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Librarians' Preference of Virtual Meeting Platforms

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Abstract

Virtual participation in professional organization and other committee meetings outside of one's home institution continues to increase as time and money for travel to these events decreases. As the profession moves into a model of increased virtual communication, questions arise as to the best platform and tools to be used for the most effective method of communication. This study seeks to determine which platforms are currently being used, which platforms are preferred by organizers and participants and which platforms will best serve the needs of the committee. Results of this study on preferences for virtual platforms can help individuals and organizations make decisions on the best tools for this method of communication.

Introduction

The ability to communicate with colleagues has changed drastically with the advent of new technologies. Meetings that were once only held face to face can now include members from different locations and time zones. While teleconferencing allowed for communication across locations and time zones, videoconferencing and web conferencing have provided for more robust interactions with images of attendees and features such as document and screen sharing. Current conferencing platforms provide as close to a face to face experience as technologically possible. The videoconferencing platforms of today are quite different than the first one, dubbed the Picturephone, introduced at the 1964 World's Fair by the AT&T Corporation (Sprey 42). Affordability and practicality limited the widespread distribution of this technology, which did eventually become more affordable and more widely used during the 1980's. During the 1990's, videoconferencing became even more affordable and widely used, especially with the introduction of desktop video systems (Sprey 42). The 2000's show even greater adoptions of these technologies as meetings go beyond desktops to mobile devices and applications.

Videoconferencing can be broadly defined as "two or more remote locations engaging in face to face communications" (Sprey 41). While this definition reflects the technology of the time the article was written, it still applies to today's internet videoconferencing, or web conferencing. The videoconferencing platforms reviewed in this study all provide the ability to have more than two remote locations connect with face to face communications. Many of these platforms provide additional features which include the ability to share screens and collaborate on documents. These platforms provide a great opportunity for libraries to collaborate and communicate, especially in regards to group and committee work outside one's institution.

Decreased travel funds, scheduling and time away from the office all contribute to a need to strengthen virtual participation in library organization committees.

As co-chairs of a committee which traditionally met in person at conference, the authors sought alternatives to this due to their own travel limitations as well as those of the other committee members. In using a specific means of virtual communication (Google Hangouts), the authors began to wonder what other tools were being used to meet virtually and whether there was a strong preference of virtual communication within the profession.

Identifying what platforms are being used for professional communication that does not take place face-to-face is important in determining whether the current tools are meeting the needs of the groups and committees. This study seeks to identify preferences and perhaps even determine, or at least suggest consistency of use within the profession. With so many platforms available, this study seeks to identify those which will be most useful and valuable to librarians in their library committee work. The results of this study might suggest that library organizations should consider focusing on specific virtual platforms in order to accommodate a variety of needs for committee work.

Literature Review

The term “virtual meetings” typically refers to people who use technology to meet when they are unable to meet in-person. However, this type of meeting can vary by its setup, purpose, and use of different technologies and software. Virtual teams, for example, are often cited as meeting in small subgroups of team members meeting with other subgroups or they meet individually (Ale Ebrahim, Ahmed and Taha 2654). This term is common within business-related literature but virtual teams have been cited as being used in libraries as well (Knecht 24). Some of the primary reasons to hold a virtual meeting are to deal with geographic and temporal for group meetings (Cascio and Shurygailo 362). DeLuca and Valacich also cite cost as a factor (323). With these factors in mind, virtual communication is being used for more than just meetings, it is also used for training, events, and conferencing (Flowers and Gregson 48; Cakir, 365). Borzillo identifies this extension of the virtual with the term virtual communities of practice (114). However, expanding the context of these meetings too widely can blur its purpose, especially as it relates to this study. It can also become complicated when referring to all the types of technology and software that have been used to conduct virtual meetings. Telework or teleconferencing technically falls into the realm of virtual meetings (Ale Ebrahim, Ahmed and Taha 2655; Topi 79). However, the majority of this study will focus on computer technology and software that has been used to hold these meetings.

There has been little to no research that discusses how the preference of virtual platforms affects virtual meetings. Articles have tended to focus upon individual platforms as a focus of their study, rather than a comparing user preference between multiple platforms. Platforms such as Adobe Connect have articles that focus on classroom collaboration use rather than committee work collaboration (Cappiccie and Desrosiers 296; Kaufmann and Frisby 1). Literature referencing virtual teams often focuses on the structure, benefits, and drawbacks of group meeting within a virtual setting (Ale Ebrahim, Ahmed and Taha 2653-2669). Such as issues of interaction and communication styles (Ale Ebrahim, Ahmed and Taha 2659-2660; Gonzalez-

Navarro et al. 1472). When virtual teams literature does describe technology its often in reference to how technology affects their ability to meet effectively or affect their infrastructure (Powell, Piccoli, and Ives 6-36). There has also been reference to technology within videoconferencing literature Bross, Beck and Leffler discusses online issues to be aware of in order to hold a successful videoconference, such a dealing with audio echo and software glitches (203). However there is little discussion of why people choose one platform over another and investigate all the reasons why they voluntarily participate in these virtual meetings, especially if they have an option.

While literature was limited on citing explanations of preference for virtual platforms, one common theme was to explain the advantages of meeting virtually rather than face-to-face. Richards reflects on the benefits of using virtual meetings within her own library-related responsibilities; she addresses benefits such as cost, time, and the ability to choose a preferable format (79-80). Christina Wasson used an ethnographic approach to examine how virtual meeting attendees felt about their computer-human experience (103-30). Many participants liked the ability to multitask (Wasson 125). Wasson (125) believes that multitasking during meetings is not unique to the virtual setting but participants do notice the advantage of multitasking without creating too much distraction. Current literature presents an array of reasons why these types of meetings are advantageous, but they still have their limitations (Flowers and Gregson 48-64). The goal of this article is to go beyond the advantages of virtual meetings and uncover why librarians choose one platform over another even though they all hold certain advantages.

Methodology

The authors created a 23 question survey using Survey Monkey. The survey link was sent to a variety of library list-servs and posted to related Facebook groups. Some examples include ala-related list-servs such as ili-l, stars-l, rusa-l, acrl-ir and some other library-related listservs such as libref-l. Participants were asked about their experience with virtual meetings for library organization committees. Library organization committees were defined in the survey as meetings that occur outside of one’s own library or institution. Examples of these committee meetings include national committees such as ALA groups, regional consortiums and state-wide groups. Librarians and library staff from both academic and public libraries were encouraged to participate. IRB exemption was obtained through Binghamton University. The survey questions were written in such a way as to gain an understanding of what is currently being used, what (if any) preferences in platforms might exist and whether the currently available platforms are meeting the needs of the profession. The survey also collected information on gender/ethnicity/age/type of library geographic location in order to explore possible patterns or trends in the use of virtual meeting platforms. The authors identified 14 virtual platforms (see table 1) for the survey and also allowed participants to write in any other platforms that may not have been included on the list. Participants were given the ability to write their own answers in for most of the questions where answers were provided and three of the questions were open form.

Table 1
Virtual Platform choices provided on survey

AdobeConnect	ShowDocument
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Blackboard Collaborate	Skype
Elluminate	Vyew
Facebook	WebEx
Fuze Meeting	Yugma
Google Hangouts	ZohoMeeting
GotoMeeting	321Meet

Results

There were 246 respondents for the survey, with 174 finishing the survey for a 70.7% completion rate. Considering the open nature of the survey distribution, it is not possible to determine a response rate, as the number of individuals who received the survey link is not known. It was the authors' intention to make the survey as widely distributed as possible in order to receive diverse results. The results show a greater number of academic librarian responses (75%), most likely due to the nature of the list-servs, which were predominantly academic. Respondents included media specialists, graduate students, library staff, archivists and public librarians. The majority of the respondents listed their employment as full-time. Thus, the results are heavily weighted with responses from full-time academic librarians.

Preliminary results show that there is a slight preference for virtual meetings (50.6%) vs. face to face (41.4%) for library organization committee meetings. The overwhelming reasoning for meeting virtually was to increase participation for those who cannot meet face to face (90.1%) with cost effectiveness being a second reason (70.8%). The platforms that are being used most often by the respondents are: WebEx, Adobe Connect and GoToMeeting. Adobe Connect, Google Hangouts and WebEx were selected as the platforms that best served the participant's purposes (see fig.1), though it is noted that these purposes will vary depending on the nature of the meeting.

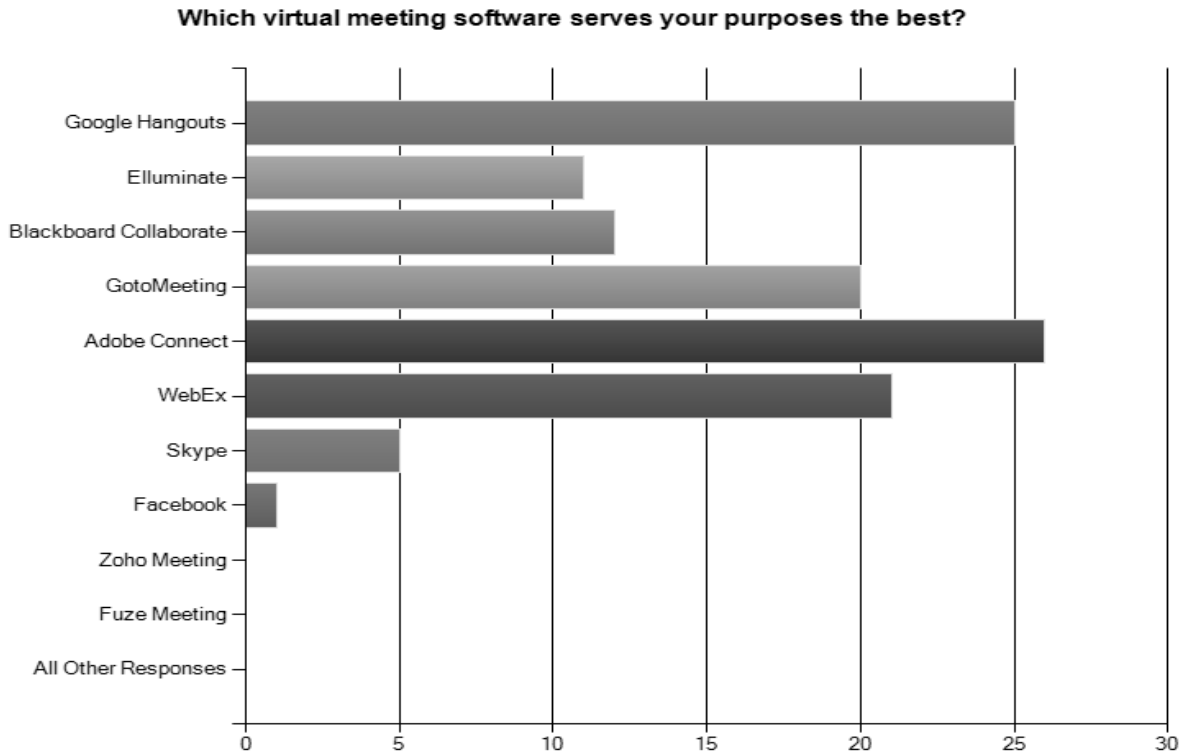


Fig. 1. Platform that serves survey participants' purposes best.

The five most important features of the virtual platforms are the ability to share and collaborate on a document, recording capabilities, voice muting capabilities, phone-in feature and an unlimited number of attendees (see fig. 2). Other important elements in selecting a virtual platform are ease of use, accessibility, cost and support. It is interesting to note that the platforms currently being used the most often are not the platforms that were selected as best serving the participant's purposes. Further study of the results and comments provided by the participants will be used in order to determine why certain platforms are chosen over others that may better serve the meeting attendees needs. The results will also be analyzed to review possible preference based on age, gender, geographic location and library type.

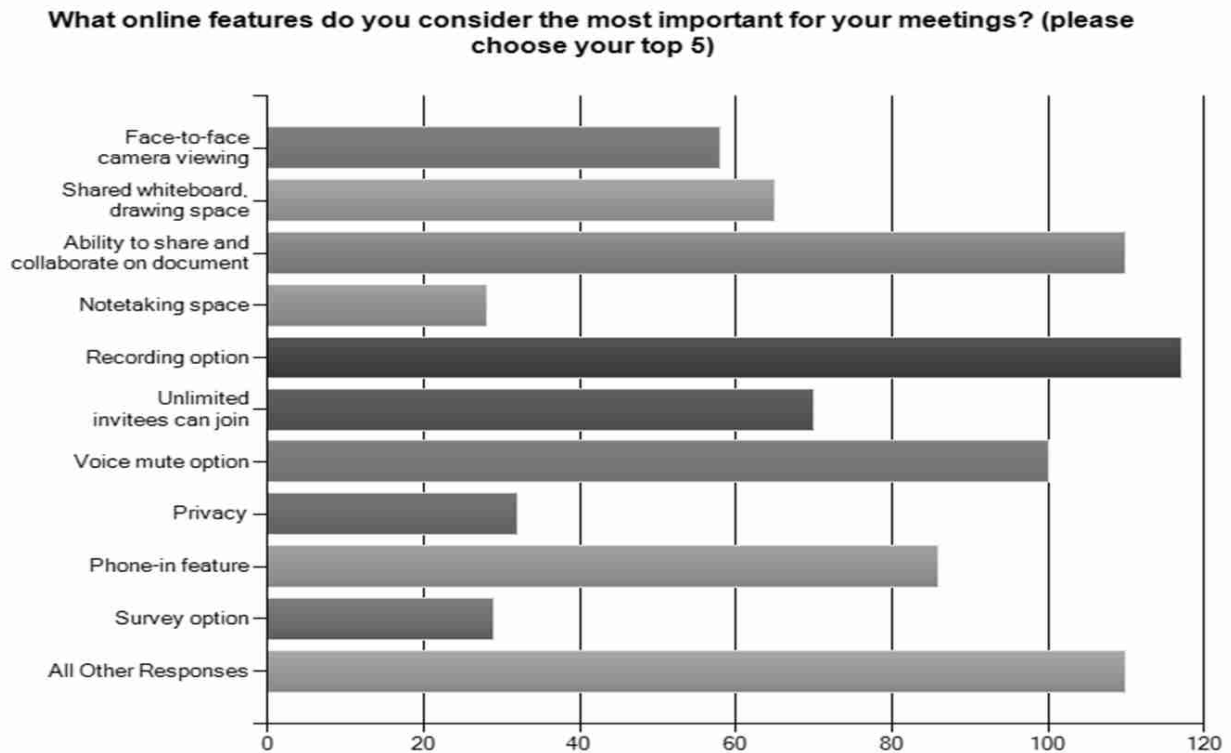


Fig. 2. Top 5 online features considered most important for meetings.

The preliminary results reveal that many different platforms are being used for a variety of reasons which include cost, ease of use, existing support, organizational use and not always being chosen because of preference. The authors hope to explore these results further in order to review the reasons behind both the choice and the preference while also seeking to identify areas of consistency in chosen platform across the profession. Feedback from this survey might assist meeting organizers choose a platform and also determine training needs. The results of this study will be of interest to librarians and library organizations who are seeking to explore virtual communication as well as those already taking part in virtual communication. The study can also be helpful for those outside of librarianship as other professionals and professional organizations increase virtual participation.

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