

## Managing Editor's Desk

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**T**he economy is down. Travel costs are up. The boss won't pay for continuing education. I may not have a job tomorrow. In view of considerations like these, *how in the world can I possibly justify attending a meeting?*

Believe me, I've asked the same question and from two different positions. In the first instance, I attend meetings and often ask myself beforehand, "Is this meeting worth it?" I also approve the meeting attendance of our employees, and I ask the same question then.

In the second instance, I manage an association that puts on meetings, at which we seek your attendance. Accordingly, I have to ask, "Are our meetings, and especially our annual conference, worth your attendance?"

To gain a better sense of how to answer this question — are meetings worth your attendance — please join me for a deeper discussion on the value of meetings. I hope this exercise proves helpful when you are wondering about attending some meeting or conference.

For starters, a huge debate currently rages in the world of meetings. Driven in no small measure by these hard economic times, this debate pits those who have vested interests in meeting venues (who therefore strongly favor in-person meetings) against those who are strictly focused on the bottom line (who therefore strongly favor virtual meetings, which are low cost). From NEHA's standpoint, this debate presents a false choice, as we don't see a conflict in the selection between these two different means of education. Rather, we see that the two are integrated and that each has its place. This is why we have developed an e-Learning program at the same time that we continue to enhance and upgrade our Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition (AEC).

## The Value of Meetings

**In today's world,  
it is all about getting  
something back on  
your investment.**

For example, I can't imagine ever wanting to attend a conference to learn about what an RSS feed means, when a webinar will easily do the trick. If I wanted to hear about how a best practice can be used in my program, however, the wiser choice would probably be to attend an event in person, where I can ask questions and interact with the expertise that is immediately available to me.

As NEHA continues to develop how we provide our educational offerings, we will continue to try to deliver our education in the most appropriate manner — sometimes choosing live conferences, sometimes choosing a webinar, and sometimes choosing other means for getting the education out, such as through our Web site, our e-Newsletters, our new Radio NEHA program, our e-Learning series, and so on.

We also think about merging online education with in-person education where we can. For example, at this year's annual conference, we devised an online blog that enabled people to discuss the major conference topic of "Who are we and where do we want to go," before and after the AEC. We're making ways available for attendees to plan coordinated activities at the conference long before it is held, just as we are making ways available for attendees to continue their conference discussions electronically long after the conference ends.

Moving on from the relationship between online education and in-person education, let's take a deeper look at the in-person meetings. To help you to assess the value of these meetings, I suggest that if you can answer yes to the majority of the questions below, the meeting that you are considering attending is probably worth going to, even in these tough economic times. If you can't honestly answer most of these questions with a yes, even if it is the NEHA AEC that you are evaluating, then you should probably save your money for something else. (I can tell you that the idea of "return on investment" is a major factor for us in our conference design and that we test our conference against these kinds of questions all the time.)

For the conference that you are considering attending:

1. Would it be beneficial for you to meet some of the people who will be attending the meeting?
2. Can you imagine "crucial conversations," which you would want to be a part of even if only to listen, taking place at this meeting?
3. Is the emotional connection that you could make with some of the conference attendees of value to you?
4. Is high-level interaction available to you at this meeting, and would it be beneficial to you to have such an experience?
5. Is the education available at the conference relevant to your work responsibilities?
6. Could this education enable you to do your job better and/or more cost effectively?
7. Could this education help you to explain and present your work to others more impressively?
8. Are topics covered at this conference that you feel a personal connection to,

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- and are these discussions open to your contribution?
9. Are opportunities being provided to learn best practices?
  10. Would some of the conference offerings enable you to return to your workplace as an effective change agent?
  11. Would some of the offerings help you to build a better team spirit within your program?
  12. Does the meeting take time to recognize its leaders and achievers with awards so that you might better understand what excellence in your line of work looks like?
  13. Are opportunities available at the conference to either mentor or be mentored?
  14. Does the conference provide important updates on where the profession is?
  15. Are motivational opportunities available at the meeting?
  16. Is the conference set up in a way that makes it easy to continue discussions after the conference concludes?
  17. Is a measure of hands-on training available at the conference?
  18. Are enough interesting people attending to give you reason to believe that you will

have important and meaningful “chance conversations”?

19. Can you see within the conference agenda and organization the opportunity to build mini-communities of friends and colleagues, even if only for the conference itself?
20. Can you get the bulk of your continuing education credits taken care of through the conference course offerings?
21. Are memorable moments suggested within the conference that would have you think back fondly on your attendance at this event?

One of the many things that I do is serve on a board for an organization that provides meeting support. At our last board meeting, we considered the state of the economy and asked tough questions about the future of meetings. The points that I've listed above came out of a discussion about the value of meetings. A subcurrent that ran through that discussion addressed what happens if we don't meet.

Interestingly, I went into this discussion leaning more toward e-Learning than toward in-person meetings, despite the fact that NEHA puts on an annual conference that means the world to us! I came out of this discussion, however, more convinced than ever about the importance of in-person meetings. If a conference

can affirm the kinds of experiences that these questions point to, then it is hard to imagine a more worthwhile investment of time and money. In addition, educators have understood for years that people learn best in group settings. That fact only adds to the case for meetings that reflect yes answers to the questions above.

I close by posing an honest question. In offering the above list of questions, I obviously had NEHA's AEC in mind. I urge you to put any meeting that you are considering to this test, however, including ours. If you can't answer yes to the majority of these questions, then you probably shouldn't spend your precious time and money to attend the event you are considering. In today's world, it is all about getting something back on your investment. Meetings are no longer just occasions to get together. They have to produce value, or they are increasingly difficult to justify. If you can answer yes to these kinds of questions, then good for the meeting designers and good for you. You need to be there. Professional gains and even personal fulfillment await — two treasures in any kind of economy. 🐼

