DbI World Conference 2015 – what did participants think?

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Introduction

This survey provides unique information about participants' responses to a DbI conference and, based on this information, the article presents some suggestions and offers guidance for future DbI events.

This conference evaluation was achieved through a survey sent to all participants of the DbI World Conference in Bucharest, 2015, around 4 weeks after the event. 185 people responded out of 390 people who were at the conference. This a response rate of almost 50%, providing a significant number of responses from which to make valid conclusions. In addition, a short survey was completed by 80 participants at the conference. This focussed on the future of DbI but included some feedback on the conference.

The questionnaire was constructed by Patricia Lee, from Perkins School USA, who is experienced in program evaluation and questionnaire design. The analysis was made by Tony Best, who was also chair of the Scientific Committee. The short survey was compiled and analysed by Dennis Lolli, member of the Scientific Committee, and his initial results were presented in the conference final plenary.

The raw data from the Survey, the rated questions and individual comments, is available to DbI so that it can be examined by interested parties - perhaps particularly those engaged in planning future conferences.
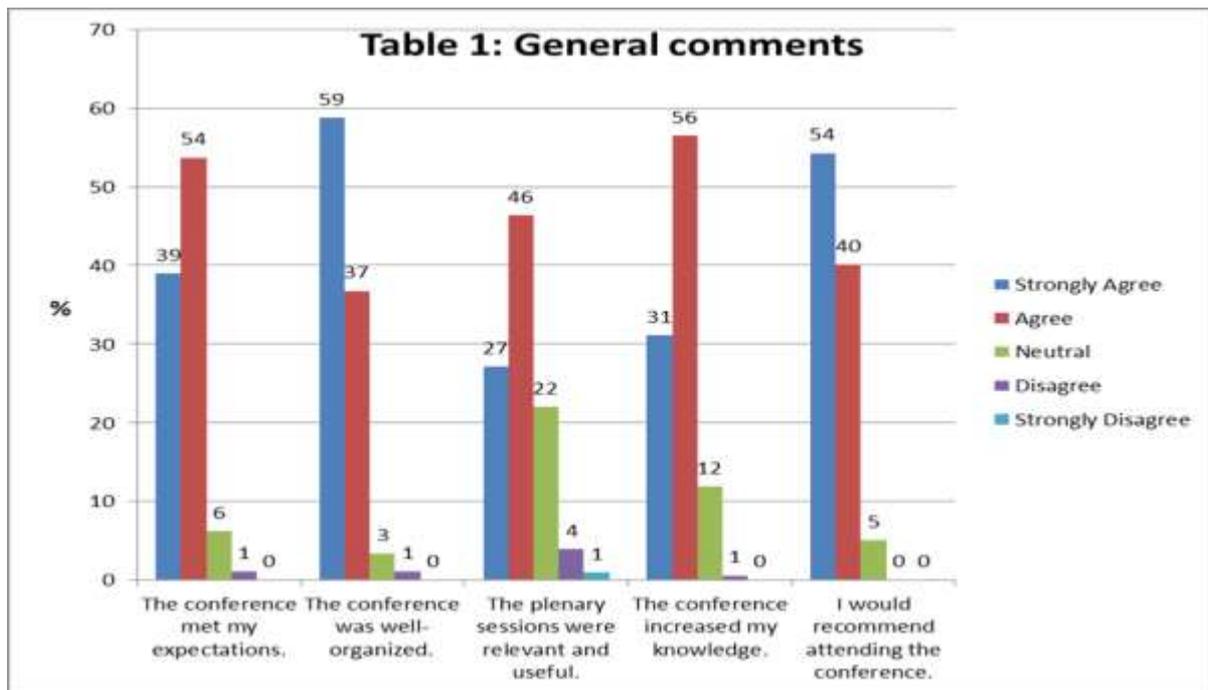
Participants

Around 40% of respondents said this was the first DbI conference they had attended, with 60% having attend previous conferences. This is an encouraging number of new participants, and particularly so as DbI Secretariat signed up 35 new members at the conference.
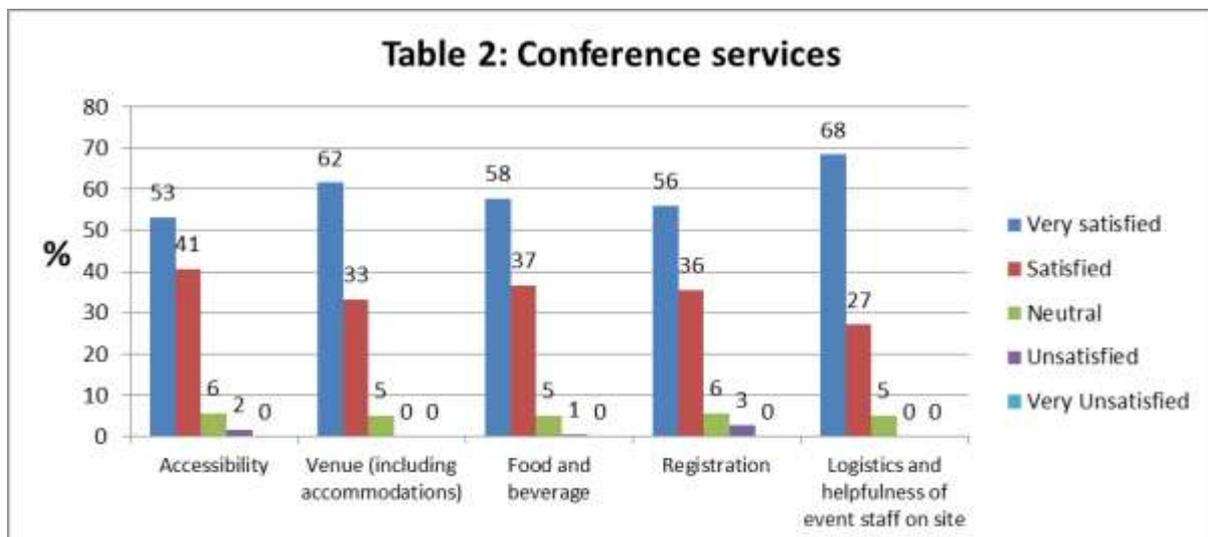
Participants came from all over the world although, as is expected given the location, the majority came from Europe. Previous conferences have had a similar attendance pattern, with the majority of participants from the host country and close surrounding areas. It is possible, from registration information, to give a *rough* indication of the attendance by geographical region;

Africa:	Asia & Australia:	East European & Russia:	West Europe:	North America:	South America:
2%	10%	20%	55%	10%	3%

Overall impressions

Table 1: General comments
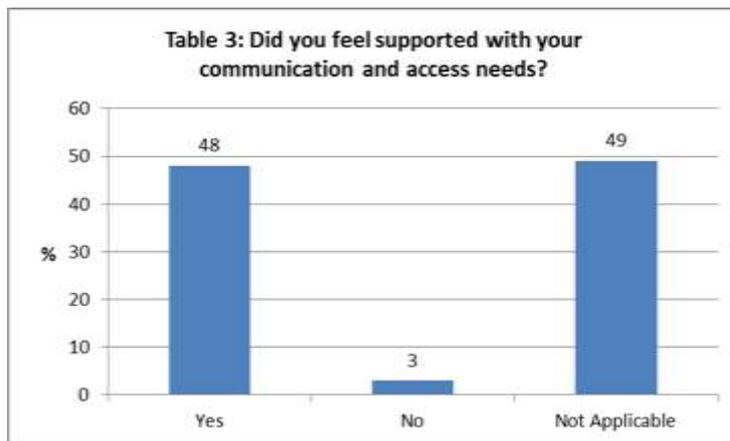

The overwhelming majority of comments about the conference were in praise of the high quality organisation. Around 96% of respondents agreed the conference was well organised, and 94% said they would recommend attending a similar conference. This enthusiasm was confirmed in the many positive comments, e.g. 'a relaxed but organised atmosphere', 'an openness and willingness to share', 'good organisation and the large amount of interesting topics', 'the sharing of knowledge was incredible-I loved every minute of it', 'it was a great conference and I was able to meet new friends and network easily'. Overall, more than 50 of the 128 comments expressed strong satisfaction with the conference.

Table 2: Conference services

Accessibility

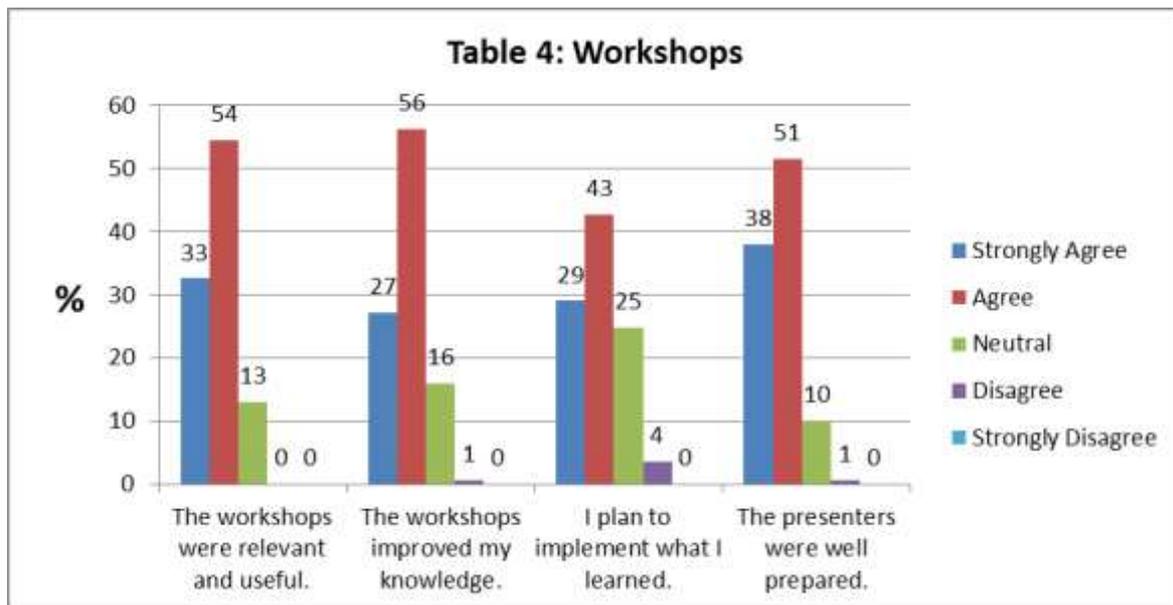Table 3: Did you feel supported with your communication and access needs?

One critical feature of the organisation was the loop system, available in every room. 98% of comments about accessibility were about the excellence of the loop system, both in terms of its presence and its quality. Clearly, for a large number of participants (maybe as many as 180), this was critical in allowing access to the content. One respondent said that they thought a similar system should be an essential part of all future DbI events.

The presence of the International Sign Language interpreters was also highly valued. They were present in all the plenary sessions, but also volunteered on request to interpret the workshops. Their presence was considered essential by some of the respondents- although it is not possible to calculate how many sign language users responded with comments.

How many participants needed the loop system and sign language interpreters? The survey asked for information about communication needs, but no figure is available for the number of people with a disability, as this was not a direct question in the registration process. However, this question and the open ended responses, showed that 84 (47%) of the respondents commented on the use of the loop system or sign language interpreters. If all these participants has a significant hearing impairment, this would give a total of around half the participants having a hearing impairment- a figure far greater than at previous conferences. If accurate, this may indicate a trend in attendance that could have major implications for the organisation and delivery of future conferences.

Workshops – best or worst?

Table 4: Workshops

When asked about the best feature of the conference, around 70% of the responses identified the workshops, praising the wide variety of topics, good choice in each session, good geographical spread of presenters, opportunity to network and for follow-up discussion. Around 87% of respondents found the workshops useful, and over 89% said the presenters were well prepared. Respondents to the short survey also identified the workshops as a valuable part of the conference.
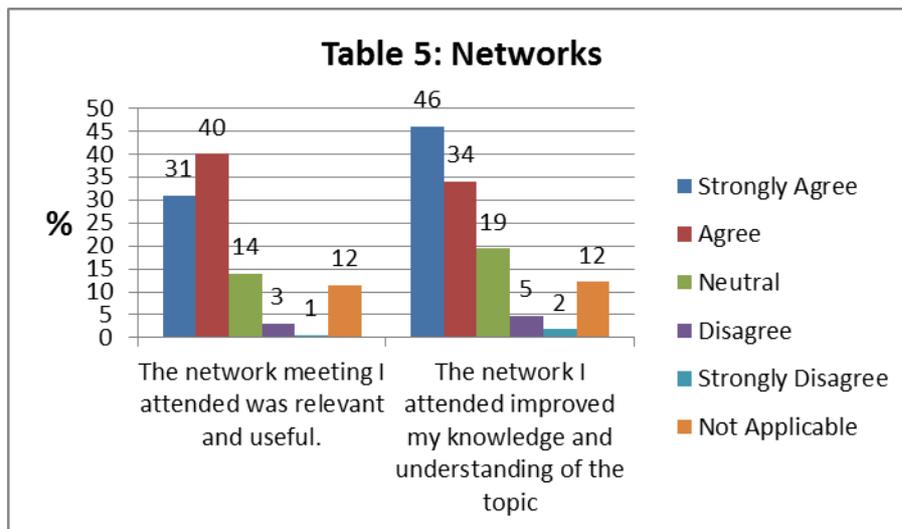
However, when asked how the conference could be improved, nearly 80% of responses asked for a longer time for each workshops- at least 45 minutes, and several asked for 60 minutes. Some respondents praised the attempt to encourage interaction within the workshops, and the emphasis on shorter presentations than is usual for DbI. (The Scientific Committee had aimed for the TED talk criteria of 'short, powerful talks of 18 minutes or less, with the slogan 'ideas worth spreading'). Despite this, of all the comments in the whole survey, the majority commented on the difficulty created by the short time for each workshop, for example of speakers not having time to complete their presentation, of discussions having to finish after just a few minutes, of presenters speaking too quickly in order to fit into the short time available.

Respondents said they recognised that reverting to longer sessions would mean including fewer workshops. 100 workshops were accepted for the conference, and around 20 submissions were not able to be included. If there had been sessions of 45 minutes, then only 70 workshops would have been possible. It is not possible to know the impact on conference attendance and satisfaction if many fewer submissions were presented.

Whatever the length of the sessions, several respondents asked that future conferences provide very clear guidance on the need to speak slowly, and to check that the content can be delivered within the allocated time, as this has been a problem in previous conferences.

Networks

Networks are a core part of DbI activities and give an opportunity for members to meet with colleagues who have similar interests. At the conference 9 DbI networks held sessions of half a day each.

Table 5: Networks

A bar chart showing percentage responses for two statements:

"The network meeting I attended was relevant and useful."
- Strongly Agree: 31
- Agree: 40
- Neutral: 14
- Disagree: 3
- Strongly Disagree: 1
- Not Applicable: 12

"The network I attended improved my knowledge and understanding of the topic"
- Strongly Agree: 46
- Agree: 34
- Neutral: 19
- Disagree: 5
- Strongly Disagree: 2
- Not Applicable: 12

Fewer participants attended the network meetings than the workshops- 12% of the respondents said they did not attend a Network. Of those who did attend, the majority found it useful and relevant.

Positive comments included 'successful as an active working session', 'there was lots of discussion and exchange of ideas', 'the meeting has already resulted in follow-up information'. Other comments pointed out that some meetings had a very small number of people attending, there had not been adequate information before the session about what was to happen and what to expect. A number of respondents said that they had not been able to attend all the meetings they wanted to, as all the networks were held at the same time, and suggested repeating the meetings during the conference. One comment suggested holding the Network meetings at the beginning of the conference, so only those interested need attend, and participants would be able to meet colleagues with similar interests at the beginning of the conference (helpful for participants attending for the first time).

There was enthusiasm for the principle of meetings with like-minded colleagues, but the responses seem to indicate that, at present, the Networks and conference-based meetings, do not fully meet expectations.

How could the conference be improved?

A number of more specific comments were received, identifying aspects of the conference that had contributed to the high quality or could have improved the conference. These comments may provide some guidance to the organisers of future events, as they seem to be aspects that are highly valued by participants. Here, the focus is on those ideas expressed by more than 5 respondents, although the full response data includes all the comments.

The single location for plenary, workshops, posters and meals was very well received. It allowed for discussions and informal meetings as well as making the movement between sessions efficient.

The posters were very well received. The format was popular as it provided opportunities to discuss content with the authors, and the range of topics was

praised. However, several respondents felt the posters should have had a more prominent part in this conference. It was suggested there could have been more posters, while having fewer workshops. To ensure they are visited, it was suggested that part of one day should be available when only poster sessions were presented- at this conference they were available during the whole day but, in practice, could be visited only when no plenary or workshops were running.

Several respondents felt the conference was too expensive and this seriously reduced the number of people able to attend from some parts of the world. They suggested that DbI find ways to sponsor or support participants, so that there is a more complete presence of members from throughout the world. This was also a major concern in the short survey, with respondents asking that DbI provide more support for developing countries, so that more people can attend events from those parts of the world.

In terms of content, there were requests that more research be presented in sessions, rather than program descriptions. However, other comments expressed satisfaction with the content as a good mix of practical ideas and theoretical underpinning.

A few respondents asked that a list of participants, with personal details, is made available at the start of the conference. At this conference, a list was made available during the conference - as the registration form did not include a section asking permission to release contact information.

Conclusion

This DbI conference seemed to be well received in terms of organisation and content, but there are clearly a number of learning points, and suggestions of alternatives, that could be considered by the organisers of future DbI activities.

This report is just one element in the legacy of this conference. Other elements include a number of papers being published in DbI Review, abstracts of all presentations issued at the conference, selected papers on the DbI website, a short DVD featuring main conference events, and a pack of critical event summaries prepared for DbI ManCom.

The author and conference organisers would like to thank the many conference participants who took the time to respond to the survey and provided so many excellent and useful suggestions. These will undoubtedly have a real influence on the way in which DbI is able to plan and carry out activities, and provide a rich source of ideas for a better future.