An Empirical Study of the Impact of NLA Conference Attendance on Librarians' Professional Development

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Introduction

Among the most important events that professional event managers organize are conferences. There are a variety of gatherings, from researchers who meet to discuss scientific results to sales people who are training. Conferences are filled with presentations which are followed by discussion. The difference between a conference and a workshop is the number of attendees involved. A large meeting is usually called a conference, while a smaller one is termed a workshop. Conferences may be called seminars, which are usually smaller groups of delegates, or symposiums – a conference or meeting to discuss a particular subject. One thing is instrumental to them all: communication.

The Nigerian Library Association (NLA) annual conference is a typical academic conference. The NLA website says that the association started as a division of the West African Library Association (WALA). The second out of the six objectives of NLA is to safeguard and promote the professional interests of librarians. One fundamental interest is professional development, which refers to skills and knowledge attained for both personal development and career advancement. The NLA organizes an annual conference intended to allow for the convergence of all librarians, student librarians, library practitioners, book vendors, publishers, and friends of the association. At this conference, issues are raised and discussed during the paper presentations and the Annual General Meeting, which occurs at least twice during the conference. Vega and Connel (2009) note that "conference attendance is a requirement for the career advancement of many librarians, particularly those who work in colleges or universities."

NLA in Brief

As earlier stated, the association under study is one meant to bring together, all Nigerian practicing and intended librarians, book vendors, publishers, and friends of the libraries. The association website (http://www.nla-ng.org/aboutus.html) states that the objectives of NLA are:

- To unite persons interested in Libraries, Librarianship and Information services;
- To safeguard and promote the professional interests of librarians;
- To promote the establishment and development of libraries and information centres;
- To watch legislation affecting libraries and assist in the promotion of such legislation as may be considered necessary for the establishment, regulation and management of libraries within Nigeria;
- To promote and encourage bibliographical study, research and library cooperation and;
- To do all lawful things as are incidental and conducive to the attainment of the above objectives.

NLA began in 1962 as a division of the West African Library Association (WALA). The NLA website has it that WALA was established in 1954 as an offshoot of a UNESCO Seminar on the Development of Public Libraries in Africa, held at Ibadan in 1953. With the political independence from colonial rule of Anglophone West African countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s, WALA national divisions transformed into national library associations of their respective countries. This led to the birth of NLA in 1962.

Since then, 39 NLA conferences have taken place and have been well-attended. People attend conferences as a requirement for career advancement and many other reasons, which are discussed in this paper.

**Literature Review**

A literature review on the impact of conference attendance on professional development identified few articles. Tomaszewski and MacDonald (2006) observe that librarians attend library conferences for professional development and continuing education, to learn about new trends, new technologies, and to build a professional network. They further remark that the American Library Association (ALA), Special Libraries Association (SLA), and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) conferences provide essential tools for growth in the profession.

Most articles consulted focused on general benefits of conference attendance, such as discussed in Crum (2008). Tomaszewski and MacDonald (2009), also note Pavilina (2009), Natarajan (2008), Alaimo (2008), Abram (2008), Morse (2008), Morese (2008), and Pesko (2006). These articles deal with the benefits of attending conferences and the conclusion that people attend conferences for professional development, including knowledge exchange, peer-to-peer communication, and technology updates (Tomaszewski and MacDonald, 2006).

**Library Conference Attendance**

There are different ways to attend conferences. Not only do people attend physically, there is also virtual conferencing, especially in this age where the computer is used to facilitate events. Tomaszewski and MacDonald (2009) give examples of discussions relevant to this trend, which include Bell and Shank (2006), Farkas (2006), and Cakir (2002). All these forms of conference attendances are in a bid to achieve a purpose some of which are:

Collaboration: Collaboration opportunities come primarily through networking and secondarily through attending specific events (Tysick, 2002). People meet at conferences in order to locate researchers they can work with. Conference centres offer grounds for researchers of like interest to meet and agree on topics about which to write. As stated by Tysick (2002) in Tomaszweski and MacDonald (2009), "conferences are a fertile ground for socializing, which in turn leads to building friendships based on common interests. One thing leads to another and you find yourself discussing a collaboration project with a scholar or fellow librarians."

Networking: Another great benefit of attending conferences is to meet with colleagues in the same profession. Networking is human-to-human interactions that spur action. Olubola (2007) states that "the themes of the conferences and workshops more often than not provide a platform for delegates to exchange views, share experiences, learn from best practices, and develop sustainable network with colleagues outside the country".

Motivation: Motivation comes from listening and interacting with senior colleagues in the same field. When the more experienced librarians are presenting papers or giving a talk, the newer ones listen. The years of experience of senior colleagues help motivate newer librarians to strive to reach farther. Tysick (2002) wrote that, "immersing yourself in a discipline that you have a connection to, either through academic or work-related experience, is energizing....Without renewed motivation you may become stagnant and even alienated from the discipline you support".

Collection development: Conferences give librarians a chance to interact with vendors. Lyons (2007) ponders the question of librarians attending conferences not oriented to the collection subject areas. According to Tysick (2002), "when [faculty and students] learn that the library has thought it important to send a librarian to 'their' conference, they begin to realize the library is genuinely interested in their needs."

All these reasons for attending conferences involve professional development.

**Review of Related Empirical Studies**

Ngamson and Beck (2000) examined motivation, inhibitors, and facilitators of association members in attending international conferences. A survey questionnaire was used to measure the importance of those factors in influencing the subjects during the conference attendance decision process. The study revealed that opportunities for travel to overseas destinations, outdoor recreation, business or political activities, change of pace, networking, and education were important factors which motivated the respondents in attending international conferences. Perceived risks of safety, inconvenience, and unfamiliarity with overseas destinations, distance, time, money, health problems, and possible security problems of overseas destinations inhibit people from attending conferences. The respondents considered deals on overseas travel packages, opportunities to do activities with family at overseas destinations, and costs covered by their employer as important factors that facilitate their attendance at international conferences.

Adomi, Alakpodia, and Akporhonor (2006) surveyed patterns of conference attendance among LIS professionals in Nigeria. Findings revealed that the

respondents attend a variety of conferences, although a majority attend the NLA National Conferences only occasionally; most of them attend conferences in order to keep up-to-date with developments in the profession; most of them obtain conference information from websites; the main factors which determine conference attendance are the reputation of the organizers and early notification of conference date and venue; conference attendance results in improved productivity in the organization; lack of organizational funding for conference attendance is a problem for most of the respondents. In general, the results indicate that, for most respondents and their employing organizations, participating in conferences produces real benefits.

Rotkin (2008) reports on a professional development fund survey. Of those responding, almost three-quarters (73%) said they had spent money out of pocket to support attendance at professional meetings or for other professional development activities. Of those responding, almost two-thirds (64%) said they had decided not to attend otherwise important or appropriate conferences or not to pursue other job-related professional development opportunities because of the lack of available sufficient professional development funding.

Yoo and Chon (2008) developed a measurement scale to examine factors affecting convention participation decision-making. Five underlying dimensions of convention participation decision-making were labeled: (a) destination stimuli, (b) professional and social networking opportunities, (c) educational opportunities, (d) safety and health situation, and (e) travelability. The implications of the scale are discussed for future research as well as convention marketing strategy.

Vega and Connell (2009) tried to determine why professional librarians attend conferences and to consider their attitudes toward various conference offerings and whether conference attendance is important to their careers. The study found the main reason the respondents attended conferences which was to achieve professional rejuvenation (56%) and networking (40%).

More recently, Yoo and Zhao (2010) validated previous studies. Four determinants were identified (networking, destination, travelability, education), which are in line with the factors suggested in the literature.

**Problems Associated with Conference Attendance**

Before an individual embarks on a conference journey, there is a decision-making process. The factors hindering conference attendance by librarians as identified by the researcher and other researchers are:

Cost of participation: According to Ramirez, Laing and Weiler (nd.), cost is important to the convention attendance decision (Mair & Thompson, 2009; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat, et al., 2001; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Yoo & Zhao, 2010; Zhang, et al., 2007). Rittichainuwat, et al. (2001) suggest that both affordability and availability of time are considered under the cost factor. Cost of participation in a conference includes cost of registration, transportation, accommodation, and food.

Lack of sponsorship: If a librarian is not sponsored to the national conference, which might be expensive, it discourages the person from attending. Sponsorship could
come from the institution where the librarian serves or from NLA as a means of encouraging people to be active members of the association. Ramirez, et al. (n.d.), say that, "in some cases, a company offers a limited number of places for their employees to attend a convention and many may apply for this support which can often become competitive between colleagues."

Lack of interest: Lack of interest in a conference might be due to stale programme, poor quality, unattractive conference venue, poor quality of invited keynote speakers, lack of rapport among association members, poor quality of food and accommodation provided, lack of social activities, unavailability of conference resources for purchase.

Unacceptance of Submitted Papers: Papers for NLA are accepted primarily because of quality. When some papers are rejected and others are accepted, those whose papers were rejected may not wish to attend the conference.

Lack of awareness: Some librarians say that they do not hear about the NLA annual conference/AGM and the call for papers. They do not have an opportunity to submit a paper and this may negatively affect their decision to attend the conference.

Statement of the Problem

Librarians attend conferences that relate to their profession, but some librarians attend conferences, especially the NLA conference, without a clear objective. The question posed by this study is: why do librarians attend NLA conferences?

Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- How often do librarians attend NLA conferences? [frequency of attendance]
- Why do librarians attend NLA conferences? [reasons for attending]
- What benefits are derived from these conferences? [benefits derived]
- What problems hinder librarians from attending NLA conferences? [problems faced]
- What strategies could be adopted in ameliorating these problems? [solutions]

Population and Sample

More than 700 people attended the 48th National Conference/AGM of NLA, held at International Conference Centre, Abuja, from 18th – 23rd July 2010. Those attendees are the population for the study. A sample of 200 was chosen. Data was collected using a questionnaire. A total of 185 copies were retrieved and found usable, a 92.5% response rate.

Methodology

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the survey were analyzed using percentages, frequencies, and means, where applicable. The quantitative items on the questionnaire were: gender, age, years of professional experience as a librarian,
rank, and frequency of NLA conference attendance. For qualitative analysis, a four-point Likert scale was used to determine mean scores of respondents' perception of issues raised. The values assigned to the different scaling statements were as follows:

SA - Strongly Agree 4
A - Agree 3
D - Disagree 2
SD - Strongly Disagree 1

On a 4-point Likert scale, the cut-off point was obtained by adding the values in the scale (1+2+3+4=10) and dividing by 4 to obtain a mean of 2.50 (10/4). Any item rated 2.51 and above was regarded as positive, while any from 2.5 and below was regarded as negative. The scores given to any item were computed by adding the values of the ratings by the respondents. The means were computed from the sum of the value points and divided by the number of the responses. The formula that was used in calculating the means was \( X = \frac{\Sigma x}{n} \).

Where:  
\( X = \) Mean 
\( x = \) Value 
\( n = \) number of responses 
\( \Sigma x = \) sum of values.

**Analysis**

Data for each research question was analyzed in order to ease comprehension of respondents' responses.

Research Question 1: How often do librarians attend NLA conferences?

Data in this respect were collected using questionnaire item 2 and the analyses are shown in chart 1:

Chart 1: Number of times respondents have attended NLA since inception

Data in chart 1 reveals that many of the librarians (128) have attended NLA conference 2-5 times (69.1%) and only few (8) have attended more than 10 times (4.3%). Those with more experience in the profession have attended more than ten times, especially academic librarians. Newer librarians are most of those who have attended once (15.6%).

Research Question 2: Why do librarians attend NLA conferences?

This second research question was answered using questionnaire item 3. See chart 2:

Chart 2: Reasons why librarians attend NLA conferences

Drawn from chart 2, the result presented indicates that four ratings are above the criterion mean of 2.5. From the responses given, most librarians (3.67) attend NLA to learn about professional issues. That is, issues that pertain to the profession which may relate to the professional development of the individual. Responses on "to

brainstorm with colleagues” were rated 3.23 which is another good reason why librarians attend NLA conferences as they indicated. It is seen also that librarians attend conferences to meet with colleagues (3.23) and elites (3.01) in the profession. The least of the reasons why librarians attend NLA conferences is “to participate in elections” (2.03), and to attend group meetings (2.4).

Research Question 3: What benefits are derived from these conferences?

Chart 3 was used to represent data received and analyzed on research question 3:

Chart 3: Benefits derived from attending NLA conferences

From chart 3, it is seen that benefits librarians derive from attending NLA conferences in order of ranking are: “to learn new occurrences in the profession (4.05)”, “to update existing knowledge (3.72)”, “to learn how to serve clients better (3.51)”, “to learn how to write scholarly papers (3.50)”, and “to learn how to speak in public (3.45)”.

Research Question 4: What problems hinder librarians from attending NLA conferences?

Data received was analyzed and represented in chart 4:
Chart 4: Problems hindering librarians from attending NLA Conference

Chart 4 explains vividly that the major problem hindering librarians from attending NLA conference is "lack of sponsorship" (4.01). Another notable problem is "lack of awareness" (3.91), followed by "cost of participation" (3.82). Some librarians claimed "unacceptance of submitted papers" (3.5) poses a threat while "lack of interest" (1.57) was the least problem remarked.

Research Question 5: What strategies could be adopted in ameliorating these problems?

Chart 5 represents the analysis of research question 5:

Chart 5: Strategies in ameliorating hindrances to conference attendance

The data presented in chart 5 interprets the responses of librarians towards strategies in ameliorating hindrances to conference attendance. The major point identified by the respondents is "sponsorship by institutions/libraries/NLA" (4.2). Respondents also noted "reduction of registration cost" (3.9) and "proper awareness of NLA conference" (3.61) as good strategies, followed by "publication of presented papers" (3.56).
papers" (3.56), "acceptance of more papers" (3.52), and "more professional activities" (3.12).

Discussion of Findings

Most librarians attend the NLA conference to learn about professional issues and to brainstorm with colleagues and elites in the profession. This is in line with Yoo and Chon's (2008) finding that professional and social networking opportunities are one of the five underlying dimensions of convention participation decision-making. In addition, Adomi, et al. (2006) surveyed patterns of conference attendance among LIS professionals in Nigeria, and their findings revealed that most NLA conferees attend the conference in order to keep up-to-date with developments in the profession. Vega and Connel (2009) also noted that conference attendance is a requirement for the career advancement of many librarians, particularly those who work in colleges or universities. According to Ramirez, et al. (n.d.), another important driver of association convention decisions identified by existing studies is educational opportunities (Grant & Weaver, 1996; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Ngamson & Beck, 2000; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat, et al., 2001; Severt, et al., 2007; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Yoo & Zhao, 2010; Zhang, et al., 2007). Ramirez, et al. (n.d.) stated further that the "educational" factor has also been referred to in other studies as encompassing personal and professional development, career enhancement, the desire to learn, keeping up with changes in the profession/field, updating knowledge, hearing eminent speakers and learning new skills (Oppermann & Chon, 1997).

With regard to the benefits derived from attending NLA annual conferences, a majority of the respondents indicated that they learn about new occurrences in the profession and update their knowledge. These major benefits are yet in line with the findings of Adomi, et al. (2006), whose study revealed that most NLA conferees attend the conference in order to keep up-to-date with developments in the profession.

The analysis done on the problems hindering librarians from attending NLA annual conference reveals that the major problems are lack of sponsorship, lack of awareness, cost of participation, non-acceptance of papers, and lack of interest. Ramirez, et al. (n.d.) supports this, noting that, "in some cases, a company offers a limited number of places for their employees to attend a convention and many may apply for this support which can often become competitive between colleagues." Cost of registration is also a threat to conference attendance (Mair & Thompson, 2009; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat, et al., 2001; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Yoo & Zhao, 2010; Zhang, et al., 2007).

Research question 5 sought strategies to alleviate conference attendance hindrance factors. Chart 5 shows the points identified by the respondent, including sponsorship by institutions/libraries/NLA, reduction of registration cost, and creating proper awareness of NLA conference.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

Librarians are urged to attend the NLA annual conference to learn more about professional issues and to brainstorm with colleagues and elites in the profession, as this is a major reason noted by most of the respondents.

Librarians should note the benefits derived in attending NLA annual conference as identified by the respondents. There should be provision by institutions/ libraries and NLA for sponsoring librarians to attend the annual conference. These bodies should encourage librarians to attend conferences pertaining to their profession by making financial provisions available to them so they can attend and be active members of their profession. It is worthy of note that the Nigerian Library Association has made provisions for prizes which have been established to be competed for annually (sourced from http://www.nla-ng.org/nlaawards.html):

- The Award for Young Library and Information Professionals (yLIPs) – instituted by NLA in 2006 and includes full sponsorship to the annual national conference;
- NLA Award for Innovation in Libraries ;
- The E. B. Bankole Librarian of the Year – Endowed by a former President of the NLA, Alhaji Mauzu H. Wali in 2001, this carries a prize of twenty thousand naira (N20,000.00);
- Dr. James O. Daniel Award for the Most Innovative Library-Based ICT Project of the Year – was instituted in 2006 and carries a prize of twenty thousand naira (N20,000.00) and a plaque;
- T.M. Salisu Award for the Most Published Librarian – instituted in 2008 and carries a cash prize of twenty thousand naira (N20,000.00) and a plaque;
- Dr. Mrs Rose Bini Okiy Award for the Most Innovative Librarian in the use of Information for Creation of Awareness of HIV/AIDS Pandemic – initiated by the 2nd VP of the NLA in 2009. It carries a plaque and a cash prize of twenty thousand naira (N20,000.00);

The forms for the awards could be obtained from the NLA website. This is a pace which all library associations should set in order to encourage librarians to attend library conferences where cost of participation is assessed as high by the participants.

In addition, the NLA conference committee should endeavour to be accepting more papers and split the conference sessions into lead paper presentations and discussion groups as opposed to the ongoing tradition where only few papers are accepted for presentation in a large annual gathering of elites. This action will encourage mentoring instead of giving chance to only the good ones to present papers.

There should be activities that will stir up interest in librarians to be attending NLA annual conference meetings, and it is the responsibility of the conference organizers and the executive members of the association to ensure this. Factors like poor choice of conference venue, stale programmes, poor feeding and accommodation, poor caliber of invited keynote speakers and guests, etc can kill the interest of librarians in attending subsequent meetings.

There should be adequate awareness creation of each upcoming NLA conference, not only via the online forums platform (nla-online-forum@yahoogroups.com; nlaneulibrarian@yahoogroups.com; and nlalittcentral@yahoogroups.com), but through letters to institutions and paid-up members or any category of member. This will keep everybody informed about upcoming conferences.
• Efforts should be made where possible, to reduce registration cost of the conference as this is a major problem faced by most librarians in attending NLA conference.

References

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