

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Online Conferences: Professional Development for a Networked Era

by Lynn Anderson and Terry Anderson
(Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2010, 130 pages)

During the last 30 years in almost every industry, including continuing education, the growth in professional conferences has escalated. The opportunities at conferences to share information, draw on best practices, explore new products and innovations, and network with colleagues are invaluable. However, for most professionals the broad range of conferences exceeds their capacity, including time and budget, to participate. In *Online Conferences: Professional Development for a Networked Era*, Lynn Anderson and Terry Anderson present an alternative that addresses the challenges of face-to-face (f2f) conferences and discuss how developments in technology are transitioning conventional models of conference attendance to online experiences. In the context of continuing education, *Online Conferences* presents both timely and valuable information.

To ensure clarity and context for the reader, the authors introduce the topic by providing the history of traditional f2f conferences in continuing education and a definition of online conferences as they have evolved over the last two decades. Since the first online conference in continuing education in 1992, three generations of online conferences have evolved to the current model, which is described as “immersion.” In this model, participants engage in multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs); in other words, individuals attend as avatars, which allow them to move around and interact with other participants. Anderson and Anderson make several references to *Second Life* in particular; however, they admit that there is a risk of writing about the “current” model without sounding dated, as changes in technology occur so quickly.

In spite of the challenge of writing about a topic that is so frequently changed by new innovations in technology, the authors make an excellent case for the advantages of online conferences. Advocating for online conferences, they convincingly articulate eight benefits: accessibility, convenience and mobility, greater interaction, decreased costs, recordings and archives, sponsorship and revenues, communities of practice, and reduced environmental impact. In particular, Anderson and Anderson’s argument for the benefits to the environment makes a powerful case and emphasizes their commitment to the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions as an outcome of online conferences.

According to the authors, the primary disadvantage of online conferences is the absence of f2f informal networking, an aspect of the traditional gathering that is highly valued though difficult to quantify. The authors concede that online conferences will not replace f2f meetings, but the advantages in reducing costs and improving accessibility are relevant to the conflicting priorities of professional development and budget restraints in continuing education.

For the reader who is planning to organize an online conference, several chapters provide helpful guidance on a comparison of synchronous versus asynchronous, vendor and professional support, and effective evaluation practices. The authors provide clear definitions and present the information in comprehensible format; however, to benefit from the information in *Online Conferences*, readers must be familiar with online technology and the associated terminology. From MUVE to CMC (computer-mediated communication), there are numerous terms and acronyms that are daunting to the reader who has minimal expertise in technology.

In conclusion, *Online Conferences* makes a powerful case to consider the virtual option for conferences while providing practical advice for implementation for anyone who is planning to develop an online conference.

Reviewed by Carolyn Young, University of Western Ontario