

EDITORIAL

## The Value of Project Management Conferences: Why they are Important for Individuals, Organizations, Industry, Government & the Profession!

*By David L. Pells*

What is the real value of project management conferences? Why should someone attend a conference? Why should employers send their project managers or project teams to PM conferences? Why should companies that sell project management-related products and services participate in vendor fairs or trade shows, or support PM conferences? Do these conferences create any real economic benefits, or value for governmental organizations? I believe that conferences are far more important than most people realize. This article is an attempt to highlight some of the benefits and value of PM conferences, and to focus attention on some of the better reasons why PM societies should produce high quality events and why individuals and organizations should participate.

As a professor once explained to me, there is a natural series of career-related activities for individuals in professional fields. First, there is a period of learning and growing, following by work to apply what has been learned. This should lead to some real accomplishments. After 10-15 years, in order to keep growing professionally, one should begin to research problems and issues, and publish the results of that research in professional journals or at conferences. Further development might result in one or more books, but this is normally 15-20 years into one's "career". Eventually, professionals should reach a point where they return something to the profession, either in new ideas, volunteer activities or other contributions.

There are many reasons today why organizations should attend, participate in, sponsor or support conferences. But conferences should primarily offer individuals opportunities to both advance their careers and to advance the PM profession.

### **The Value of PM Conferences for Individual Professionals**

For individual project management professionals, the value of attending a PM conference can include the following opportunities:

- **To present a paper or teach a workshop** – professional paper presentations and workshops, and the research and effort involved, are critical stages in the professional development of professionals. Conferences offer opportunities for individuals to take these important steps in their careers, which can lead to any number of positive results.

- **To learn new approaches and methodologies** – for attendees, especially younger professionals, conferences can be an opportunity to learn new concepts and methodologies, that in turn can help them address real-world PM issues or help the individual grow and learn.
- **To learn about new technologies** – like any other industry, the project management world does not sit still; new technologies, software tools and innovations appear every year. Conferences provide an opportunity to both showcase and learn about these developments.
- **To learn of new resources** – conferences provide an opportunity to learn about experts, organizations, individuals, tools or other resources that can be taken back to work on a program or project. While some individuals and organizations aggressively market themselves at conferences, many attendees have real project management problems to solve. Conferences can bring resources of many types together as few other events can do.
- **To network**, for education, career advancement or employment – the career-related benefits of networking cannot be overstated, in my opinion. All conferences include networking opportunities, whether evening social events or daytime networking sessions. Networking can result in personal friendships, job opportunities, identification of resources, sharing of experiences and knowledge, and personal growth (for example, meeting professionals from other countries, cultures or industries).
- **To become more professional** (profession oriented) – an often overlooked aspect of PM conferences is the opportunity for professionals to observe other professionals, to learn professional behavior, to volunteer or to observe volunteers, or to find other opportunities to advance professionally (for example, to find news or information about PM professional associations, certifications, education, etc.)
- **To increase your personal value** and advance your career – with some advanced planning, a conference participant, whether an active presenter or attendee, can take concrete steps at PM conferences to advance his or her career. Paper presentations or other leadership activities can go right onto professional resumes. Active participation leads to increased knowledge. Awareness of other participants, and especially the organizations that are represented, improves one's understanding and perspective of the marketplace, and opportunities that may be out there. And of course you might learn of that dream position that just fits your next career goal.

Project management conferences offer tremendous educational and learning opportunities for all participants, whether a person is just starting out or well along in his or her career. Conferences can also be the source of solutions for immediate PM problems, whether related to methodologies, tools or people. Conferences provide a

great opportunity to meet new people, interact with colleagues, and expand one's professional network. Many of these benefits can only be found at conferences.

### **The Value of PM Conferences for Organizations**

Organizations can also benefit from sending project managers and employees, even executives, to project management conferences, in the following ways:

- **More productive employees** – companies send employees to conferences to learn, and to become smarter and more productive. Most conference attendees return home with at least one useful idea, and often with far more to help the organization.
- **More professional employees** – conference attendance provides professionals with a few more credentials & credibility, and with a sense of accomplishment. This is especially true for presenters, workshop leaders or other active participants. More importantly, attendance can lead to more self confidence, professional behavior and professional knowledge, all valuable traits for project managers and team members.
- **New solutions for accomplishing projects** – conferences provide opportunities to learn how to accomplish projects better, faster, with fewer resources & less risks. Solutions are often presented, and often multiple solutions, for a wide variety of project issues and problems. Organizations should send their smartest leaders to conferences to find those solutions.
- **New employees and PM resources** – if an organization is looking for experts, professional project managers, or project management professionals, conferences offer an excellent venue for identifying candidates. Some organizations blatantly advertise job openings; others are less obvious.
- **New customers and/or improved customer relations** – not surprisingly, conferences often include attendees from contractor and customer organizations. Not only does common attendance at a conference provide something personal in common, but it also offers opportunities for individuals and organizations to hear the same thing, see the same new methods, explore common solutions. For PM vendors or solution providers, conferences offer tremendous opportunities to identify potential new customers and to impress current or previous clients.

Successful executives recognize the value of efficient, motivated and professional employees. They also understand that project success, and the effectiveness of internal project management, directly affects the profitability and success of the organization. This is true whether projects are performed for external customers or based on internal investment. But organizations and managers should expect a report

from their employees who attend conferences; the benefits must be brought home to the enterprise.

### **The Value of PM Conferences for Industry**

Potential benefits to industry in general, and for the project management industry (vendors) in particular, can result from PM conferences. Some industries are more mature in this respect than others. For examples, the aerospace and construction industries have held project management conferences for decades, providing opportunities to leading industry organizations to showcase new products and services and for professionals to share experiences.

- **To advance industry-related PM solutions** – PM conferences provide opportunities for industry-specific projects and project management issues to be presented, showcased and discussed. Industry-specific problems can be addressed, and solutions offered. At recent PMI congresses, for example, there has been an increased emphasis on specific interest group exchanges, many of which are industry oriented.
- **To increase industry productivity and competitiveness** – just as with PM in general, PM for industry-specific projects and PM can be advanced at conferences. The overall result can be increased competence and competitiveness within the industry itself, whether new buildings are constructed better or new consumer products reach the market faster. Both can be the result of better project management.
- **To grow & promote the industry itself** – PM conferences can be used to promote specific industries, or PM within certain industries. A good example is the proliferation in recent years of PM conferences for the Pharmaceutical industry, and those for IT professionals. It should be noted, however, that PM is fast becoming an industry itself, with thousands of PM product and service companies servicing hundreds of thousands of projects and organizations around the world. PM conferences are raising this visibility.

In recent years, NASA in the United States has recognized the benefits of project management conferences. The recent NASA Project Management Challenge 2007 conference in Texas was a tremendous success, bringing NASA program and project managers, contractor project management professionals, PM vendors and solution providers together for two days of learning and sharing. The potential benefits for NASA and NASA programs are obvious and significant.

### **The Value of PM Conferences for Governments & Nations**

Government agencies and organizations are major stakeholders in project management, in every nation where the financing of major programs and projects ranges from public services to public infrastructure. There is also an important

argument now emerging on how project management can contribute to the competitiveness of nations in the global economy. For government, therefore, I want to suggest the following potential benefits arising from project management conferences:

- **To Increase the productivity of individuals & organizations** – in the global economy, the first one to market wins. The best products and projects win. The most productive organizations win. Good PM is all about increasing productivity and success, key ingredients for competitive organizations and professionals in the world today. PM conferences help individuals and organizations become more competitive, increasing exports, profitability and return on investment.
- **To improve PM on public programs and projects** – as public resources become more scarce, and as more programs compete for public funding, greater productivity is needed on public, tax-payer financed projects. This is true in every country in the world. The public deserves well managed programs and projects, where the best PM methodologies are employed, when the results often affect the lives of everyday citizens. PM conferences can help bring attention and benefits to public sector programs and organizations.
- **To develop local PM experts and suppliers** – PM conferences can help grow the local PM industry and marketplace. This is especially important for developing economies, regions or industries. But the PM industry is still young and growing, so more conferences are needed in many places, and in many countries. In the USA, there is a robust competition among cities to host conventions and conferences, because of the positive economic impact of the visitors and activities. Local and regional governments should also see the benefits and support local PM conferences.
- **To advance the local PM profession** – because the PM profession provides education, certifications, events and opportunities to advance modern PM, local PM conferences can help promote the PM profession on a local basis. This is true within and among nations. It is another piece of the puzzle for creating more successful and competitive industries, organizations and professionals in the global economy.

For nations to be more competitive today, industries and organizations in those countries must also become more efficient and competitive. Government agencies must also become more efficient and productive with public programs and projects.

### **The Value of Conferences for the PM Profession**

Not long ago, the primary objective for project management conferences was to earn money needed to sustain a professional society through the rest of the year. There

are other far more important reasons why project management professional associations must hold conferences, including the following:

- **To advance the profession** – PM conferences can and should be used to advance the PM profession. This can be done in a variety of ways, but especially by providing opportunities for new ideas, new concepts, new methodologies and new technologies for project management to be presented and discussed. Opportunities should also be provided for discussion of issues affecting the PM profession, by organizations and individuals from all elements of the PM world.
- **To provide opportunities for professionals** – PM conferences sponsored by professional associations should provide opportunities for PM professionals to both advance their own careers as well as advance the PM profession. Opportunities can include speaking, presenting, teaching, leading and facilitating. PM professionals should be showcased, to motivate more professionals to get involved in volunteer and leadership activities.
- **To provide a venue for interaction and networking** – interaction between and among individuals and organizations generates numerous benefits and positive side effects, ranging from cross-fertilization of ideas to the creation of new global networks that can generate their own synergies and benefits. The PM profession can grow and benefit in numerous ways by promoting such interaction.
- **To promote PM in industry** – PM conferences can be extremely useful for promoting the PM field and profession among industrial organizations and leaders. Industrial leaders can be invited to speak or participate; conferences then provide major marketing tools for promoting project management.
- **To promote the PM profession** – PM conferences remain one of the most dramatic means for promoting the PM profession itself. PM conferences draw attention to the PM field, to the sponsoring organizations, to the venue and to the topics of the conference. These can be big and exciting events for everyone involved, and fun to boot!

If these objectives can be met, value and benefits will result and financial success for the PM societies involved will take care of itself.

## **Conclusion**

There are many good reasons to attend project management conferences. Sometimes the value is hidden or misunderstood, and often overlooked. Executives and employers often fail to appreciate the benefits, and the returns on the small investment, of sending a key employee or two to a conference. Obviously, costs and benefits should be considered. Perhaps this paper will help with that analysis.

There are now a wide variety of conferences available for project management professionals, including regional events. Virtual PM conferences are around the corner, although it will be several years before they can replace the value of the networking, learning and career advancement available at a two or three day conference.

Conferences bring together users and suppliers of project management solutions, professionals and professional leaders, individuals and organizations. The value from such interaction should not be overlooked or underestimated!

Attend a project management conference. It will be educational, fun, interesting and rewarding, in more ways than you may realize.

*Good luck on your projects, and at your next conference!*

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