

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION / DESCRIPTION DU PROGRAMME

The HLABC Webcasting–Webconferencing Pilot Project¹

Devon Greyson and Anne Allgaier

Abstract: The purpose of the *Health Library Association of British Columbia (HLABC) Webcasting–Webconferencing Pilot Project* was to assess the feasibility and value of using Web-based technologies to improve access to continuing education (CE) events and meetings, particularly for our association's rural and remote members. By offering online access to CE events and other Chapter activities, we aimed to facilitate professional development and networking opportunities for our members by enabling those who have previously been unable to attend CE events and meetings to participate online. From June 2010 through May 2011, HLABC offered web access (via WebEx Meeting Centre) to all of our association's events. To assess value and feasibility, we conducted post-event surveys and a whole membership final project evaluation. The overwhelming majority of respondents were enthusiastic about the project's ability to increase event access. Lessons learned from the project include the need for sufficient IT troubleshooting time as well as ways to change meeting culture to better include online attendees within a primarily face-to-face event. An unanticipated benefit to the project was the ability to spontaneously create collaborative new programming, such as an online journal club. At the end of the pilot project, our association resolved to adopt Web delivery as an ongoing strategy, raising member dues a small amount to partly defray the cost of the technology.

Introduction

Similar to many other Canadian professional associations, the Health Libraries Association of British Columbia (HLABC) faces the challenge of providing Continuing Education (CE) opportunities to a geographically dispersed membership. Participation in centralized meetings and events has reflected the barriers posed by distance, and attempts at improving access via video conferencing at specified regional facilities and a small travel fund have had limited impact.

Slightly more than half of our membership (which in recent years has ranged from 85–100 in total) is concentrated in Vancouver, with another tenth from the surrounding metropolitan region. Just over a third of our members are more than an hour away, and many of these more distant members require boat and (or) air travel to attend any Vancouver area CE events in person. In the current economic climate, many employers have reduced funds for travel or CE. Such cutbacks disproportionately impact our distant members, who are arguably the subpopulation with the greatest need for professional association CE due to fewer local opportunities for professional development.

Given the geographic and fiscal challenges of providing CE to our membership, our association wondered whether webcasting (broadcasting of an event over the Internet) and webconferencing (interactive live streaming of an event over the Internet) might aid in reducing participation barriers among our members. To date, little has been published on the effectiveness or value of interactive, synchronous webconferencing for professional education purposes. An emerging body of articles is starting, however, to present a favourable picture of webconferencing for graduate students [1], medical residents [2], and nurses [3], as well as to establish best practices for webcasting and webconferencing for CE purposes [4, 5]. Finding insufficient published material to guide our estimation of the value of webcasting and webconferencing for our association's purposes, we embarked upon our own pilot project. This program description adds to the growing body of evidence on the value of Web-delivered, interactive programming to support professional development.

The purpose of the *HLABC Webcasting–Webconferencing Pilot Project* was to assess the feasibility and value of using Web-based technologies to improve access to association-sponsored CE events and meetings, particularly for our rural and remote members. By offering

D. Greyson², MLIS. Doctoral Candidate, University of British Columbia, 2206 East Mall, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z3.

A. Allgaier, MLS. Regional Librarian, Northern Health, Prince George Regional Hospital, 1475 Edmonton St., Prince George, BC, V2M 1S2.

¹This paper has been peer-reviewed.

²Corresponding author (e-mail: devon.greyson@alumni.ubc.ca).

real-time, interactive, online access to CE events and other association activities, we aimed to facilitate professional development and networking opportunities for our members by enabling those who have previously been unable to attend CE events and meetings to participate online.

Description

After consulting IT review magazines and Web sites such as CNET [7], techsoup [8], PC Magazine [9], and techcrunch [10], as well as soliciting personal experiences from members who had used webconferencing and (or) webcasting software in the past, the HLABC Executive Board (Exec) pilot tested the most highly recommended software options that met our needs. The Association identified the following software needs: interactive webconferencing, reliable connectivity, high-quality audioconferencing (ideally both telephone and VOIP), the ability to share or pass off control of a meeting, to provide for a large number of concurrent users, recording capability to enable asynchronous webcasting, a reasonable price, and ease of use. Over the course of 2009–2010, the Exec trialed WebEx, Skype, GotoMeeting, DimDim, and Adobe Connect. The popular e-learning platforms Elluminate and Wimba, as well as the Canadian option Arkadin, were also considered; however, they did not meet all of our criteria for pilot testing at that time. The executive then evaluated these software packages on the basis of connection quality, versatility, features, price, and user interface and (or) usability. WebEx Meeting Centre emerged as a leader for us in terms of ease of use, interactivity, and reliability. During our pilot project, we became aware of one other health library association also exploring webconferencing for online meetings (although not for association CE purposes), whose software selection experiences validated our own [6].

With support from a CHLA/ABSC Chapter Initiatives Fund grant, HLABC purchased a one-year subscription to the software and began our pilot project. The objectives of the pilot project were: (i) to offer Web-based participation options for all of our annual CE events, membership meetings, and executive board meetings; and (ii) to assess the value of webcasting and webconferencing software as a permanent option for our association.

Our assessment methods relied on a combination of ongoing surveys of online participants, discussion among the executive board and membership, and an end-of-project survey of the entire membership. We collected post-event data from online participants via confidential online surveys. These were quick “post-mortem” questionnaires focused on the success and value of the specific Web-delivered event. The Exec also discussed the progress of the project at every meeting and reported to the membership at each membership meeting. Our final evaluation was a Web-based survey open to all of our members, regardless of their online or in-person attendance at the year’s events.

Outcomes

During the pilot project we met all project objectives. To fulfill our first objective (providing Web access to

association events) we webconferenced all four of our annual CE events, all three of our membership meetings (including our Annual General Meeting, AGM), and three of our four Executive meetings (one had no participants requesting online access). We also hosted our first online journal club for association members — an idea suggested by a regular online attendee of the pilot project Web-delivered events.

Beyond the end of the pilot project year, the Exec elected to use Chapter operating funds to extend our WebEx subscription through the 2011 AGM, at which time association members would discuss and vote upon options for the future. In that additional month, we webconferenced both sessions of our annual member CE day, our 2011 AGM, an additional Exec meeting, and a second online journal club meeting. Our association was further able to provide webconferencing for three focus groups of a library research project (a joint project with another association with a geographically dispersed membership).

To fulfill our second objective (assessing the value of webcasting–webconferencing software as an ongoing option for association events), we synthesized the results of post-event questionnaires and our final member survey.

Post-event questionnaires

Voluntary and anonymous questionnaires were sent out to all online participants within 24 hours of a Web-delivered event. We collected 28 completed surveys over the course of the year, some of which were repeat participants evaluating multiple events. Nine of these were evaluating executive board meetings, while the rest (19) were CE events and (or) meetings open to the entire membership. Most respondents were already regular attendees of our association events (mean of 2.8 events over the past two years), although three respondents had not attended any in at least two years. While 28 responses represents more than half the number of registrants for online delivery of association events, because of the nature of terminal sharing within workplaces and the flexibility for online users to come and go at ease, we cannot be certain what the exact response rate was; therefore, we present only descriptive statistics from the voluntary surveys.

Given that the intent of the project was to reach members outside the Vancouver area, we were surprised to find that 61% of respondents who identified the region in which they lived were from the Metro Vancouver area rather than remote or rural areas. The financial savings of Web delivery ranged from minimal for locals to hundreds of dollars for long-distance attendees.

Overall, we found that the majority of online participants who evaluated the webcast–webconference program would not have attended the event in person (60%), would attend again via Web delivery (96%), found it a good value for money (88%), and would recommend it to a colleague (89%). Respondents further found the experience to be user friendly (mean 4.3 on a scale of 1–5) and of fairly good audio–visual quality (mean 3.75), they felt fairly well included (4.26), and had overall good experiences with the Web delivery (3.96).

Final survey of membership

At the project’s end, we invited all active HLABC members to participate in a brief online survey to evaluate and provide feedback on the pilot project, regardless of their participation in association events. Response rate to the final survey was 27% (*n* = 24). None of the survey questions were mandatory; thus, results do not always add up to 24.

Responses to selected survey questions are presented in Table 1. All but one of the respondents were aware of the pilot project. Nearly half of all respondents (*n* = 11) had participated in one of the online events, which is a far greater proportion than in the entire membership, indicating nonresponse bias in the form of Web attendees being more likely to voluntarily respond to the survey. The great majority of respondents (18) had attended some association event in person during the pilot period, which is likely indicative of nonresponse bias among those who are less involved in association CE events. Survey respondent locations were fairly representative of the general membership, with almost three quarters of respondents hailing from one distinct urban area.

Survey respondents were asked to supply a free-text response to the question “What, if any, do you see as the benefits of webcasting HLABC events and meetings?” The most commonly cited benefits fell into the categories of better accessibility (in terms of time, travel, costs; *n* = 15) and increased equity in terms of participation in and value of the association (*n* = 12). Three respondents also mentioned strengthening the association’s network, and other benefits cited by individuals included: innovation, online archiving, ease of Exec meetings, and potential to include nonmembers.

Respondents were subsequently asked, “What, if any, do you see as the drawbacks to webcasting HLABC events and meetings?” These results were more unified, with cost, technical difficulties, and the relative goodness of face-to-face meetings being equally cited (*n* = 7 for each). Multiple respondents also mentioned the requisite “staffing” needs to administer and facilitate web events (*n* = 4) and the challenge of changing meeting culture to fully include online participants (*n* = 2).

When asked whether the association should continue offering web access to our events, all but one respondent replied “yes”. Respondents were then asked how we should pay for continued webcasting–webconferencing (at an estimated cost of \$800 per year) should we extend the

project. Options (not mutually exclusive) were: with a dues increase, by charging virtual attendees, by using our saved-up operating funds, or other. Nearly all approved of using some of our operating funds (HLABC has a “cushion” from profits from various events that we sponsored). Almost three-quarters of the respondents approved of a dues increase to cover at least part of the costs, and approximately one quarter thought we should charge online attendees.

“Other” ideas included joining forces with a local consortium or other association to cost share and seeking corporate sponsorship of the online events. There were conflicting views regarding the ethics of charging web attendees. Some felt that charging web attendees would be a disproportionate burden on distant members. However, one respondent pointed out that the in-person attendees are often charged for attendance at a meeting (e.g., to cover the cost of refreshments), and thus a small fee for online attendees might be appropriate. The final portion of the evaluation survey was an opportunity for respondents to provide any other feedback for the evaluation committee regarding the pilot project, which primarily received expressions of enthusiasm for the project.

Beyond the pilot phase

At HLABC’s 2011 AGM, the Exec presented the final project report to our association membership, and recommended that we adopt webcasting–webconferencing as an ongoing practice for all association events. The membership voted in favour of raising dues by \$5 per person to help defray the cost of webcasting–webconferencing, which is roughly half of the total projected costs (or the equivalent of the software subscription alone). The remainder (hardware costs) will come initially from operating funds with the association Exec tasked with exploring other revenue sources.

Discussion

The purpose of this project was to assess the feasibility and value of using Web-based technologies to improve access to association-sponsored CE events and meetings, particularly for our rural and remote members. Despite some minor technological hitches, all project objectives were met; we webconferenced all scheduled meetings and events as well as additional events that arose during the year, and we assessed the feasibility of ongoing Web delivery of other association events. While we believe this project improved the accessibility of CE events for our rural and remote members, we were surprised that local members also felt that it increased their access. We conclude that while geographic barriers to participation in association activities are indeed significant, there are other barriers to face-to-face participation that Web delivery of CE may aid in overcoming.

Inevitably, we learned some lessons about Web delivery over the course of the pilot year. We now know that we must always plan for extra time – ideally a full hour – for setup and troubleshooting on-site of any event. We also learned that a change of meeting culture is necessary to fully integrate web attendees. While our attempts to

Table 1. Selected final survey results.

Survey question	Yes	No
Aware of Web conferencing pilot?	23	1
Participated in online Chapter event?	11	12
Participated in person (in past year)?	18	5
Live in major metropolitan area?	17	6
Should we continue webcasting?	22	1
Should we increase dues to pay for webcasting?	17	6
Should we charge attendees to pay for webcasting?	6	17
Should we use our operating funds to pay for webcasting?	21	3

include online attendees improved over the course of the year as we developed new procedures for processes such as voting, changing organizational meeting culture is an ongoing process. This process involves not only the meeting host and chair, but also each and every guest speaker we invite and the participation of all in-person attendees. Details such as repeating audience questions before answering them and limiting a speaker's physical roaming around a room greatly improve the online experience. Investment in professional-quality audio-visual equipment seems necessary for any group intending to Web conference on a regular basis.

Finally, we have learned that as we begin to incorporate the ability to webcast and webconference into our thinking, new opportunities for association activities begin to arise. While the virtual platform can create distance and exclusion if not well managed, it can also engender spontaneity and innovation, bringing people together. We saw this with the creation of our new online journal club as well as with the support the association was able to provide for a collaborative research project. We are also aware that there is the potential for webcasting-webconferencing to create a new revenue stream for the association, allowing us to more nimbly provide CE to an external audience on a fee-for-service basis. These ideas have only begun to arise as we have started to become comfortable with and accustomed to online participation in our events. HLABC looks forward to seeing what the future of the Chapter's webcasting-webconferencing project will bring.

Acknowledgement

HLABC thanks CHLA/ABSC for the Chapter Initiative Fund seed money to make this pilot project a reality.

References

1. Jones RB, Maramba I, Boulos MNK, Alexander T. Use of Live Interactive Webcasting for an International Postgraduate Module in eHealth: Case Study Evaluation. *J Med Internet Res.* 2009;11(4):NP. doi:10.2196/jmir.1225.
2. Grover S, Kelmenson A, Chalam K, Edward D. Webcasts for resident education. *Ophthalmol.* 2012;119(1):199–200. doi:10.1016/j.ophtha.2011.08.037.
3. Pilcher J, Bedford L. Podcasts, webcasts, sims, and more: new and innovative ways for nurses to learn. *J Neonatal Nurs.* 2010;29(6):396–9. doi:10.1891/0730-0832.29.6.396.
4. Guanci G. Best practices for webinars. *Creative Nursing.* 2010;16(3):119–21. doi:10.1891/1078-4535.16.3.119.
5. Smith-Stoner M. Webcasting in home and hospice care services: virtual communication in home care. *Home Healthc Nurse.* 2011;29(6):337–341. doi:10.1097/NHH.0b013e31821b74ec.
6. Bremner S. WebEx enables online meetings for PNC. *Pacific Northwest Chapter of the Medical Library Association Weblog.* Available at: <http://www.consortiumlibrary.org/blogs/pnc/2010/08/09/webex-enables-online-meetings-for-pnc/>. Accessed July 13, 2012.
7. CNET. Product reviews and prices, software downloads, and tech news. Available at: <http://www.cnet.com/>. Accessed July 6, 2012.
8. Techsoup. The Place For Nonprofits And Libraries. Available at: <http://home.techsoup.org/pages/default.aspx>. Accessed July 6, 2012.
9. PC Magazine. Technology Product Reviews, News, Prices & Downloads, PCMag.com. Available at: <http://www.pcmag.com/>. Accessed July 6, 2012.
10. TechCrunch. Available at: <http://techcrunch.com/>. Accessed July 6, 2012.