

# The SLA Conference Experience



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My badge with ribbons



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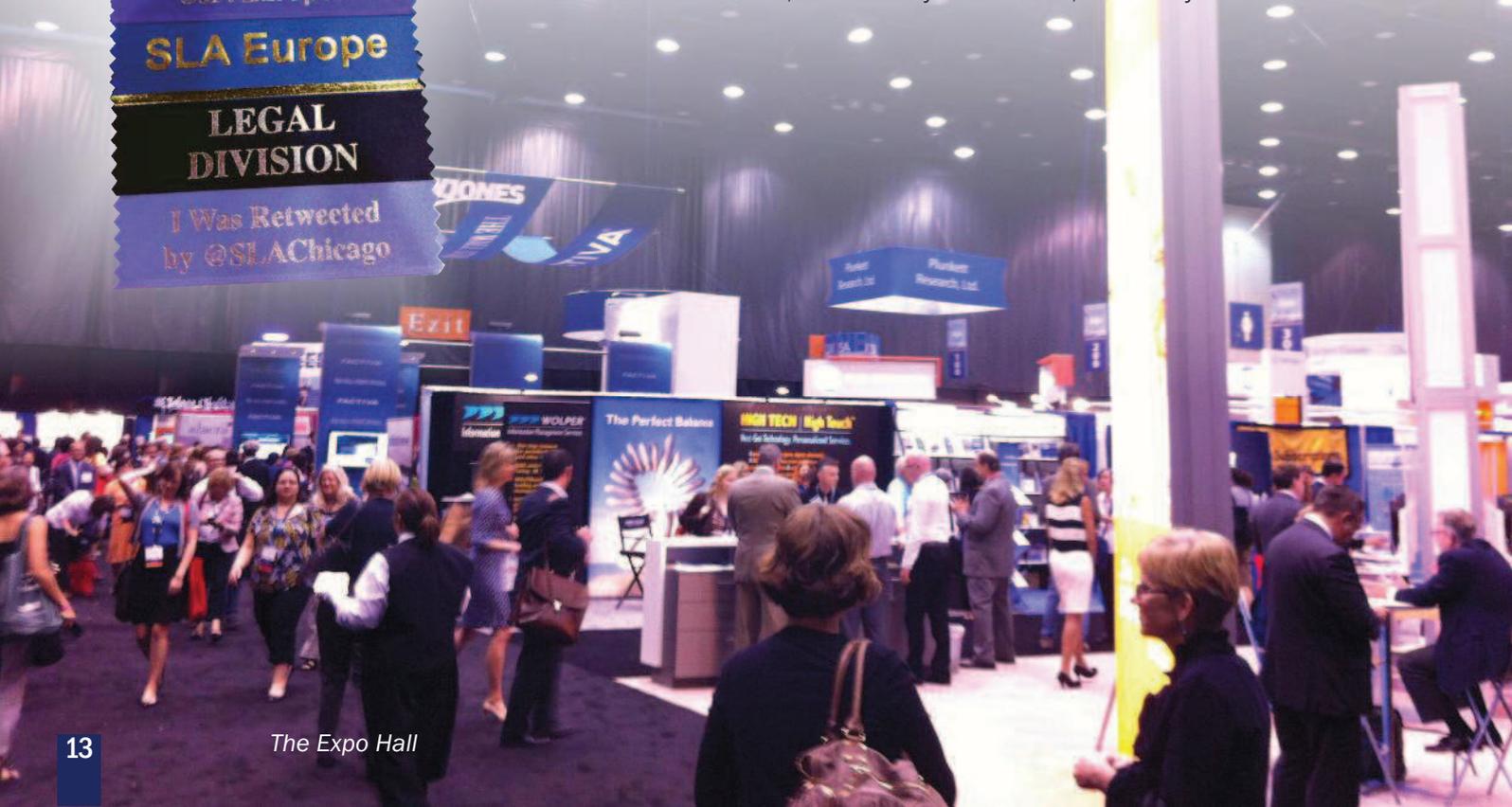
In July 2012, I attended the Special Libraries Association (SLA) annual conference in Chicago as the recipient of the [SLA European Conference Award](#). Having only attended BIALL conferences previously, I was excited to attend an American conference for all I had heard about them – everyone said they were something to experience, and they were not wrong! Here is a collection of some of my thoughts/observations from the Conference...

My first impression of the Conference was its size. The building it was held in (McCormack Place) had rooms in it the size of aircraft hangers; there were a multitude of sessions and talks you could attend; there were thousands of librarians, hundreds of vendors (some with very large and impressive stands) and people with conference badges which could get progressively larger with ribbons to announce your various associations, connections or position within SLA.

Once I had got over the size, my next hurdle was dealing with multiple sessions happening at the same time. At the Conference, it seems you were almost encouraged to switch between sessions mid-way through and it would not be seen as rude; to leave sessions halfway which no longer interested you or to get to one you had seen on Twitter others were raving about. Each session was 90 minutes long, you so could



leave one and still get a decent amount of the session you were joining. However, I did struggle to (a) pluck up the courage to stand up and walk out and (b) to choose the right session to join – my one attempt at session hopping saw me leave an ok-ish session, to attend one which didn't seem to be "as billed" in the Conference programme, to leave that and join another one just as it was seemingly finishing off with the speaker giving us a small biography of himself. There had been positive tweets about this last session, which is why I had tried it, but clearly left it too late!



# The SLA Conference Experience - continued

And that's another thing. The "Twitter Experience". The use of social media at SLA was something I felt really got me engaged with the Conference (before, during and afterwards) and other attendees, more so than I have ever experienced at BIALL. I am not entirely sure how long SLA have been doing this, but each year a Twitter account is set up specifically for that conference (this year was [@SLAChicago](#)), which you are encouraged to follow. A hashtag is also used ([#SLAChicago](#)) and tweets with this hashtag are automatically re-tweeted by [@SLAChicago](#).

This was a great way to connect with other attendees, see what others thought of sessions, if there were any good giveaways (themed hats from Factiva/Dow Jones for the IT Dance Party that evening was one I saw on Twitter first), or to announce if there was something about to happen in the Expo hall.

Which leads me on to the "social experience" at SLA. The conference began for me on the Saturday, with a trip to see the sights of Chicago, and didn't end until the Wednesday afternoon, and there had been a social event each evening you could attend... and sometimes a number of social events in one night at the same time! There were a variety of evening get-togethers, including the Legal Division's Sponsor Appreciation reception, the "Open Houses" put on by one or two divisions jointly, the larger International Reception, and famous IT Dance Party. I had heard about this IT dance party before the conference, and really didn't know what to make of it beforehand. There was talk of it being themed (Gangsters and Flappers) but I had been unsure how much this was taken seriously. I need not have worried... there were both people dressed up in the most fantastic outfits who had really taken on board the theme, and those like me who didn't have anything gangster/flapper related but were able to pick up the aforementioned hat from Dow Jones and other accessories to make some sort of outfit ("bling" rings, fake money, fake Tommy guns were all supplied, although I didn't quite work out from whom these accessories were coming from!).

*Myself and the [Early Career Conference Award winners](#) at the IT Dance Party*



# The SLA Conference Experience - continued

Let me digress a moment and mention the ECCAs and other awards given at or before the Conference. The Association is one that really celebrates its members (although in no way am I suggesting that BIALL doesn't!). On the Sunday afternoon, before the Keynote address (this year by [Guy Kawasaki](#)), there were quite a number of awards given out – these were a combination of awards within the [SLA Awards & Honors Program](#) granting exceptional individuals the status of Fellow, in recognition of their work; those spotted as Rising Stars in the profession, those being listed in the SLA Hall of Fame, or awards to those who exemplify leadership, show a lifetime of dedication to the profession, or who have raised awareness or visibility of the profession or SLA in general. In addition to those presented on the Sunday, there were other awards and grants given, such as the ECCA, the Award I received, plus a number of travel grants presented by the various Divisions or Chapters.

And so to my Learning Experience. As I mentioned before, there were quite a number of sessions to attend at SLA Conference, some included as part of the Conference package, and some you had to pay additional costs for (these were Continuing Education (“CE”) sessions). My first session happened to be a CE session on Thinking Strategically, and run by the wonderful and engaging [Jane Dysart](#) and [Rebecca Jones](#). Despite this being at 8am on the day after my arrival in Chicago, I managed to make it there on time (but only just!) and stay attentive for the four-hour session. This was very easy to do, as both Jane and Rebecca are fabulous speakers (pretty much non-stop without referring to notes!) and there were some good exercises for us to take part in, such as envisioning your library service in the future to enable you to see the steps which need to be taken to get you there. I have written a little more about this session in [my SLA Europe blog post](#). If you would like to read further.

Other sessions I attended were on the role of competitive intelligence in law firms, the famous [60 sites in 60 minutes](#) (a very popular session, in one of the largest rooms and with people still having to sit on the floor), combating defensive behaviour in the workplace, and on social media – #IknowTheBasicsWhat'sNext. I also attended sessions on competencies for your career, contract negotiation (which, as a panel session with vendors and librarians on the panel, was very interesting to hear both sides of the story), and an “unconference” run by the Legal Division – a more informal session where ebooks, job titles and creating value were all discussed.

Although the Conference is now a distant memory, its legacy lives on. Tweets are still coming from @SLAChicago and the hashtag is still being used. I have met a wonderful bunch of information professionals and the network of SLA Europe is fast becoming my favourite place for CPD and to meet old friends and new. I hadn't been a member of SLA before the Conference but now I see why so many have joined, remain and seek to make the Association better by getting involved through the board or a committee. As I write this, I have just been invited to join one of the SLA committees and although at first I was hesitant through my commitments with BIALL, I am excited at the opportunity and to give back to the Association which has been so generous to me.

No, this is not an article to “sell” SLA to BIALL members. It's just I have discovered what a great organisation SLA is, why its members are enthusiastic about it, and how it will complement my membership of BIALL. I would encourage other BIALL members to attend an SLA conference if you can, or any other international conference, as they truly are an “Experience”.