

Iowa Public Procurement Association (IPPA)
Iowa Chapter NIGP
Outstanding Chapter Award (OCA) Application 2021
Award Application for Outstanding Chapter Membership Award

2020 was a year that called upon all of us to shift our expectations and be nimble enough to pivot and adapt to a new way of working and living. As a way to stay connected and continue to serve our membership during the most remote and uncertain of times, IPPA launched its “IPPA Coffee Chat” program – a virtual monthly event for member networking, learning and engagement.

What is “IPPA Coffee Chat”?

At a time when most members were (are) working remotely, away from their peers and officemates, IPPA wanted to offer an opportunity for members to build community and camaraderie. Taking a spin on the traditional mid-morning coffee break, IPPA Coffee Chat encourages members to grab their cups of coffee, meet up with fellow members via Zoom, and enjoy a conversation with peers. While professional in nature, IPPA strives to make the coffee chats informal and welcoming to all. The intent is for members to feel as though they are at their favorite coffee shop talking amongst friends.

How does it work?

Each month, the IPPA Membership Committee arranges for a “panelist” to speak on a specific topic(s) relating to current issues and trends in public procurement. Sometimes this panelist is a fellow IPPA member with significant experience or background in a specific area of work. We’ve also gone outside of our chapter and invited members from the community/professional field to volunteer their time to chat with the group. The coffee chat is an hour in length, with the first 20-30 minutes focusing on the panelist and the remaining time open for Q&A, additional conversation, etc. One thing that is very important is that the event feels informal and is welcoming for conversation to flow easily between attendees and the panelist. Some of our best chats have been those for which there was no formal agenda!

Past topics have covered COVID and procurement, work/life balance during a pandemic, disaster procurement, best practices when handling open records requests, project management tips and tricks, and more.

To establish regularity and consistency in attendance, the IPPA Coffee Chat is always held at the same time of day and at the same time of month. A calendar invite with connection details is sent to the membership one month in advance. IPPA advertises each chat via membership emails and social media presence. Coffee Chat coordinators also seek input from the membership for ideas on future topics and panelists.

Outcomes of Success

IPPA’s first coffee chat event was held in June of 2020 and over 25 members attended. Since then, each month we average around 20 members joining us for coffee and conversation (roughly 25% of chapter members). Engagement is high with each interactive conversation running through the expected amount of time (45-60 min). Meeting on a more regular basis through this event has allowed for members to become familiar with each other and establish a connection that goes beyond a name on a membership roster. The feedback received from membership has been encouraging. The IPPA Coffee Chat has proven to be an effective and efficient way to keep current members engaged, introduce members who are new to the chapter, and is seen as a highly valued benefit of membership.

Uniqueness of Approach

What makes the IPPA Coffee Chat unique is the aspect and purpose of member conversation versus a one-sided presentation members listen to. Often our panelists will not use a PowerPoint or slide deck and will start the conversation by asking attendees what they are curious to know about the scheduled topic. Coffee Chat coordinators do come prepared with a framework of questions to help steer the conversation if needed, but the content really is based on questions or comments that come to the table in the moment.

Another factor that makes the monthly event unique is that it is created by IPPA members for IPPA members. When looking at the composition of the IPPA chapter, there are professionals from all areas of public procurement – education, municipalities, state departments, small business programs, purchasing cooperatives, etc. When planning the schedule of topics, coordinators first look to the chapter membership to see who might be a good fit for a conversation. There is something to be said about learning from your peers, and that is the value that the IPPA Coffee Chats provide.

Lessons Learned

In the beginning, IPPA did not send out calendar invites each month but relied simply on email and social media marketing to drive attendance. Coffee Chat coordinators found that this was not the easiest way to keep the event in front of chapter members. Emails with meeting links got lost, not everyone was on social media, etc. Since adopting the practice of monthly calendar invites, IPPA has had great success in getting members to attend. Having a standing calendar invite also makes it easy to share the event details with any new individuals that join the chapter after the original invite was sent.

In addition to finding the best way to reach members, IPPA struggled to find a comfortable way to introduce everyone attending the chats. At the start, participant names were read aloud and then they were asked to share which agency they worked for. This accomplished the intent of putting faces to names and highlighting the diversity of the group, but was also cumbersome to manage with muting/unmuting and members joining mid-introductions. It also took up valuable time from the conversation. However, after the first few rounds of chats and consistency in members showing up, the need for introductions faded away.

Finally, was a lesson in basic virtual meeting etiquette. It did not take coffee chat coordinators too long to realize that a friendly reminder for attendees to mute their microphones at the start of each event greatly reduced the amount of feedback and background noise during the conversation.

In summary, the addition of monthly coffee chats has been very well received by IPPA membership as the chapter pivots and adapts to a new way of connecting and providing value to members. While the initiative is still in the early stages of adoption, the first year has proven to be successful and enjoyable by all involved. As an organization, IPPA looks forward to continuing these efforts and having it grow to best suit the ever changing needs of the membership.