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There's nothing like meeting an expert face to face, having a beer with a peer and posing tough questions to an anxious vendor while you hold his/her product up to the light. These are the types of encounters that routinely take place at live, off-site conference or training events, which Maintenance Technology Reader Panelists say, are vital for team development and exposure to cutting-edge information.

With near uniformity, our Panelists feel that, despite challenges in getting off-site, attending live training events—*like our own Maintenance and Reliability Technology Summit (MARTS), for example*—can be worth the effort and cost. While their management may not always agree, they believe the show must go on. Here's why.

**Attend and learn**

"Learning off-site always seems better," says a New England-based corporate engineer who attends trade shows about twice per year when he finds the content to be "interesting." His only complaint about such events, other than the occasional "$8 hot dog," is when they're located too far away. "I don't like to fly anymore," he says. "Too much hassle."

A production support manager in the Midwest feels off-site events are "very valuable" because of the chance they offer for one-on-one interaction with experts and peers. "There are many times you read about how to do maintenance and you give it a try," he explains, "but I believe that going to these seminars reinforces what you may have learned from other outlets. It gives you access to the people who are the leaders in redefining how we should perform maintenance." He attended his first event this year, and was pleased with what he got out of it. "In the past," he reports, no one attended events like this from our company, but moving forward we hope to participate more."

Others say that in addition to educational and networking opportunities, live events are valuable for getting details and guidance from vendors. According to a facility manager in the South, "Two good reasons to go are: (1) If the event has OEMs displaying new products so attendees

can follow the future of their industry, and (2), if OEM decision makers are present to listen to people's problems and can make an effort to solve these problems with technology." This Panelist says he usually attends two or three conferences annually "if they will enhance my knowledge of new software or products."

**Getting there is half the battle**

Panelists' strong support might suggest that live-event attendance is flourishing. In fact, according to conference-industry surveys, attendance at such events across most sectors is down. Reasons for the trend include a tight economy, lean staffing and reduced budgets. Some Panelists might add one more reason: a misperception among decision-makers about the value of attending off-site events.

"I definitely believe in conferences for maintenance professionals," says a maintenance manager in New England. "But I have not been to one in more than 10 years because my employer does not feel they are beneficial. Our company sends representatives from engineering to these events and expects them to spread the word when they get back. So far, that has been a dismal failure."

This Panelist explains that those not chosen to attend from his plant are expected "to have enough information to keep us on top of our game." He points out, however, that based on his own experience, they're years behind. "The finance people who run the business are missing great opportunities to redeem value from an up-to-date and highly trained maintenance department. The expense to send people to these events can be returned in knowledge and experience," he says, "and there will always be a positive result." According to him, over the course of his career, he's never left a conference without gaining knowledge and information that will help him make better decisions later on. "One of the main problems," he says, "is that no one at the top understands the value of maintenance. They see it as a black hole where we spend a lot of money. Sooner or later, the light will have to come on."

A maintenance manager at a utility in a western state notes that while his operation still sends a dozen or so workers to off-site conferences annually, it's had to "cut back a lot in the last couple of years," due mostly to cost. Yet he still believes in the value of off-site events "as long as you know what to look for and what to expect going into it." He cautions that if a conference is based solely on presentations by vendors and consultants, the value will be lower than if the majority of speakers are end-users presenting findings or research on work they've done at their own facilities.

Another Panelist laments that his numerous personal requests to management to send personnel to a particular off-site program have been “shot down due to financial reasons.” This PM leader in the upper Midwest tells us that since his company now operates independently, “I will again approach management and explain the benefits of this type of program. If there is an opportunity to come away with information that can improve output,” he adds, “I don’t see why you would not want people to attend.”

**Maximizing value**

Most Panelists agree that the value in attending off-site events comes from absorbing new information and taking it back to the plant. And while it may be an honor to be chosen to attend, it’s usually not perceived as a perk. The implied responsibility is to learn. One Panelist suggests that if employers took steps to coordinate this responsibility, they would quickly see the advantages of attending.

“Off-site events provide a wealth of information and give insight into how other companies look at different problems,” says this journeyman at a nuclear facility in the Northeast. “Regretfully, the company that sends the representatives does not always get a bang for its buck. I am a firm believer that if you go, you owe the company a full report, what you saw, what you learned and what you thought.” He thinks that after networking, the most important value from these conferences is in the new ideas and takeaways they generate.

This Panelist also believes that to be in the best position to absorb new information, attendees must be familiar with their operations and have knowledge of their processes. While this might seem obvious, his point is that if an attendee doesn’t fully understand the key concepts related to the operations at his plant, such a concept “will never be more than an idea.” If an attendee knows and understands the concepts, “presentations at the event will only increase his understanding,” he says, “and help bring value back to the organization.” **MT**

**About the MT Reader Panel**

*The Maintenance Technology Reader Panel is comprised of working maintenance practitioners who have volunteered to answer bimonthly questions prepared by our editorial staff. Panelist identities are purposely not revealed, and their responses are not necessarily projectable.* ***The Panel welcomes new members:***
*Have your comments and observations included in this column by joining the Reader Panel at www.mt-online.com. Click on “Reader Panel” under the “MT Resources” header, and follow the instructions. If accepted, you will automatically be entered into a drawing for a cash prize after one year of active participation.*