AIHA Earns High Marks from Virtual Conference Attendees Using Abila Freestone™ LMS

It's the job of American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA) members to make recommendations and set standards that keep our workplaces healthy and safe.

And it's the job of AIHA to achieve and maintain the highest professional standards for these members. One of the ways it accomplishes this is through the administration of comprehensive education programs that keep occupational and environmental health and safety (OEHS) professionals current in the field of industrial hygiene. In fact, more than half of its 8,500 members are Certified Industrial Hygienists (CIHs), and many hold other professional designations.

Expanding its Conferencing Reach

For nearly 80 years, the AIHA's annual conference and expo (AIHce) has been the premiere destination for thousands of industrial hygiene and occupational health professionals. They gather to participate in an array of quality, peer-reviewed presentations, including general sessions, lectures, lunch discussions, roundtables, podium and poster sessions, and pre-conference Professional Development Courses (PDCs), much of which earns them credits toward their certification requirements.

American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA)
To expand AIHce’s reach, the eLearning Services Team offered its first “virtual conference” in 2013 and again in 2014, using its AV company. When team members realized the virtual conference was going to be a legitimate product among the association’s learning offerings, they set out to find a partner that could help them step up their virtual game.

Jessica Pagel, Manager of eLearning Services, says they looked at several virtual conferencing platforms, ultimately deciding on Abila Freestone™ Learning Management System (LMS). “Virtual conferencing was the main driver, but we were also looking for a full-service product, and Freestone was clearly the winner,” says Pagel.

“Virtual conferencing, a platform for our online courses, conference recordings, reporting capabilities, dedicated tech support – Freestone had everything we needed to build our program.”

And, build it, they have. The virtual audience for its annual conference has grown to reach more than 400 people each year. Virtual AIHce closely mimics the live event, in that the audience attends for the full four days. They’re also given a choice of sessions – they can pick from two of the 14 concurrent sessions happening throughout each day.

In just its first two years using Freestone, virtual conference ratings have soared. Some 54 percent rate their satisfaction with the virtual conference as “Excellent” (versus 29 percent for onsite); while 90 percent of virtual attendees rate the education quality “Excellent” or “Above Average” (compared to 74 percent, onsite).

And revenues for the virtual conference now reach $150,000, with a profit margin of 66 percent. “Our revenue continues to grow each year,” says Pagel. “Every time I put my budget number out there, I think, ‘There’s no way this is going to happen,’ and it does. We even surpassed our stretch goal last year!”

Getting Creative with Freestone

Pagel and team were excited about the success of their virtual conference and the virtual community they were building through Freestone. “Online, there’s this whole conversation going on via the Freestone chat feature,” explains Pagel. “We’re able to have running commentary during the sessions, which we can’t do onsite. Everybody is sharing and communicating with each other in a way that doesn’t naturally happen face to face. So, attendees are not only learning from the presenter, they’re also learning from each other.”

Looking for ways to continue this conversation and bring even more of the in-person experience to their virtual attendees, the eLearning Services Team launched a virtual happy hour to mimic the networking receptions offered to onsite conference goers.

“Our virtual happy hours are 30 minutes at the end of the day,” says Pagel. “We seed the conversation very little, by asking questions like, ‘What was the favorite thing you guys learned today?’ And they’re just off. It’s a chance for virtual attendees to join with their peers in a casual setting and share things they’re doing. It gives them a space to connect, and they all really like it.”

Yet another innovative way AIHA is making virtual attendees feel a part of the onsite conference is by bringing the exhibit hall to them. “We’re starting something we’re calling ‘Spotlight Interviews.’ During these 10-minute segments, we’ll conduct live interviews with conference exhibitors and sponsors, who are paying for the opportunity to get in front of our virtual audience,” explains Pagel. “The tab sets in Freestone will enable us to do things like iframe the exhibitor’s website or whatever product they want to showcase. We’ll also interview some of our award winners and presenters, so it will be a good mix of content.”

Because the AIHA eLearning Team is clearly innovating in the virtual conference arena, they get lots of questions from peers who worry if they make their virtual conference too attractive, they’ll cannibalize their live, onsite audience. “What I tell people is, nobody ever says given the choice, I would much rather sit at home online. It’s not a choice between attending in-person or attending virtually. It’s a choice of attending virtually or not attending at all.”

About Abila

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