

Big Science and Local Meetings

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Arrangements that enhance collaboration are critical to enhancing the geographically distributed work environment of LTER information managers. Given a data environment filled with short-term deadlines in terms of both field data acquisition as well as digital systems providing data access and networked data sharing, long-term planning through new organizational mechanisms may ease the burden of planning for information exchange.

The annual LTER Information Management Committee (IMC) meeting provides a central, stable forum for our well-established information management community-of-practice. This meeting holds importance at an organizational scale. Are there additional ways to enhance community communication and coordination that may ultimately feed back to enhance the LTER IMC meeting itself? The EIMC meeting to be held in conjunction with the IMC Meeting this year is one type of new event, a reaching out and a scaling up that can broaden information management discussions. Supporting small locally organized meetings represent a type that scales down in order to network. At the implementation level, goals are frequently more easily identified or defined initially in smaller groups. Contemporary communication environments such as VTC are powerful tools but for ambitious projects these mechanisms are frequently most useful after initial personal contact and project layout.

We are exploring self-organized local meetings as an additional venue for information exchange. Note, the suggestion is for a ‘local meeting’ rather than a ‘small meeting’. This is deliberate, namely, to avoid connoting that small activities occur at such meetings. This serves as a reminder that small-scale meetings do address big science and have ramifications for the larger community. It is only the number of initial attendees that is small in order to facilitate low overhead, informal meetings. Informal scheduling allows for unexpected turns of events, particular types of emergent synergies, and more directed conversations rather than large-scale discussions with their myriad of overlapping contexts and trajectories.

The Ocean Informatics team (PAL and CCE) routinely schedule events for ‘pass-through’ visitors who have formal meetings scheduled at UCSD but who coordinate a follow-on meeting with our Ocean Informatics team. Ocean Informatics events have included visits from librarians with interests in E-science and institutional repositories, an industry web manager with experience with content management systems and an archivist with insight into long-term artifact preservation, as well as information management colleagues.

In a recent meeting of participants involving PAL, CCE, and MCR, we exchanged information in particular about data system organization and data turbines. We learned from each other how we manage and publish data and metadata at our respective sites as well as about how our approaches differ. The DataZoo information system publishes data as standard packages as defined by the data provider or as temporal and/or spatial subsets, accessible through intuitive web based user interfaces. Data are available in tabular or graphic form. It was not too surprising

that the overall approach of MCR was comparable. MCR seemed on a similar trajectory given the related research topics that frame the site work. Together we began to analyze those common needs and shared user requirements among our marine and coastal sites as opposed to across the full spectrum of LTER sites. It was enjoyable to work with an underspecified agenda that allowed for unplanned, difficult-to-account-for tacit and implicit information about site and network arrangements, plans, and history .

Last year, a conversation with an LTER community advocate prompted some thinking about the value of creating an organizational arrangement in the form of a funding mechanism such that local meetings did not wait for the serendipitousness of an unrelated meeting being scheduled. We thought it valuable to transform Ocean Informatics events into a recognized and supported part of an information infrastructure. To try out this approach, support for a local meeting was included in this year's - almost regular but not taken for granted - PAL and CCE annual site supplements. Travel support was included so that a colleague could travel to San Diego for a brief stay. Site LTER co-PI's were supportive in that the funds were designated for an information management event rather than for the myriad of other site needs. A budget, however small, becomes a place marker, a seed for proactive planning and a recognition of the value of these small but formal exchanges. Having a budget specifically designated for a local information management activity opens up possibilities. We are able to plan events to match the timing of our local needs whether to investigate common approaches and themes, to share targeted applications and techniques, or to explore issues and joint articulation work.

So expect an update next year on our view of the shift from reactive planning to strategic meeting planning. Like the saying goes 'good things come in small packages'; we would add that 'large ramifications may come from local meetings'.