**Convening Meaningfully with People at the Center**

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[SLIDE - INTRO]

Hello! I’m Aliya Reich, and I’m the Program Manager for Conferences and Events at the Council on Library and Information Resources, or CLIR. I plan the annual Digital Library Federation, or DLF, Forum and manage our affiliated events.

[SLIDE - PEOPLE]

Events are one of those things that everyone has an opinion on because everyone’s attended them, and everyone’s planned them. For library professionals, events like conferences, seminars, and symposia are crucial parts of our professional development, both to learn what’s new in the field and also to share the work we’re doing at home.

[SLIDE - PEOPLE]

The pandemic has changed a lot about these events. In the next few minutes, I’ll share a bit about DLF’s process in planning our conferences during the pandemic and how we’re emerging as we navigate plans for our upcoming events this October. I hope you are inspired to rethink how you plan your own events and how you keep your communities at the center.

[SLIDE - PEOPLE]

In March 2020, DLF was at the beginning of our planning process for that year’s Forum. We had released our Calls for Proposals early that month and were initially optimistic we’d be able to host our fall events in person, but as the pandemic progressed it became increasingly apparent that we were going to have to change course.

[SLIDE - QUESTIONS]

We took several steps back and started to ask ourselves some fundamental questions. When everything is stripped away, what’s really important about a conference? What does our community need out of a chance to meet, to connect, to learn, at a time like this? Does it even need an event at all? What’s truly important here?

[SLIDE - SURVEYS]

To answer these questions, we asked our community. We conducted a series of surveys to try to understand how our community was feeling about the pandemic, about their jobs, and about what they wanted from the DLF in a time of crisis.

Sent at the end of April 2020, our first survey asked some basic questions to begin to understand whether people would attend our events if we held them and what about the pandemic concerned them most.

Our second survey a few weeks later asked more specific questions about what our community would need out of a virtual conference. Options included “creating as many opportunities as possible for community members to present,” “taking time to focus on self-care and wellness so I can regroup, recharge, and help others around me do the same,” and “hearing about creative ideas for advancing social justice through digital projects.”

Surveying our community had so many benefits: we learned what they were worried about and what their needs were, and it brought them into our decision-making process. As a result, we were able to plan relevant events that fulfilled the community’s needs.

[SLIDE - ART OF GATHERING]

As the results for the second survey were coming in, I came across Priya Parker’s book, *The Art of Gathering*. Parker makes a lot of excellent points, but my main takeaway was the importance of having a guiding focus to help make decisions. No event can be everything to everyone; trying to serve everyone ultimately serves no one. How could we at DLF balance competing interests in a time of crisis, help our community members connect with each other, and not overburden them or ourselves in the process?

As we sifted through the survey results, a few themes emerged. As they did, we prepared a third survey, this time for our planning committee, to help us determine what this year’s guiding focus would be.

[SLIDE - BUILDING COMMUNITY WHILE APART]

Together we selected the guiding focus, “building community while apart.”

This process was very helpful for us in creating structure out of a situation where initially it felt like the options were endless. Once we understood that our community still wanted to meet and wanted to feel connected to each other, we had our charge and could make decisions about the program, the format of the event, the wellness activities, and more.

[SLIDE GROUP - DECISIONS]

We made the following decisions:

* We made our 2020 conferences free.
* We shortened them to just a few hours each day with copious breaks.
* We reduced the number of simultaneous tracks by 50%.
* We pre-recorded everything, which allowed for greater accessibility, captioning, and greater safety for participants.
* We set up Slack spaces to allow participants to chat and connect with each other.

[SLIDE GROUP - WHAT WORKED AND WHAT DIDN’T 2020]

So, did it work? Did we “build community while apart”? Yes and no. We found that:

* Offering a free event was fantastic. The event was generally very successful, with more than double the number of attendees as our in-person events.
* Reducing the hours and tracks was the right choice for not overwhelming attendees with too much content.
* Some attendees missed the chance for live interaction with each other through casual conversations or workshop-like sessions.
* Having the videos in one platform and the chat in another cause some attendees confusion and made them feel disconnected (though others felt the format worked well).

Ultimately, we found that it can be really challenging to strike a balance between helping people connect, allowing attendees to share their work, lowering the cost barrier, and ensuring content is as accessible as possible. What works for some people doesn’t work for everyone. But, casting the net wide while staying steady on the focus helped us produce a cogent event that got it right as best we could.

Fortunately or unfortunately, we had a second chance at the virtual conference endeavor, as we brought our 2021 conferences online as well.

[SLIDE - SUSTAINING OUR COMMUNITY]

Again we surveyed our community, and together we decided on a different guiding focus: “sustaining our community.”

[SLIDE GROUP - SAME 2021]

We kept some things the same for our 2021 events…

* We kept them free, except for some paid workshops.
* We kept the content mostly, but not entirely, pre-recorded.
* We kept our tracks and conference hours reduced and our breaks very regular.

[SLIDE GROUP - CHANGED 2021]

…We changed some other things.

* We chose a comprehensive conference platform where attendees could watch videos and chat in one place, without having to manage multiple windows or programs.
* We offered several “office hours”-type orientations to help attendees and presenters get comfortable in the platform.
* We added a few live, discussion-based sessions to help attendees connect, including some live 90-minute workshops.
* And, we spread the events out over two weeks.

[SLIDE GROUP - WHAT WORKED AND WHAT DIDN’T 2021]

For our second year of virtual events, we found that:

* Attendance was great again, even with Zoom fatigue and pandemic exhaustion.
* Our 2021 platform solved some issues and created others.
	+ While the comprehensive conference platform we provided for folks was an improvement on having to navigate between different programs…
	+ The one we chose didn’t work as well as promised, nor did it offer the level of accessibility features that were promised to us when we signed the contract.
	+ We found attendees expected a platform like Zoom, and this was different and inferior.
* Folks loved the live workshop sessions (when the platform was not malfunctioning).
* Spreading the events over two weeks was good for the bandwidth of our attendees, but it was rough on staff.

Ultimately, it’s hard to know how new tech will really work until you’re in it. Also, accessibility for online events is really challenging, and even when you’re intentional about it, things sometimes don’t go as planned. It’s ok to make mistakes though.

[SLIDE - TAKEAWAYS]

As we “Sight New Horizons” for library events of all types and think ahead to our in-person events this fall, we have a few recommendations for helping communities connect and re-connect in the best ways possible, regardless of the scale or format for your event.

[SLIDE GROUP - TAKEAWAYS]

* **Stay in touch with your community.**
	+ Ask your community what they need as you’re planning your event.
	+ Short Google Form surveys aren’t expensive or too cumbersome to set up, and the information can be invaluable.
	+ Having good community feedback can also help organizers transparently explain the decisions they make.
* **Be clear on your primary goal for your event.**
	+ This can be difficult to do, but having a focus is essential to planning a coherent event that’s meaningful for attendees and manageable for your staff.
* **Bake accessibility into your events from the beginning.**
	+ For both in-person and virtual events, it’s crucial to think through a plan EARLY in the process for making content accessible and for adjusting where there’s room for improvement (and there’s always room for improvement).
	+ Again, stay in communication with your community and be honest if there’s something you can’t provide, and explain why where you can.
* **Finally, don’t be afraid to make mistakes.**
	+ No matter the format of your event, you won’t always get it right, and you can’t please everyone.
	+ But with buy-in from your community and a clear purpose, you can plan an event that’s meaningful, educational, and productive for your attendees.

[SLIDE - THANK YOU]

If you want to chat about your event planning experiences, find me on Twitter @aliyareich or shoot me an email at areich@clir.org. Thanks for listening!