IAAO Communication Practices Survey: Looking to the Future

IAAO Communications Committee

The statements made or opinions expressed by authors in Fair & Equitable *do not necessarily represent a policy position of the International Association of Assessing Officers. This article expands upon a presentation made by members of the IAAO Communications Committee at the 76th Annual International Conference on Assessment Administration, August 31, 2010, in Orlando, Florida.*

*F*air & Equitable magazine, the *Journal of Property Tax Assessment and Administration,* the IAAO Web site, *IAAO E-news* broadcast messages, person-to-person, and AsessorNET are some of the communication tools IAAO uses to share information among members and others in the property valuation and assessment community. Do these communication tools work? Does IAAO communicate effectively with its members? Do members think they have effective ways of communicating their needs to the leadership and staff? Are more types of communication tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, needed? Should printed materials be de-emphasized in favor of electronic versions, or vice versa? Should communication materials be more individualized to target specific member interests? What types of communication vehicles will be needed in the future?

To obtain answers to these and related questions, the Communications Committee, with approval from the IAAO Executive Board, conducted a Communications Practices Survey in July 2010. The survey was publicly posted on the IAAO Web site for the month of July 2010. It was publicized to members in F&E, *IAAO E-News,* the IAAO Facebook page, and promoted to state representatives and local chapters by e-mail and word-of-mouth. They were encouraged to provide the link to nonmembers in their assessment offices as well. Although the survey focused on individual preferences, viewpoints, and knowledge, it also asked questions about workplace communication practices to determine individual exposure and access to various communication tools and technologies. The results of the survey provide a snapshot in time that allows IAAO to identify trends in communication practices and formulate future communication goals.

In formal terms, the desired outcomes of the survey were to

- Better understand the communication preferences of individuals in the appraisal and assessment community
- Increase the relevance of IAAO communications
- Recommend new communication methods
- Prioritize resources dedicated to IAAO communications
- Provide insight about future communications needs.

Survey Demographics

A total of 533 people completed the survey: 412 IAAO regular members, 31 associate members, 76 nonmembers working for assessment jurisdictions, 10 nonmembers not working for assessment jurisdictions, and 4 people whose status was not clearly identified. This represents approximately a 6.0 to 7.5 percent response rate when compared to the total IAAO membership, enough for a statistically representative sample. An additional 21 people gave partial responses that were valid and included in the results. Survey respondents were not required to complete every question, although most did.

When respondents were asked, "How many employees are in your immediate office or department?" the answers ranged from 1 to 1,500 with a median of 11. Individuals from very large offices with substantial communication resources provided their perspectives, but most were in smaller offices with fewer communication and staffing resources. Some retired or self-employed individuals responded that they had no employees, so they were counted as 1 to include themselves.

Workplace Environment

Although the survey focused specifically on *individual* communication preferences, viewpoints, and knowledge, an evaluation of exposure to communication tools in the workplace was also sought. Understanding what tools are commonly available in the workplace, and how they are managed, provides insight into issues of accessibility.

When asked, "Does your workplace have a dedicated public information (PI) officer or dedicated PI staff?" 211 respondents said "Yes" and 343 said "No." A follow-up question, "Are specific individuals authorized to handle media inquiries?" elicited 516 responses. The majority indicated that a few top administrators, such as the department head, assessor, or deputy assessor, generally handle media inquiries not directed to a PI officer. There were 61 "no" responses to this follow-up question.

When asked to identify communication tools currently used in the workplace, survey respondents indicated that Web sites, printed brochures, and press releases are the most universally used. In-person communication in various forms is also prevalent. As shown in figure 1, while all the listed communication methods are used to some extent, there is a clear hierarchy of use. Individual comments about other communication methods in use mentioned personal communications, interoffice communications, intergovernmental communication such as communication with legislators, and formal presentations at conferences and assessor meetings, as well as video conferencing.

When respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of various workplace communication tools, responses tracked closely with prevalence of use. The most frequently used communication tools are also perceived to be the most effective, as shown in figure 2 (ranked using weighted mean of responses).

When asked to describe how *in-person* inquiries were handled, 254 respondents indicated that inquiries are handled by designated representatives; 363 indicated that inquiries are handled by all department staff; and 80 indicated that results (when warranted) are communicated with all stakeholders (other departments or agencies).

Figure 2. Perceived effectiveness of communication methods in the workplace

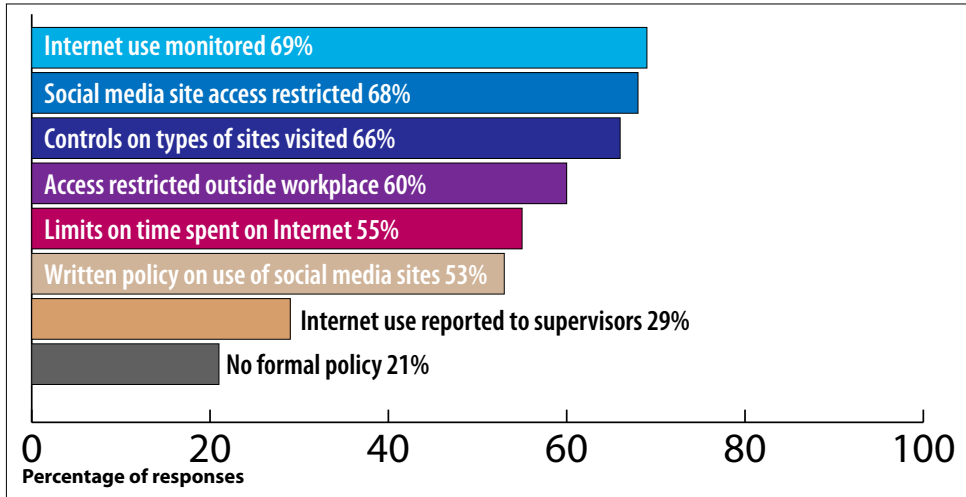Least effective ↔ Most effective
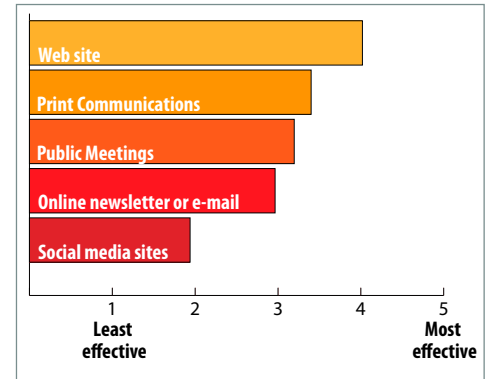
Workplace and Social Media

Survey respondents were asked whether their workplace uses online social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube) as part of their PI program. Eighty-four percent (448 out of 534) said that they do not use social media *or* did not identify a specific use in their PI programs. Of the total survey population only 5.9 percent said they use social media to post links to their office Web site; 4.8 percent said they use social media to post event notices; 2.8 percent use it to provide a discussion forum; 2.8 percent use it to post event coverage; and 1.3 percent use it to post blogs.

With the current popularity of social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, and others, why don't jurisdictions use social media more often? A possible explanation became more apparent in subsequent survey responses.

When asked, "Does your workplace have a written policy defining use of social media sites and other online communications for work use?" more than half (68 percent) of respondents indicated that they do. When asked, "Does your workplace restrict access to social media sites for personal use?" 68 percent of respondents said "yes" and 32 percent said "no." Figure 3 identifies controls on workplace access to Internet communications that affect a significant percentage of survey respondents. A majority of workplaces

Figure 1. Communication tools currently being used in the workplace

Number of responses	
519	Web site
390	Printed brochures
346	Press releases
223	Town hall-type meetings
220	Public appearances in person, TV, and radio
145	Online newsletter
129	Broadcast e-mail
125	Printed newsletter
83	Formal position statements
62	Press conferences
63	Other (focus on in-person communication)
45	Social media sites

Figure 3. Workplace controls on Internet use

Internet use monitored 69%
Social media site access restricted 68%
Controls on types of sites visited 66%
Access restricted outside workplace 60%
Limits on time spent on Internet 55%
Written policy on use of social media sites 53%
Internet use reported to supervisors 29%
No formal policy 21%

Percentage of responses

monitor Internet use, restrict access to social media sites, place controls on the types of sites visited, and limit time spent on the Internet. Only 21 percent of respondents indicated that they have no formal policy on the use of social media sites.

At present, it appears that there are significant restrictions on Internet use and social media access in the average workplace of survey respondents. Many of these restrictions are based on administrative concerns about staff productivity, IT (information technology) department concerns about network security, and restrictions imposed by statute or administrative rule to protect personal information stored in property tax database systems. Administrative policies that impose limits on the use of online communication tools may help to explain why social media is not in greater use in the workplace. This administrative environment may also help to explain why assessor offices' public relations departments don't consider the use of social media more often.

When asked whether social media site content is archived to meet open records/Freedom of Information Act requirements, only 7 percent of respondents indicated "yes." A significant percentage of respondents (46 percent) did not know. Because social

media tools are relatively recent and are not as frequently used as other technologies in the workplace, they seem to be in catch-up mode when it comes to being addressed by formal policies.
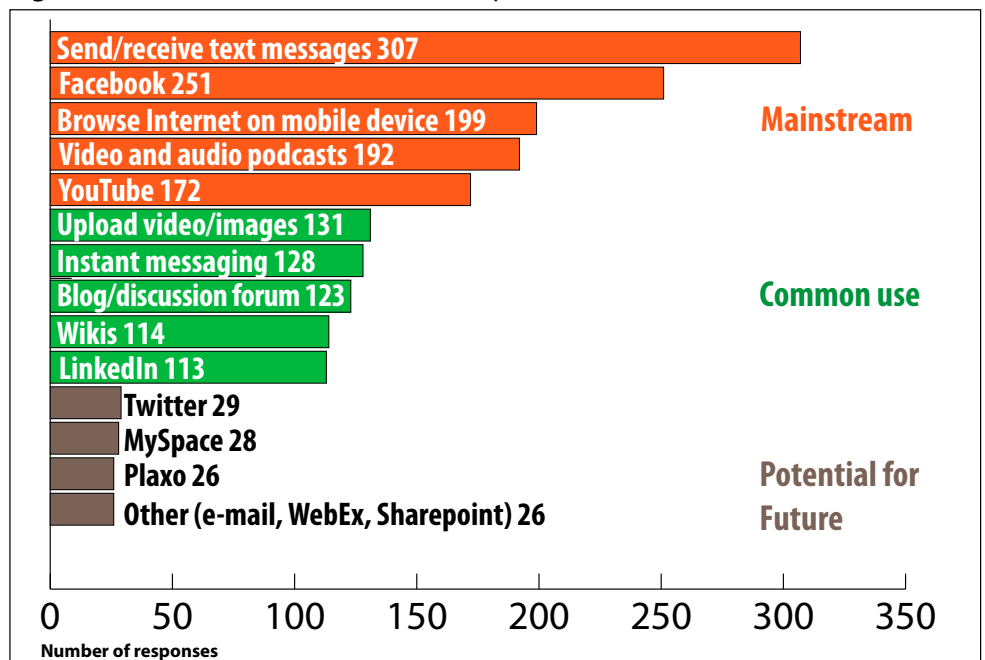
Individual Online Preferences

Because personal use of the Internet is generally less restricted than workplace use, information was sought about exposure of the survey population to a wide variety of online communication tools and technologies. In response to a question about participation in various online communications, the frontrunners (as shown in figure 4)

were sending and receiving text messages, using Facebook, and browsing the Internet using mobile devices. The proliferation of wireless mobile devices (smart phones, iPads, iPhones) seems to have reached all segments of the survey population (and society in general), and accessing the Internet did not seem to be a big obstacle for the great majority of survey respondents.

Viewing online video and using YouTube also fell into mainstream use categories. Uploading video or images, using instant messaging, participating in blogs or discussion forums, using Wikis, and participating on LinkedIn were also common activities. Other online communication methods, such as Twitter, MySpace, and Plaxo, were not in common use in the survey population.

When asked, "How often do you use online social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Plaxo, and MySpace" 33 percent of respondents said rarely; 9 percent once a month; 18 percent once a week; and 19 percent daily. With 46 percent of respondents accessing social media sites at least once a month, this avenue of communication obviously is alive and well outside the workplace.

Figure 4. Individual online communication preferences

Send/receive text messages 307
Facebook 251
Browse Internet on mobile device 199
Video and audio podcasts 192
YouTube 172
Mainstream
Upload video/images 131
Instant messaging 128
Blog/discussion forum 123
Wikis 114
LinkedIn 113
Common use
Twitter 29
MySpace 28
Plaxo 26
Other (e-mail, WebEx, Sharepoint) 26
Potential for Future

Number of responses

When asked, "How often do you go online to find information on the Internet?" an incredible 96 percent of survey respondents said they use the Internet at least once a week and 81 percent said they use it daily. Only 3 percent said they use it once a month or less.

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IAAO Communications
Good to Better

IAAO appears to be doing well communicating with its members. As shown in figure 5, an overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that IAAO keeps them informed about the association and its activities; that they can easily find answers to questions related to IAAO; that they have opportunities to communicate with senior IAAO leadership; and that they have opportunities to communicate their ideas on IAAO-wide initiatives. A possible goal for IAAO would be to find ways to improve already good communication to even better communication across all categories.

When asked which communication tools they currently depend on to stay informed about IAAO, 93 percent of respondents indicated that they depend on F&E and the *Journal of Property Tax Assessment and Administration*; 84 percent, the Web site; 58 percent, *IAAO E-News* broadcast messages; 43 percent, person-to-person (word-of-mouth); 31 percent, AssessorNET discussion group; 20 percent, direct communication with IAAO leaders; 4

percent, social media sites (Facebook, LinkedIn); and 3 percent, SPCNET state and provincial discussion group (see figure 6). Interestingly, person-to-person communication still ranks high considering the multitude of mass communication tools that are available.

When asked where they usually first hear about IAAO news and information, 64 percent of survey respondents said *IAAO E-news* or the Web site; 48 percent, IAAO printed publications; 11 percent, a chapter or local newsletter; and 8 percent, word-of-mouth and local groups. Two percent of survey respondents said they first hear IAAO news and information from a non-IAAO source, and 1 percent indicated that they first hear IAAO news from a social media site (Facebook, LinkedIn).

Figure 5. IAAO communication—headed in the right direction
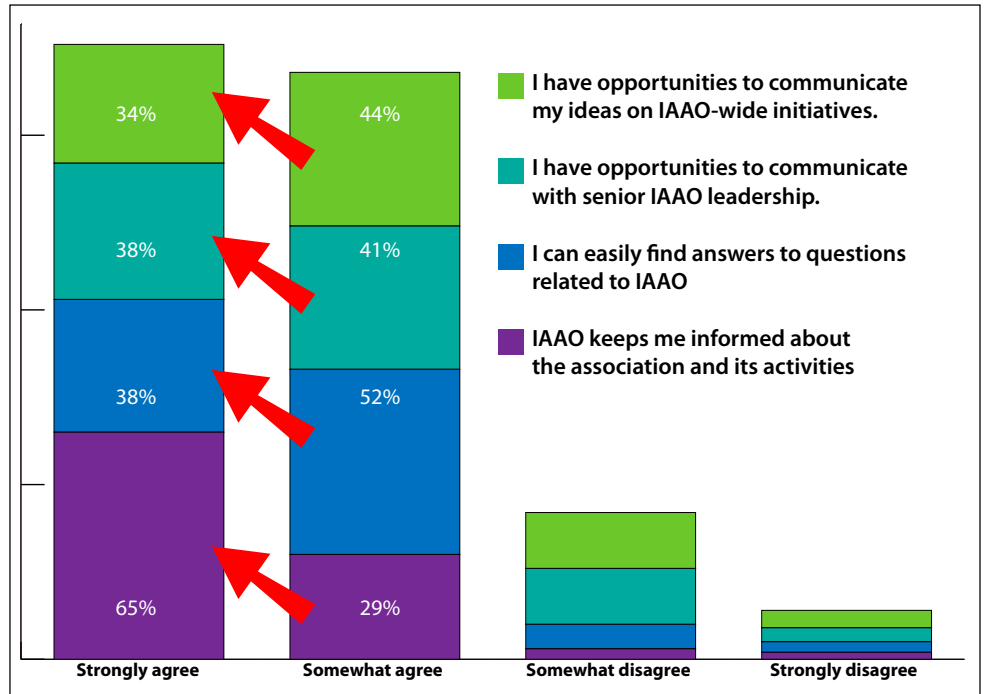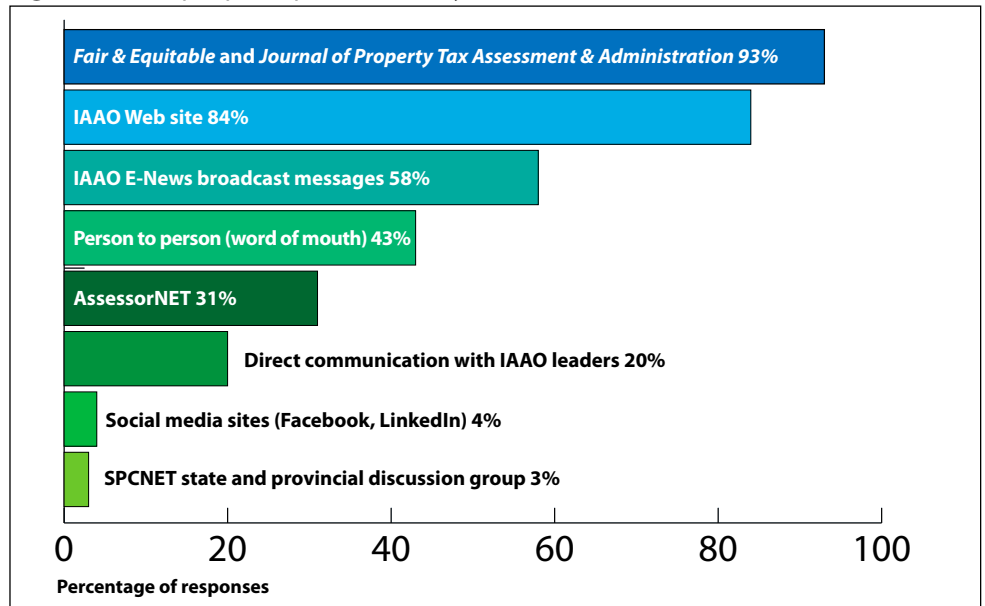

Figure 6. What people depend on to stay informed about IAAO

When asked about the level of interest in various IAAO communication topics, survey respondents showed the most interest in educational opportunities, followed closely by IAAO events (see figure 7). All the communication topics showed some level of interest, and no one said that they were uninterested. Interest in education of all types is affirmed by high levels of activity on education-related pages on the IAAO Web site and in broadcast e-mail links to these pages.

IAAO Printed Materials

When asked how often they read IAAO printed materials, 75 percent of respondents said they read *Fair & Equitable* regularly and 20 percent occasionally read it or skim it. As shown in table 1, a majority of respondents read IAAO printed materials regularly, which makes them an important vehicle for reaching IAAO members.

Based on the results shown in figure 6, slightly more survey respondents read IAAO printed materials than go to the Web site or read broadcast e-mails as a source of information. Print is the preferred medium by a slim margin over online communication tools. The survey independently evaluated each communication tool and did not presume exclusivity of use among choices. In other words, respondents evaluated each communication tool on its own merits.

When asked about specific content in *F&E*, survey respondents indicated the highest level of interest in feature articles, the education calendar, and "In the News" (abstracts of online news related to property tax policy, economic influences, and regional and international trends); see figure 8.

All content in *F&E* received a high positive level of interest. When "not very interested" responses were excluded from the results, rankings for content areas shifted slightly but all

areas showed an interest of 69 percent or greater.

When asked about the look and feel of *F&E*, survey respondents again showed a high positive level of interest. More than 80 percent of respondents approved of the photography and imagery, writing quality, timeliness, and coverage of IAAO events and education (see figure 9). A few

Figure 7. Level of interest in general reporting topics (ranked using weighted mean)
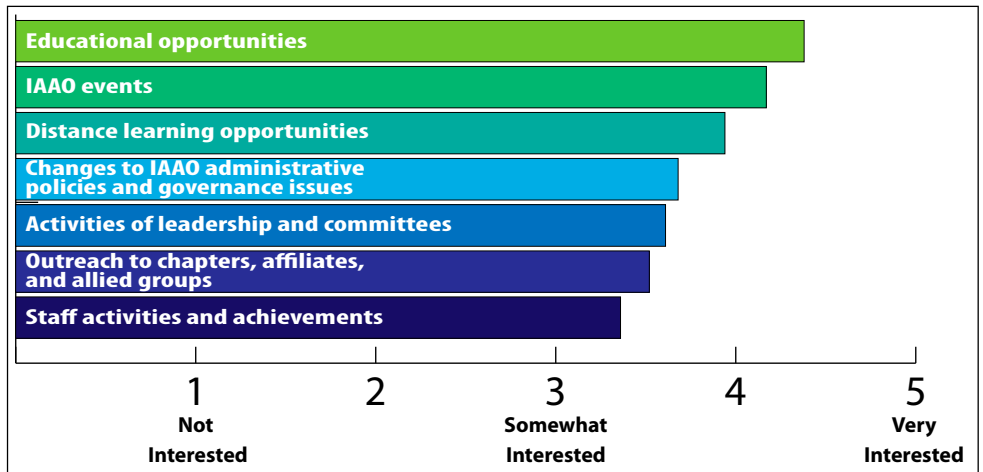

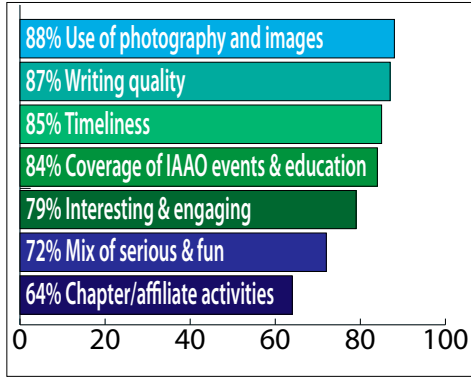**Table 1.** Reading frequency of IAAO printed materials

	Regularly read	Occasionally read or skim	Rarely read or skim	Never read	Not aware of
Fair & Equitable (monthly publication)	75%	20%	3%	1%	1%
Journal of Property Tax Assessment & Administration (quarterly publication)	39%	42%	13%	5%	2%
IAAO event promotion brochures and postcards	43%	39%	14%	2%	3%
IAAO Technical Standards	23%	41%	26%	6%	4%

Figure 8. Level of interest in *Fair & Equitable* content (ranked using weighted mean)
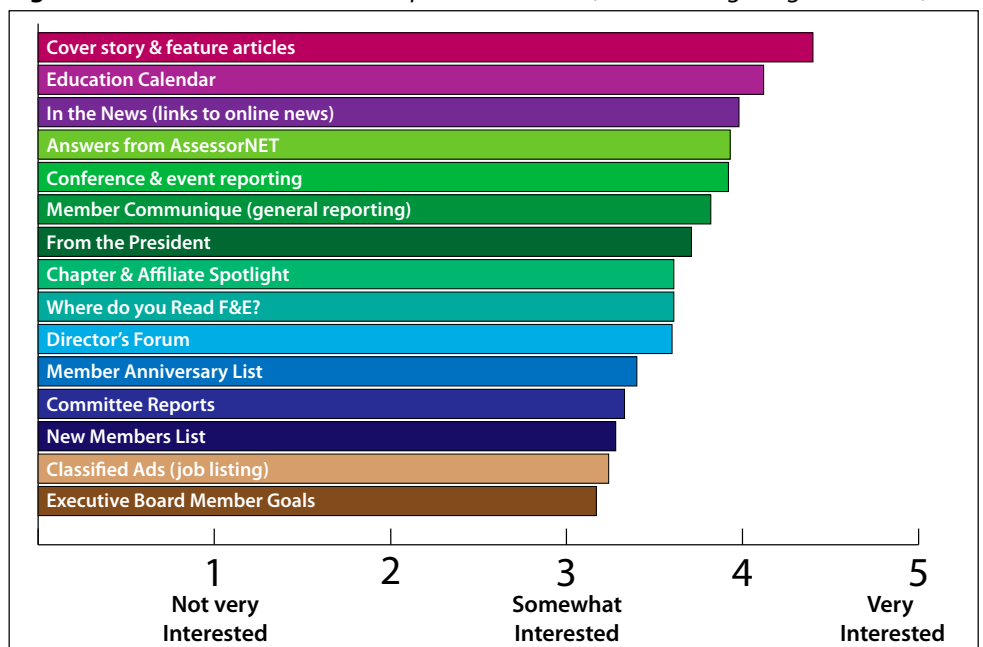
survey respondents indicated a low level of interest, which skewed the overall percentages slightly downward but did not affect the overall ranking.

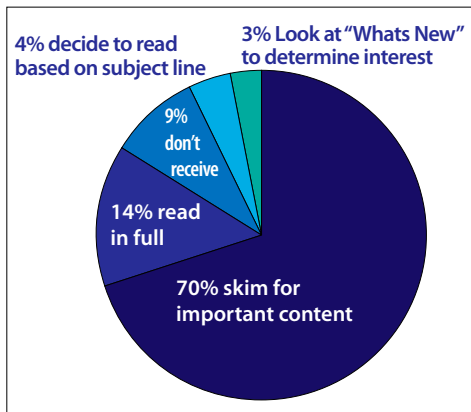**Figure 9.** Evaluation of *Fair & Equitable* look and feel

- 88% Use of photography and images
- 87% Writing quality
- 85% Timeliness
- 84% Coverage of IAAO events & education
- 79% Interesting & engaging
- 72% Mix of serious & fun
- 64% Chapter/affiliate activities

Broadcast E-Mail

The survey asked two questions about *IAAO E-News* broadcast e-mails.

The first question (figure 10) evaluated how completely e-mails were being read. As might be expected in a busy world, a large majority (70 percent) of respondents are skimmers, checking for important content and following links of interest. Fourteen percent said that they read the e-mails in full. A small percentage (4 percent) said they decide whether to read the e-mail based on the subject line, and 3 percent said they look at "What's New" to determine interest. Nine percent said they do not receive IAAO broadcast e-mails. Apart from survey results,

Figure 10. Readership of *IAAO E-News* broadcast e-mail

- 4% decide to read based on subject line
- 3% Look at "Whats New" to determine interest
- 9% don't receive
- 14% read in full
- 70% skim for important content

evaluation of e-mail statistics on open rates and "click-through" rates for *IAAO E-News* indicates that recipients consistently have a strong interest in education-related links and frequently updated or new content.

The second question asked about the frequency of broadcast e-mails. Seventy-eight percent of respondents said that the current frequency of two per month is appropriate; 10 percent said the e-mails were not frequent enough; 2 percent said e-mails were received too frequently; and 10 percent said they don't know or don't receive them. Based on these responses, plans to continue sending *IAAO E-News* to members twice monthly seem reasonable. The 2 percent who said *IAAO E-News* was received too frequently can opt out of receiving *IAAO E-News* at any time by clicking the unsubscribe link in the e-mail. The 10 percent who don't know or don't receive *IAAO E-News* can opt in by sending a note, "opt in to *IAAO E-News*," to info@iaao.org.

IAAO Web Site

The survey asked three questions about the IAAO Web site.

Responses to the first question, "In the past three months, how often have you visited the IAAO Web site?" showed that 76 percent of respondents visited the Web site at least once a month, 27 percent at least once a week, and 2 percent daily. Nineteen percent said they rarely visit the Web site, and 5 percent said they never visit it.

The second question asked about the value of information resources on the Web site. As shown in figure 11, there is a concentration of responses in the "somewhat valuable" range as calculated using the weighted mean and excluding the "don't know/don't use" responses from the ranking.

Overall, respondents found value in Web site content; however, as shown in table 2, the value ratings were widely distributed with significant percentages in the "very valuable," "not valuable at all," and "don't know/don't

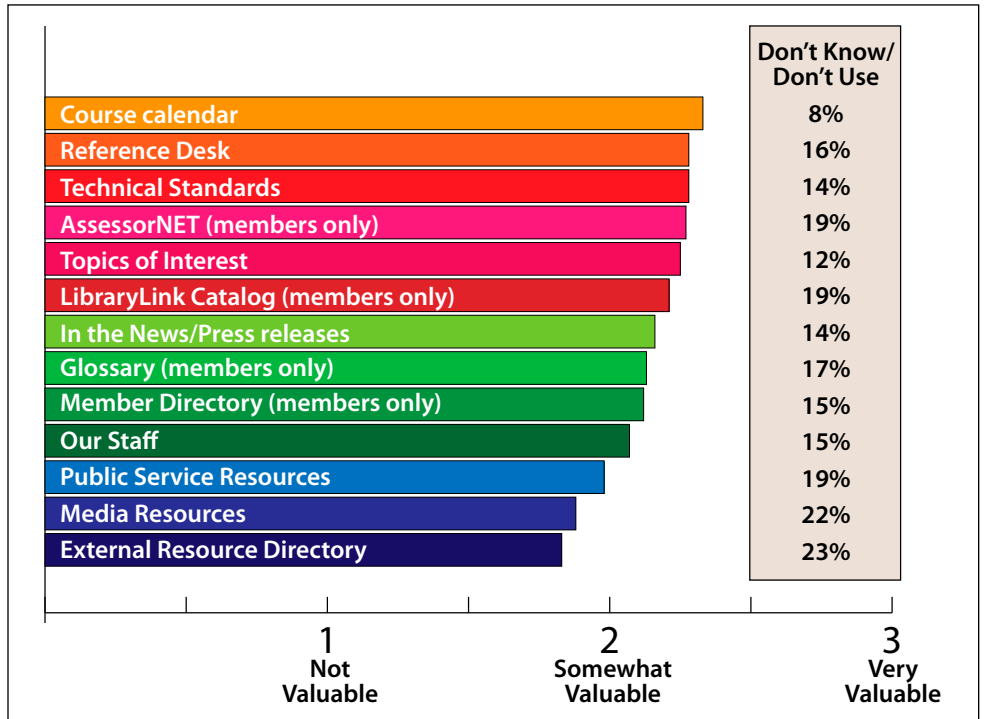**Figure 11.** Value of Web site content (ranked using weighted mean)

	Don't Know/ Don't Use
Course calendar	8%
Reference Desk	16%
Technical Standards	14%
AssessorNET (members only)	19%
Topics of Interest	12%
LibraryLink Catalog (members only)	19%
In the News/Press releases	14%
Glossary (members only)	17%
Member Directory (members only)	15%
Our Staff	15%
Public Service Resources	19%
Media Resources	22%
External Resource Directory	23%

1 — Not Valuable
2 — Somewhat Valuable
3 — Very Valuable

Table 2. Interest in Web site content

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Not valuable at all	Don't know/ don't use
Reference Desk	28%	53%	4%	16%
AssessorNET (members only)	28%	47%	6%	19%
Glossary (members only)	21%	51%	10%	17%
Technical Standards	32%	47%	8%	14%
Course Calendar	41%	40%	11%	8%
Public Service Resources	14%	51%	16%	19%
Topics of Interest	30%	50%	8%	12%
LibraryLink Catalog (members only)	29%	40%	12%	19%
In the News/Press Releases	24%	51%	11%	14%
Media Resources	11%	47%	20%	22%
External Resource Directory	8%	48%	21%	23%
Member Directory (members only)	26%	44%	15%	15%
Our Staff page	21%	49%	15%	15%

use" choices. There is clearly room for improvement based on these results.

At the November 2010 Executive Board Meeting, then-president Bill Carroll directed the Communications Committee to research how the IAAO Web site should be designed and to make recommendations to the Executive Board in April 2011. Part of that direction included using whatever resources are needed (other standing or special committees, IAAO staff, and the like) to complete the evaluation.

A third open-ended question asked for additional suggestions for

- Information that should be available on the Web site
- Improvements to the Web site
- Areas of the Web site that need additional explanation or instructions for use
- Links that are especially useful.

Responses included the following:

- Keep the Web site current and remove outdated content.
- Provide more detailed instructions on using the IAAO Library.
- Reorganize the content and simplify the home page.

- Reduce the number of clicks required to access member information.
- Create a members-only resource page.
- Improve the Course Calendar functionality.
- Make it easier to find such information as minutes of board meetings and recertification information.

- Standardize downloadable documents in PDF format (not Word).
- Improve the search function.
- Expand links to external resources.
- Make everything easier to use.

The open-ended comments suggest that the Web site could be simpler and easier to use. By keeping posted information current, relevant, and easy to find, IAAO should be able to improve this important resource.

The Future
Communication Tools New to IAAO

Respondents were asked to evaluate their level of interest in communication methods and technologies not regularly used by IAAO (see figure 12). When results were ranked according to the weighted mean of responses, the level of interest in new communication methods appears to be somewhat low, particularly for Twitter posting, information posted to social media sites, video event coverage on YouTube, and blogs on the IAAO Web site.

On the other hand, if results are examined from only survey respondents who expressed a positive level of interest (3 or higher on a scale of 1

Figure 12. Interest in communication tools new to IAAO (ranked using weighted mean)
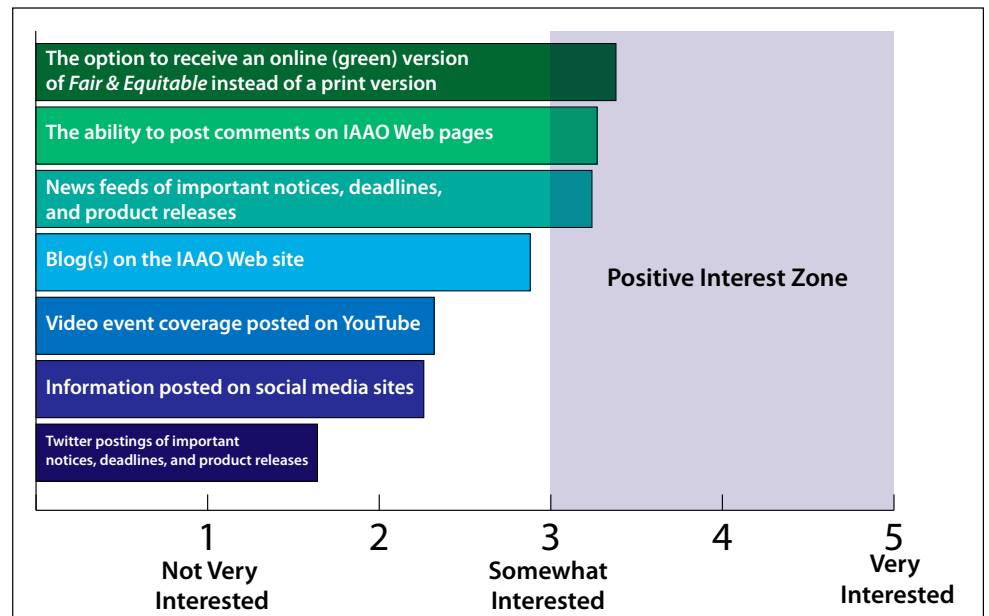
to 5) , a significant number expressed interest in the following:

- The option to receive an online (green) version of F&E
- The ability to post comments on IAAO Web pages
- News feeds of important notices, deadlines, and product releases

These particular results indicate a wide variance among the survey population in preferences for using communication tools that are relatively new to IAAO. Based on these results, IAAO could consider how it communicates with different segments of its core audience. The survey results provide a tool for prioritizing and targeting the communication options that will achieve the most significant results for a broadly diverse audience.

The most interesting result from this particular survey question about new communication tools was the "green" option for F&E. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of respondents for each level of interest, from

"very interested" to "not applicable." Twenty-eight percent were strongly interested in an online version of F&E; 52 percent showed a positive level of interest; 21 percent were somewhat interested; and 26 percent indicated a level of interest less than that.

In the end, it is all about offering choices and multiple efficient pathways for accessing information relevant to IAAO members and the assessment community.

At the direction of the Executive Board, the Communications Committee will continue to explore options for an online F&E in 2011. It offers compelling possibilities as interest grows in expanding the presence of IAAO internationally and making IAAO news more accessible. In addition, offices that receive multiple

copies of F&E may opt to receive fewer print copies if extras are unread and go directly to the recycling bin. As baby boomers leave the workforce and GenXers, millennials, and other digitally immersed generations join the workforce, there may be broader acceptance of an online version of F&E. Tools to effectively view, process, and understand online publications continue to evolve and improve. This may eventually result in a better overall reading experience that more people can benefit from. Periodicals *built for digital* may also enhance the value of the online choice. Economic considerations will undoubtedly also have an influence.

In the end, it is all about offering choices and multiple efficient pathways for accessing information relevant to IAAO members and the assessment community.

Looking into the Crystal Ball
When respondents were asked what communication tools they would like to have available in the future, the ranked results (figure 13) indicated significant interest in audio or video podcasts and live Webcasts, and some interest in blogs or online commenting. IAAO began offering live Webcasts and online courses in 2010. Attendance figures for recent Webcasts and online courses support survey results showing that programs like these are strongly desired. IAAO plans a full lineup of online learning choices in 2011 and beyond.

When asked how they would like to receive communications in the future, respondents indicated *IAAO E-news* as the most prominent choice, followed closely by printed periodicals, and the Web site. Thirty-one percent indicated they would prefer to receive brochures. Eight percent indicated that they would prefer to receive communications on social media sites and Twitter (see figure 14).

Table 3. Interest in an online (green) version of *Fair & Equitable*

	Very interested		Somewhat interested		Not very interested	Not applicable
The option to receive an online (green) version of *Fair & Equitable* instead of a print version	129	111	100	45	75	7
	28%	24%	21%	10%	16%	1%

Figure 13. Interest in future communications tools

Audio or video presentations via podcast or online streaming 66%
Live Webcasts 47%
Blogs on selected topics 46%
Additional online discussion groups 42%
News feeds 34%
Text messages sent to mobile devices 12%
Other 5%
Twitter posts 2%

Percentage of responses
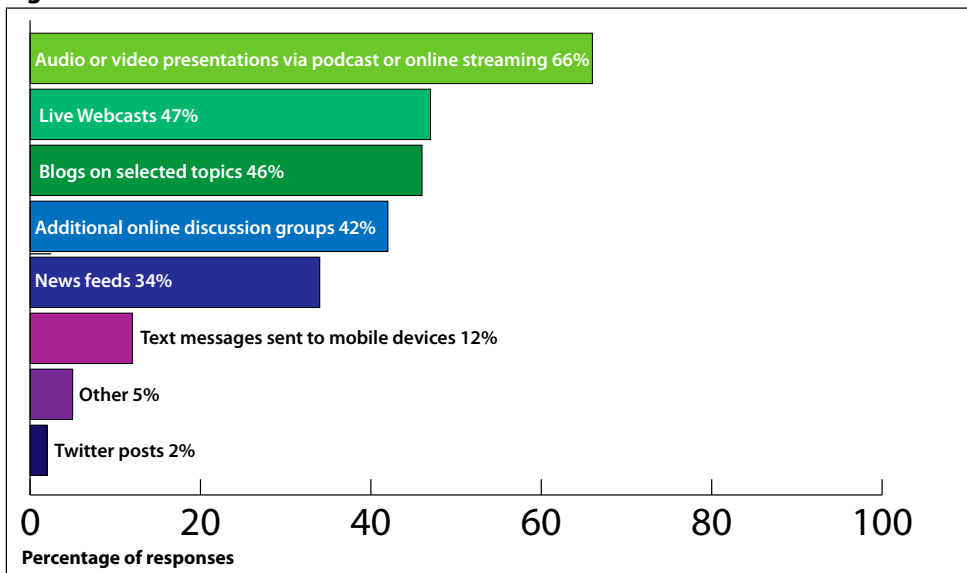
Figure 14. Preferences for receiving future communications

- IAAO E-News 82%
- IAAO periodicals 75%
- Web site 54%
- Brochure/flyers 31%
- Social media sites and Twitter 8%
- Other 3%

Percentage of responses (0 20 40 60 80 100)
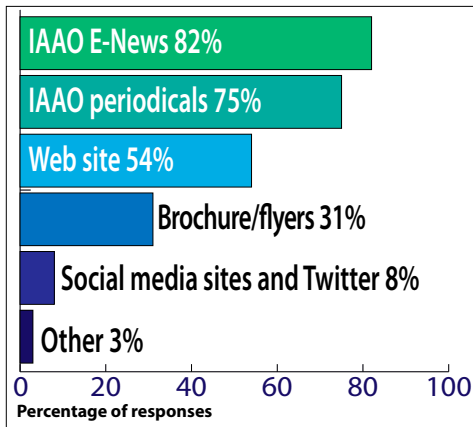
Summary

Individual communication preferences varied widely among survey respondents. Preferences for particular communication tools or methods are not exclusive—many respondents use multiple communication tools and methods. In order for IAAO communications to remain relevant, they must utilize the same communication tools that members use and have access to. Providing choices makes it easier for members to receive information from IAAO in the way that best suits them at a particular time and place.

The communication tools that individuals use can vary depending on time of day, access to a computer or mobile wireless device, workplace restrictions, personal and generational preferences, social influences, and privacy concerns. Influencing factors such as these affect which method is used to access information. In today's increasingly complicated world, having choices makes it easier

Social media as communication tools are being readily embraced in both the corporate world and at the individual level. Survey respondents who come primarily from government offices may encounter a different set of rules that limit access to these communication channels during work hours. The culture within government offices tends to be more conservative and restrictive than that in corporate culture, in part because of sensitivity about privacy issues and the need for more regulation due to public information laws.

A major concern surrounding social media, and online communication in general, is security.

Choosing tools that provide the most benefit and make the best use of available resources is a constant challenge. The challenge is made easier by the valuable information provided by survey respondents. ■

Communications Committee members in 2010, at the time of the survey, were Chair David McMullen, Manuel Gallegos, John Taylor, Alan Dornfest, AAS, L. Wade Patterson, Rebecca Malmquist, CAE, and Chris Bennett, Staff Liaison