attend conferences session higher than Group 2; and (4) the perception of disadvantages of virtual conferences, with Group 2 ranking the lack of training for presenters higher than Group 1.

Table 4: Disadvantages of Virtual Conferences

Rank	Disadvantage	OSRA Respondents		ABC Respondents	
		Fq	%	Fq	%
1	Professional Isolation	36	43.4	98	53.6
2	Human Factors	14	16.9	33	18
3	Initial cost of equipment and facilities	10	12	0	0
4	Planning and development	8	9.6	0	0
5	Lack of training for presenters	7	8.4	29	15.8
5	Inability to participate	7	8.4	15	8.2

Table 5: Significant T-test Differences between OSRA Group 1 and OSRA Group 2

Variables	Means of Group 1	Means of Group 2	t
Would you participate in a virtual conference if offered in your area of expertise?	1.2903	1.8235	-2.754**
Advantage: No Need to be Out of the Classroom to Attend sessions	3.500	2.7500	2.078*

* p < .05.
** p < .01.

An Examination of Differences Between ABC and OSRA

An analysis of the two groups, OSRA and ABC, revealed that both groups agreed on most aspects. The only significantly different response was in ranked disadvantages, as ABC respondents ranked the lack of training higher than their OSRA counterparts ($t = -2.314$).

An Examination of Differences Between Conference Attendees and Non-Conference Members

When data from the OSRA membership and the ABC membership were combined and analyzed in terms of conference attendance and nonattendance, significance was found only in the perception of the ability to attract top names in the field for presentations. Non-conference attendees ranked this advantage higher than conference attendees.

A serendipitous finding was that the two groups ranked the importance of their academic responsibilities differently; i.e., conference attendees ranked the responsibility of scholarship and research as more important than their non-conference-attending counterparts. This trend continued when respondents were asked to rank the institution's perception of academic responsibilities, again with conference attendees ranking scholarship and academic as more important.

Conclusion

With the combined 46% return rate for ABC responses and the 40% return rate for OSRA responses, it appears that virtual conferences piqued the interest of both organizational memberships. However, an analysis of the data indicated that although virtual conferences were of apparent interest, they were not to replace traditional conferences.

A favorable view of virtual conferences and a willingness to try one is present among both organizations'

membership. Just as discussions of faculty concerns stated in the literature review, OSRA and ABC members do see virtual conferences as an option to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for professional development. On the other hand, the respondents indicated professional isolation and the lack of human factors to be a distinct disadvantage to this type of professional development.

Being urged to assimilate technology into the classroom is one point; however, using that technology for our own organizational purpose may not be viewed as a positive step. As Munter (1998) pointed out, to make [conference] technology productive, we must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each system.

Recommendations for Further Research

In view of the findings concerning virtual conferences and their continued role in the profession, the following research is recommended:

1. Conduct an experimental study using a concurrent virtual conference with a traditional conference and perceptions of participants.

Table 6: T-tests on Differences between ABC Group 1 and ABC Group 2

Variables	Means of Group 1	Means of Group 2	t
Conference Attendance	2.4211	2.1500	3.102**
Percentage of Reimbursement	7.3226	6.0759	2.275**
Advantage: Ability to Attract Top Names in Field	3.8000	2.5111	3.545**
Advantage: No Need to be Out of the Classroom to Attend	2.4308	3.0536	-2.240*
Disadvantage: Lack of Training for Presenters	3.0725	2.5370	2.110*

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

2. Survey college administrators to determine if virtual conference participation is viewed in the same regard as traditional conference participation with reference to support for tenure and promotion.

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