



Rural Wisconsin
Health Cooperative

Annual Conferences--Not Just Cheesehead Hats

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Not too long ago, the role of an annual conference was for guys (and then it was almost always guys) to have the opportunity to get to the big city, to explore and rediscover adolescence in as many ways as time, wallet and a wavering conscience permitted. Of course it's all different now--both men and women now make the pilgrimage. Actually, I'm half joking, but I do believe that what we look for in our conferences hasn't really changed.

For better or worse, I had a 50th birthday last year, which will make the math in the following illustration easy. When I was in college, a hundred years was five of me, now it is only two. Or put differently, the happenings of a century feel very close and personal in a way that used to seem foreign and personally irrelevant. My father traveled as part of the great southern migration to Chicago, his father had come to the same city by steamer, an illegal immigrant from Canada. Both looking for opportunity and probably a chance to break out of their daily grind back home.

It is a cliché to talk about the pace of change in our technology, the tools we use to do our work. While I mostly just use them, I am still enough of an engineer to marvel at the changing technologies that have been made available to us. My son's watch now does calculations that once took me days with punch cards and a mainframe computer; we've gone from the mimeograph machine's blurry purple sheets to crisp in-house Xeroxing/publishing; mail that used to take weeks by ship now goes instantly from my Macintosh Powerbook at the kitchen table. The real challenge is how to most cost and time effectively choose and use these tools.

Career and technology are important but so is that kitchen table, a solid reminder of our need for family, friends and stability. Our ongoing churning of place, our migration for work and opportunity is a significant part of the richness of our culture, both urban and rural but it comes with a cost. The aforementioned technology has made it easier now than ever to meet our need of staying in touch. Many of us have reconnected with lost friends and relatives through the explosive expansion of the world wide web site. Via daily email, I check in more with some friends a thousand miles away than I do my next-door neighbors. (Check out <www.switchboard.com/> to experience an incredibly powerful tool to find lost phone numbers and addresses.)

Through all of this, America has become a pretty small country; ironically the ease of keeping in

touch electronically increases the need to see each other face to face, as relationships are maintained and enhanced, not lost. As part of my volunteer work with the National Rural Health Association (NRHA) I've been promoting NRHA becoming more of a virtual organization, doing collaborative work less bound by a single organizational structure, place or time, making better use of current communication technologies. But none of this is intended or can replace the need we all have to spend time with each other, face to face.

If you haven't asked yourself, what does this all have to do with the initial question, you may have been too polite. My answering of this question reflects a deliberate focus and bias, not on what a conferences can offer but what we are seeking from the critically useful ritual of annual meetings. Planes take us farther more quickly, hotels are generally more upscale and presentations (some of them) are slicker, but we go to conferences for the same reasons we always have--to engage in some of the basic activities we need to grow and thrive, both professionally and as individuals; as noted above we seek:

- to explore/learn new ground
- to rediscover/recharge
- to seek new opportunities
- to break out of a daily grind
- to learn the use of new technology/tools
- to create/maintain individual networks

Donna Williams, NRHA Executive Vice President, sums it up more succinctly: "Annual conferences of any membership organization provide an excellent opportunity for the members, staff and organizational friends to come together to meet, learn, and network together. Its a way to re-connect and re-charge." [The NRHA Annual Conference is May 12th-16th in Orlando, Florida, call 816-756-3140 for details.]

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