

## Can cross-disciplinary conferences improve perceived productivity?

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**Extended Abstract:**  
**Can transdisciplinary conferences improve perceived productivity?**

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**Introduction**

Agritourism has proven to be a promising way for farms across the world to ensure the viability of their business (Schilling, et al., 2012; Hollas, et al., 2021) and for rural destinations to thrive (Contini, et al., 2009; Yang, 2012). As with many entrepreneurial endeavors, operators have faced challenges along the way. Recent research has highlighted many difficulties including understanding the regulatory landscape (Wang, et al., 2022), a lack of infrastructure (Yang, 2012), human capital (Adamov et al., 2020), and gender stereotypes and expectations (Carter, 2017; Savage et al., 2020). These challenges have inspired many in the field of agritourism to collaborate (Choo and Park, 2022), cooperate (Che, et al., 2005), and provide networking opportunities (Domi and Belletti, 2022). Recent examples of this are new international conferences, a new global organization (i.e., Global Agritourism Network), and the growing prominence of national-level organizations (see Scottish Agritourism Conference in Scotland, World Agritourism Day in India, et al). Collaboration and partnerships are often the result of, and can be most effective in, difficult and competitive operating environments (Hamel, et al., 1989; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2007). However, it is unclear if economic trials (Farm Aid, 2020; Burchfield et al., 2022) and social challenges (Thomas, 2021; Yin et al., 2020) seen lately by agricultural producers can be remedied by collaboration. How these collaborations relate to the success of actors in their fields of practice is at the heart of this paper.

While tourism scholars have sought to understand collaboration on (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007), networking within (Albrecht, 2013; Erkuş-Öztürk & Eraydın, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2019), and the influence of ‘community’ (Hwang et al., 2012; Aref, 2011) on tourism development, the recent growth in the field of agritourism offer us unique insight into how collaboration can improve the viability of the sector. Building on the relevant literature, this paper aims to shed light on how individuals within a tourism sector community respond to an interdisciplinary professional conference and how events such as conferences might impact the productiveness of individuals within.

**Literature Review**

***Agritourism***

As destinations seek to promote the economic development of rural areas while farms hope to diversify income streams in an increasingly challenging market, agritourism has accelerated in popularity (Rauniyar et al., 2021; Rosalina et al., 2021). Distinct from other forms of rural tourism, agritourism refers to touristic experiences through which visitors engage with on-farm

activities such as tours, events, lodging, recreation, and direct sales of farm products (Phillip et al., 2010; Chase et al., 2018). In recent decades, there has been significant growth in the number of farms offering agritourism citing it as a sustainable and profitable business diversification strategy (Nickerson et al., 2001; Hollas et al., 2021). Agritourism remains a prominent research topic, as scholars attempt to make progress towards sustainable development goals and a more sustainable tourism sector (Ammirato et al., 2020; Font et al., 2022). Part of this sustainability is protecting the livelihoods of residents while also promoting a vibrant tourism economy (Iorio and Corsale, 2010; Nyaupane and Poudel, 2011). Researchers have put forth many strategies for doing this effectively, and one of the most prominent is collaboration (Selin and Beason, 1991; Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2007; d'Angella & Go, 2009; Ladkin & Betramini, 2002).

### ***Transdisciplinary Collaborations***

Knowledge is increasingly being produced and disseminated by teams rather than individuals (Wuchty et al., 2007). Moreover, research conducted in teams can result in more novel and impactful findings (Uzzi et al., 2013). In fact, in agritourism, collaborations have led to more sustainable paths for tourism development (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Wondirad et al., 2020), improved relationships in competitive business environments (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007; Wang and Xiang, 2007), and even more inclusive approaches to tourism (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999).

One relatively new approach to collaboration is known as transdisciplinary (TD) research. TD collaborations extend beyond that of interdisciplinary interactions by emphasizing the synthesis of discipline-specific knowledge and strategies into a new, integrative conceptual framework (Stokols, Hall, & Vogel, 2013). In doing so, TD collaboration heavily emphasizes the translation of knowledge in order to address complex, real-world phenomena. Perhaps most importantly, TD collaboration seeks to not only incorporate various academic disciplines, but also include members of the larger community as critical stakeholders throughout this process (Tebes & Thai, 2018). In doing so, effective TD collaboration has resulted in significant progress towards battling complex biosocial-environmental problems (Luke et al., 2015). While notions of collaboration were introduced into tourism scholarship long ago (Selin & Beason, 1991; Getz & Jamal, 1994; Jamal & Getz, 1995), only recently has the field adopted a more transdisciplinary approach. For example, researchers are beginning to investigate what it means for the tourist to engage in a co-creation process of tourism experiences (see Campos et al., 2018 for review).

### ***Role of conferences in collaboration and productivity***

One of the most successful methods for building TD connections is through conferences (Hall et al., 2018). The International Workshop on Agritourism was the second installment of a new series of international conferences supported by Eurac Research in conjunction with the Global Agritourism Network, a community comprised of both support professionals (i.e., individuals with roles that primarily focus on knowledge production and/or dissemination) and practitioners (i.e., individuals with roles that encompass direct involvement in agritourism practices). The purpose of this network and the associated events is to “to enhance the capacity of agritourism stakeholders worldwide” (Global Agritourism Network, 2023). Naturally this not only involves decreasing the barriers faced by operators (e.g. Savage et al., 2020; Hollas, et al, 2021; Wang, 2022), but also by “building a global support network for agritourism” (Global Agritourism

Network, 2023). By inviting both support professionals and practitioners, the conference holds the potential to foster connections across industries and job functions in order to realize the benefits of transdisciplinary collaboration. As such, this paper seeks to understand how a conference intentionally created to cross such boundaries can promote productivity for both support professionals and practitioners.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Context***

The context of this study is within a first-of-its-kind event held in Burlington, VT, USA at the end of August 2022, the International Workshop on Agritourism. The conference was open to both support professionals and practitioners in order to encourage transdisciplinary collaboration. Attendees had opportunities to expand their professional network during pre-conference tours, farm visits, sponsored networking events, as well as three days of concurrent sessions with both scholarly and practical peer-reviewed presentations.

### ***Participants***

The total number of conference attendees was 504 individuals, representing 56 countries and 44 US states. Of these, 352 attended in-person, while 152 attended the conference virtually.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were asked to engage in a post-conference survey assessment following the conclusion of the International Workshop on Agritourism. The survey assessed a variety of measures including, but not limited to, perceived networking opportunities, perceived benefits, and demographics. Attendees were encouraged to submit the post-conference survey during the closing plenary session of the conference. The plenary session host allowed time for the completion of surveys for in-person attendees and for those attending virtually. The survey was open for responses for a month following the conference and sent reminders via email. To incentivize completion of the survey before leaving the conference, respondents were entered into a drawing with gifts from businesses local to Burlington, Vermont. Virtual attendees were also eligible for incentives.

### ***Measures***

**Profession.** Respondents were asked to complete demographic information including the professional roles they serve in the agritourism sector. Attendees were asked to identify as many as they felt fit their professional role. Response options included those representing support roles (i.e., Researcher, Extension/Service Provider, Non-profit, Government Agency, Educator) or practitioner roles (i.e., Producer, Tourism Professional, Business Owner/Manager), along with an “Other” option in which participants self-defined their role if necessary.

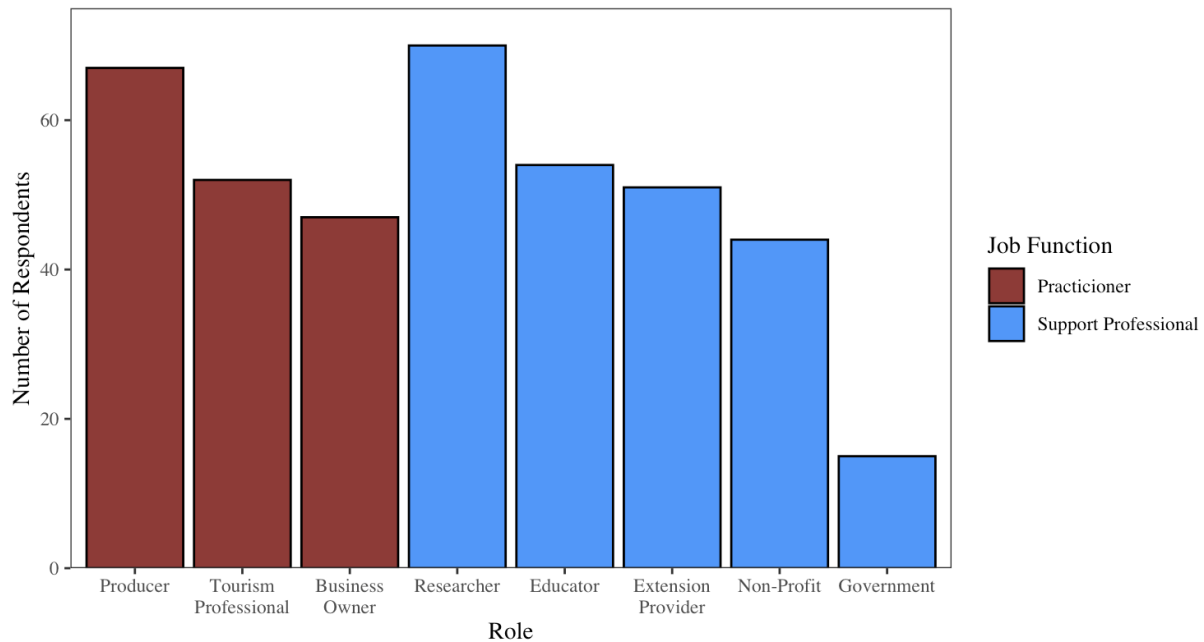
**Perceived Productivity.** Participants indicated their expected outcomes as a result of attending the conference. Response options differed for those in support roles (e.g., develop grants, implement workshops) versus those in practitioner roles (e.g., develop marketing strategy, increase profitability). Participants with both role types were presented with all options. The full list of options can be found in Appendix A.

## Results

Responses were received from 238 conference attendees, including both in-person and virtual attendees (47% of total attendees). Respondents ( $n = 238$ ) spanned across several academic and service backgrounds, representing 32 countries and 36 US states. Of these individuals, 182 attended in-person, 52 attended virtually, and 3 reported attending both in-person and virtual sessions at the conference.

Respondents indicated all roles they held, and each role reflected a broader job function, either practitioner or support professional. Figure 1 represents the distribution of roles across survey respondents. Summarizing Figure 1, the most common roles held by respondents included researcher ( $n = 70$ ), producer ( $n = 66$ ), and educator ( $n = 54$ ). Additionally, 44% of respondents held support-only roles, 27% held practitioner-only role, and 29% reported having both support and practice roles (i.e., hybrid).

**Figure 1. Distribution of Roles across Respondents**

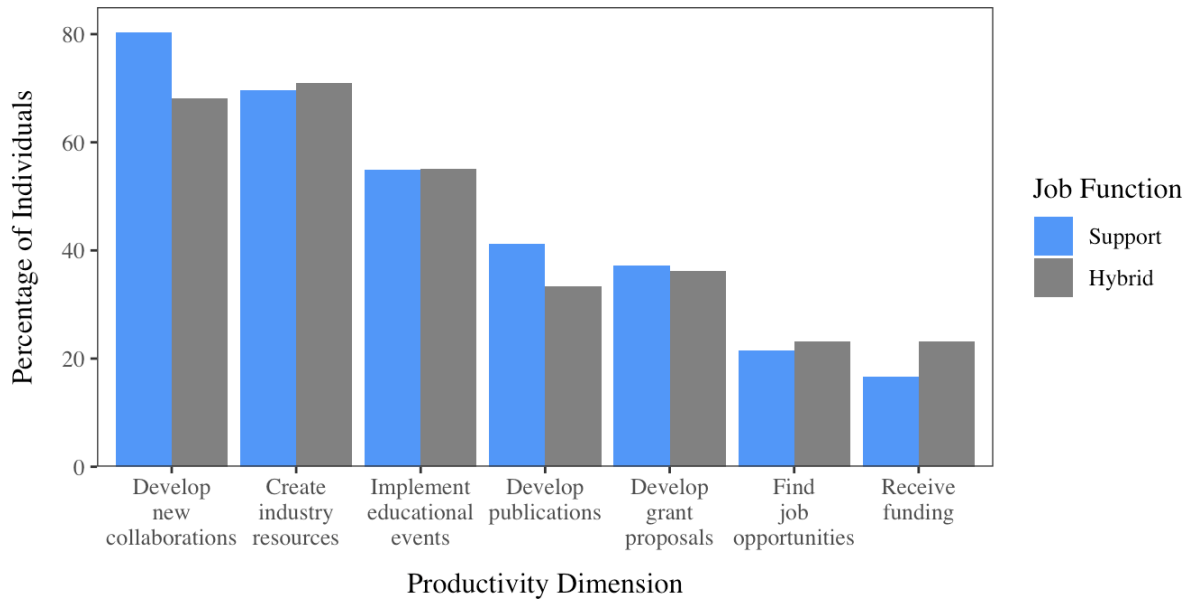


### *Support Professional Perceived Productivity*

Figure 2 summarizes the perceived productivity levels of support professionals as a result of participation in the IWA conference. Support professionals encompass individuals who reported support roles only or reported both support and practitioner roles (i.e., a hybrid job function). For

individuals only in support roles, the most common responses included developing new collaborations (80.4%), creating industry resources (69.1%), and implementing educational initiatives (54.9%). For those hybrid roles, the most common responses were creating industry resources (71%), developing new collaborations (68.1%), and implementing educational initiatives (55.1%).

**Figure 2. Perceived Productivity Levels of Support Professionals across Job Function**



*Practitioner Perceived Productivity*

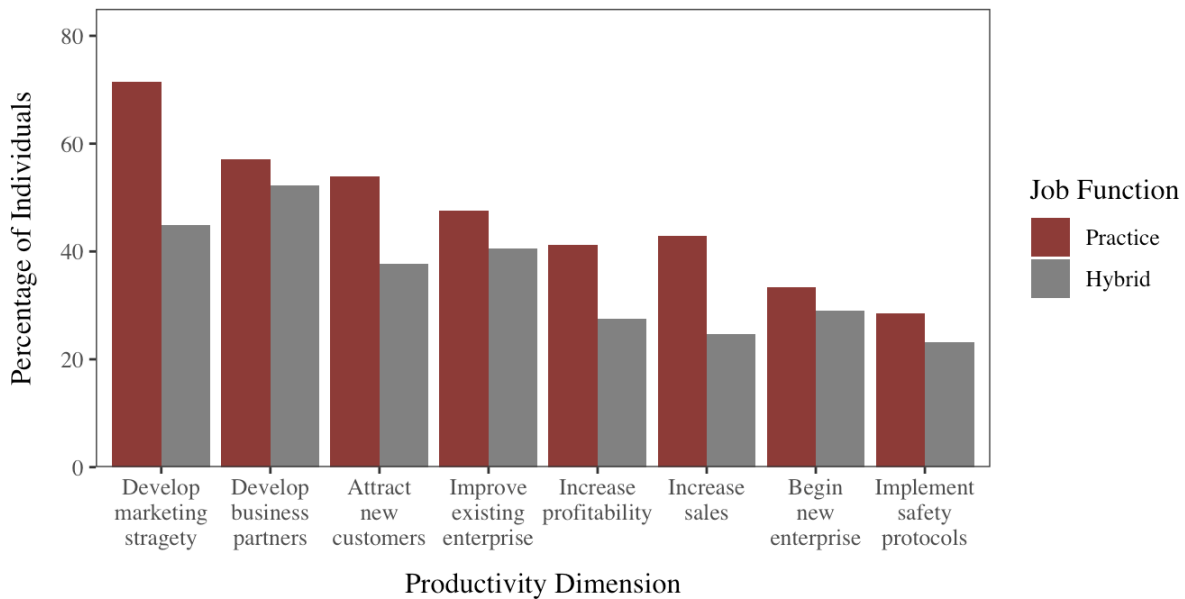
Figure 3 summarizes the perceived productivity levels of practitioners following attendance at the IWA conference. Practitioners included individuals who either only reported practitioner roles or reported both support and practitioner roles (i.e., a hybrid job function). The most common responses selected by practitioners were developing marketing strategies (71.4%), developing new business partners (57.1%), and attracting new customers (54%). For individuals

in hybrid roles, the most common responses included developing business partners (52.2%), developing marketing strategies (44.9%), and improving existing enterprises (40.6%).

### Discussion and Implications

This paper provides new insight into the intended productivity levels of attendees following a transdisciplinary conference. This work builds on the research into perceived productivity in the

**Figure 3. Perceived Productivity Levels of Practitioners across Job Function**



tourism industry (Barros and Alves, 2004; Kim, et al., 2021) as well as the role of conferences in tourism development (Getz and Page, 2019). The existing literature explores primarily how conference satisfaction results in future attendance (Hahm, et al., 2016; Hashemi, et al., 2020) and how the conference experience results in perceived satisfaction (van Riper, et al., 2013), but falls short of measuring the effectiveness of conference experiences for resulting in meaningful impacts on attendees’ work and productivity. It is clear that conference attendance can improve the likelihood of academic co-authorship and collaborations (Campos, et al., 2018). The results of this study indicate that as a result of the conference, attendees intend to be productive in their professions. How these intentions towards being productive translate to the attendees’ actual outcomes of productivity is still yet to be explored. However, previous analyses indicate that intentions predict behavior (Webb and Sheeran, 2006)

While this study focused on productivity as a result of conference participation, it is important to note that conferences and professional events have more meaning to attendees than simply improving professional output. As validated by the results of this study conference attendees develop new business partnerships and new collaborations. Through these experiences, conferences provide opportunities for finding a sense of community (Hahm, et al., 2016) and can help an organization develop a positive reputation (Baker and Crompton, 2000). Events such as these are inherently social events. Similarly, tourism is a social practice. Therefore, not only are



there significant relationship dynamics between the tourist and host (Joo, et al, 2018; Woosnam, 2011), but also between destinations and organizations which support the sector (Jamal and Getz, 1995). These collaborative relationships often take the form of official partnerships and are a vital part of regional success with tourism. Tourism development, especially in rural areas, depends on a network of these partnerships (Pilving, et al., 2019). Partnerships and collaboration between stakeholders take many forms and may benefit the cultural heritage of a region, or simply improve social or economic conditions within a region (Czernek, 2013; Musavengane, 2019). As extension, tourism, and community development professionals seek to build collaborations and offer new methods of engagement and support with their stakeholders, the effectiveness of conferences towards these goals is a pressing topic.

While the results of this paper are an important step toward understanding the value of transdisciplinary conferences for improving productivity of practitioners and support professionals in the tourism industry, more research is needed. Of particular note are the following questions: How do conferences that are not transdisciplinary impact productivity? Can virtual events be just as effective at influencing perceived productivity as in-person conferences? How does a sense of community created by conferences relate to the perceived productivity of conference attendees?

As with all research, this paper is not without its limitations. While our response rate (47%) was satisfactory, the sample of practitioners and support professionals is limited to those attendees who responded to the conference survey. Additionally, this same research question needs to be applied to more conferences. The focus of this paper is limited to the agritourism sector - more research needs to be conducted to better understand how the results reported here may or may not be applicable within other tourism sectors.

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## **Appendix A**

For individuals with support-focused roles, please indicate which of the following are likely to result from participating in the International Workshop on Agritourism.

- Develop publication(s)
- Develop grant proposal(s)
- Receive funding
- Create resources or tools to support agritourism
- Develop new project collaboration(s)
- Implement educational workshops or events
- Find new job opportunities
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

For individuals with practitioner-focused roles, please indicate which of the following are likely to result from participating in the International Workshop on Agritourism.

- Begin a new agritourism enterprise
- Improve an existing agritourism enterprise
- Implement safety and liability protocols
- Develop or improve a marketing strategy
- Develop new business partnership(s)
- Attract new customers/visitors
- Increase sales
- Increase profitability

- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_