Virtual Networking Pilot: Feedback

Dr Gareth J Johnson, May 2020

Executive Summary

A successful pilot virtual networking (video conferencing) event was held in May 2020 for a small number of Collaboration member library staff using *Zoom*. Delegate feedback suggests more such events should be hosted drawing on current hot topics as well as areas of interest to the special interest groups. Recommendations for effective online events include relatively frequent hosting, structured around informally themed discussions and coordinated by co-chairs. While technical issues were limited, virtual networking events are unlikely to appeal nor be practicable for all member staff.
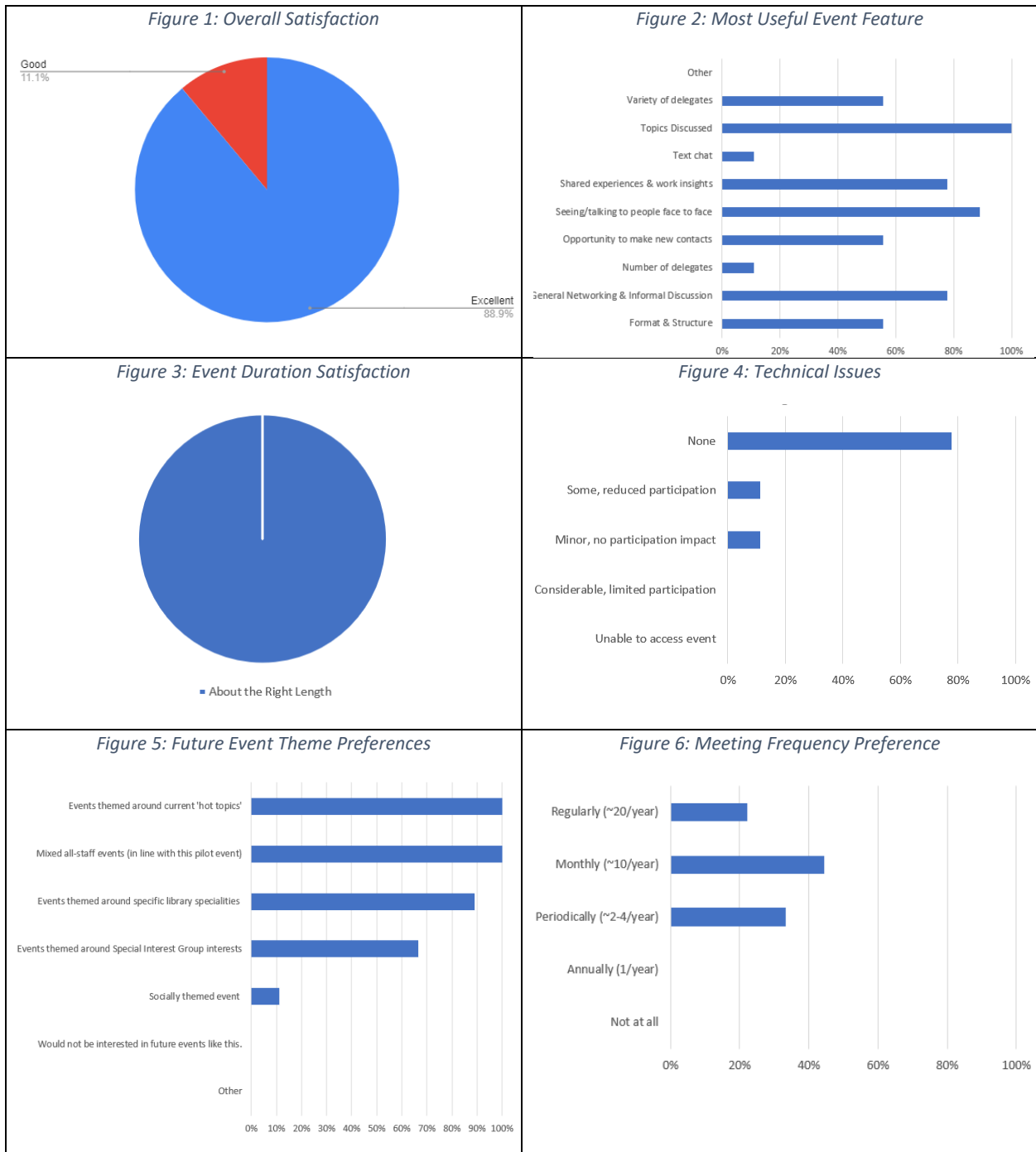
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Introduction

With the UK lockdown and social distancing imperatives affecting academic libraries and their staff throughout the region, the Mercian Collaboration has currently suspended its online meeting programme.[i] Following the results of a membership survey, which included questions relating to hosting a 'virtual networking event', 24 individuals from member libraries were invited to attend a pilot event, hosted on the *Zoom* platform, and facilitated by the Development Officer.

Nine delegates responded, with eight participating and one unable to connect due to local connectivity issues, for an event lasting 90 minutes.[ii] [iii] The meeting was co-hosted by Gareth J Johnson (Mercian Collaboration) and Sarah Pittaway (Worcester, MSDF). Meeting discussions were kept informal and loosely constructed around the twin themes of 'lockdown experiences and workarounds' and 'challenges of reopening library services'. While participants were free to guide debate in other directions if wished, these topics formed the core of discussions.

Following the event, a brief online survey was sent to all participants, with all attending delegates responding. The following report therefore presents the results of this feedback, followed by comments and recommendations concerning future such virtual networking events.

Results

Quantitative Feedback

Figure 1: Overall Satisfaction

Good
11.1%

Excellent
88.9%

Figure 2: Most Useful Event Feature

- Other
- Variety of delegates
- Topics Discussed
- Text chat
- Shared experiences & work insights
- Seeing/talking to people face to face
- Opportunity to make new contacts
- Number of delegates
- General Networking & Informal Discussion
- Format & Structure

(0% – 100%)

Figure 3: Event Duration Satisfaction

■ About the Right Length

Figure 4: Technical Issues

- None
- Some, reduced participation
- Minor, no participation impact
- Considerable, limited participation
- Unable to access event

(0% – 100%)

Figure 5: Future Event Theme Preferences

- Events themed around current 'hot topics'
- Mixed all-staff events (in line with this pilot event)
- Events themed around specific library specialities
- Events themed around Special Interest Group interests
- Socially themed event
- Would not be interested in future events like this.
- Other

(0% – 100%)

Figure 6: Meeting Frequency Preference

- Regularly (~20/year)
- Monthly (~10/year)
- Periodically (~2-4/year)
- Annually (1/year)
- Not at all

(0% – 100%)

Future Discussion Themes

Learning & Teaching	Supporting online learning/teaching
Collections & Data	Acquisitions and buying stock when not physically on site. Digitisation.
User Experience	Current service delivery. eg. chat enquiries. Management of study rooms. Reopening services (post-lockdown).
Research	Supporting researchers.
Workforce Development	Remote working. Returning to work [physical, furloughed etc]

Additional Comments

- *Thank you for organising this event - I shall be recommending to colleagues*

- *It was useful to see what other Universities were doing at such a strange time.*

- *I found the mixture of institutions and roles/responsibilities enhanced the meeting.*

- *Really good to see everyone! Useful discussion.*

- *Could agendas be more fluid and suggested by attendees prior to the event?*

Analysis

Delegate feedback strongly validates the online/virtual networking format as used for this event (**Figure 1, Additional Comments**). Its informality, loose structure, face-to-face engagement and broad themes broadly seem to be the major satisfiers for attending delegates (**Figure 2**). Notably, text chat was seen of limited use, but this may be an artifact of the relatively low delegate numbers and their ability easily interact throughout.

The 90 minute duration satisfied all delegates as being an ideal event length (**Figure 3**), and thankfully technical problems were limited. Informal comments suggested technical problems derived largely as a result of local/personal internet connectivity issues (**Figure 4**). A regular virtual networking event, with a relatively regular monthly occurrence (~10/year) seemed desirable (**Figure 6**). Again, comments during the meeting included a noted delegate keenness to '*meet again in a few weeks*'.

Delegates strongly favoured future events themed around both specific specialities (e.g. as represented by the SIG) but also those discussing '*hot topics*' (e.g. responses to lockdown etc.) (**Figure 5**). It was notable that User Experience/Service elements were the most frequent specific suggestions, although this represents only this group's perceptions (**Future Discussion Themes**). It was notable the blend of delegates (in terms of role, seniority, experience and focus) was also seen as a major satisfier and a desirable element for future networking events (**Figure 5, Additional Comments**).

Discussion

In virtually all respects, this event was a success and well received, validating both the format and the platform for use in future events.[iv] It also identified a desire, wiliness to engage and demonstrable member benefits from deploying events in a video conferencing format. In line with the experiences and feedback from the annual Collaboration conference, drawing delegates from across library service staff, rather than being from within specific interest or speciality groups, was a considerable benefit in spurring conversation and enabling variety of experiential exchange. Hence, this delegate heterogeneity would be one worthy of repeating in at least some future online events. Delegates also expressed during the meeting the benefit of speaking with colleagues from outside their own teams and institutions, identified previously as a core benefit of Collaboration membership.[v]

It is clear therefore at least for the period of lockdown, but potentially beyond that too, that the Collaboration and its constituent groups should strongly consider organising more video conference discussion events. Such events should centre on topics key to each SIG's interests and the Collaboration's strategic concerns, but also provide the opportunity for more general discussion too. Additionally, the personal wellbeing arising from such 'face-to-face' engagements was expressed by more than one delegate during the event, consequently providing additional benefits.

This experience of hosting the pilot and future online events would also help feed into the plans to host Conference 2020 as an online event. Through providing technical and practical experience for staff hosting, alongside greater familiarising member staff with effective video conferencing engagement, such a programme would contribute towards the Collaboration's Workforce Development strategic goal.

While it is clear the Collaboration should seek to host more of these events, there are caveats. Delegate numbers were relatively low for this event (~10), in comparison with most physical events (>20), which aided discussion and engagement. However, larger events would reduce this degree of interactivity and reduce the potential for all delegates to be as engaged. Hence, for future events care needs to be taken to not allow them to swell beyond the level at which such beneficial engagement can be enjoyed by all participants. From the experiences of this format of event, keeping delegate numbers relatively low (<15 participants) is therefore advisable.

Additionally, the delegates for this pilot event were a self-selected group of 'willing online participants'. Not all Collaboration member library staff will be as technically capable or willing to participate. Hence, while care must be taken to open video conferencing events to all staff, it should be appreciated that not all member staff will be ready, willing or able to participate. Furthermore, there will likely also be an increased burden of technical support for those less familiar with ICT-derived communication. Such support would need to be provided by member staff, as the resource for support from the Collaboration centrally is extremely limited.

Nevertheless, the co-hosting model worked well with one SIG lead chairing the event, and the Officer providing organisational, discussion and technical support for both host and participants. This should be continued for future events, although this places a further limiting factor on event hosting regularity, especially where specific subject experience is required. Hence, this and the previous considerations may therefore set a natural ceiling on the number of such events which can be facilitated in the coming months. It may be advisable to seek to provide a modest number successfully, than an extensive schedule of poorly considered and ineffective events.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations suggested from this study:

- This report to be shared online, and specifically with Directors and SIG Chairs, for their consideration and information.

- Further pilot events should be held and made open to delegates generally.

- Events should be facilitated for small delegate groups, engaged with informal but loosely structed discussions for no more than 90 minutes.

- Hosting general (non-themed) online discussion events should also be explored by the Collaboration.

- SIG Chairs and Groups should be encouraged to explore host virtual networking events.

- The Co-Hosting format should be adopted throughout for event efficacy and effectiveness, with the Development Officer continuing to provide support for event hosts in a co-chair capacity.

References

[i] Johnson, G.J., 2020. *Mercian Collaboration & Covid-19*. 18th March. https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/mercian-collaboration-covid-19

[ii] Johnson, G.J., 2020. *MSDG Events Programme & Virtual Events Survey*. [*forthcoming*]

[iii] Mercian, 2020. *Virtual Networking Pilot Meeting*. https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/virtual-networking-pilot-meeting

[iv] Johnson, G.J., 2020. *Inaugural Online Networking Event a Virtual Success*. 13th May. https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/inaugural-online-networking-event-virtual-success

[v] Job, D., & Johnson, G.J., 2020. *Tangible Membership Value*. https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MC%20Tangibles%20and%20Value%20-%20v1.0%20Jan%202020.pdf