

ABSEL'S SILVER TSUNAMI

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the number of papers presented at ABSEL conferences from 1990 through 2012. Besides the general trend of the total number presented, we also compare the trends of those who have been frequent presenters versus those who have made one or two presentations and then presented no more papers at later conferences. The potential consequences for ABSEL, given the aging of its most active members and low retention of new presenters are explored.

INTRODUCTION

Casual conversations with the “old guard” members of ABSEL who regularly attend the annual conferences over the past decade have often turned to “what’s the future for ABSEL?” Casual observation of the aging of these members combined with the perennial problem of attracting new attendees and retaining new members suggests that there is cause for concern. But is this perception a reality? This paper analyzes the number of papers presented at ABSEL conference from 1990 through 2012. Are the contributions by the regular presenters decreasing? Are there a sufficient number of one-time attendees to result in a vibrant conference?

DECLINING NUMBER OF PRESENTATIONS

As shown in Exhibit 1, while the pattern for the total number of papers presented at ABSEL conferences has been erratic there clearly has been a downward trend.

We searched for a possible pattern for the peaks and valleys, hypothesizing that location may have an impact. And, indeed, location does appear to play a role in determining attendance. However, to our surprise, the relationship is not as strong as we might have suspected. It was no surprise that the highest number of papers presented (201) at a conference in the 23 years studied was for the conference in Hawaii in 1990. Nor that the number fell the

following year (113) for the conference held in Nashville. But when the conference was held again in Hawaii in 1998, the total number of papers was down to 146. Somewhat surprisingly, the total increased to 178 the following year when the conference was held in Baltimore. And with the conferences held in San Diego in 1994, 2001, and 2012 having totals of 110, 102, and 75, respectively, warm locations don’t seem to be a determinate of how many present at a conference. This suspicion is further supported with the two conferences in Pensacola having paper totals of 98 and 101. So, while location undoubtedly affects attendance, what constitutes a desirable location isn’t altogether clear.

NUMBER OF PAPERS PER PRESENTER

Exhibit 2 shows the percentage of papers at a conference where the author(s) present just one paper versus two or more. For example, nearly 95% of those making a presentation at the 1991 ABSEL conference presented only one paper. In 19 of the 23 years assessed, 80% or more of the presenters presented only one paper.

TOTAL NUMBER OF PAPERS PRESENTED PER AUTHOR

Exhibit 3 indicates that 65% of all papers presented at ABSEL conferences from 1990 through 2012 were by authors who only presented one paper during those 23 years. They were “one and done”. And 91% of the authors presented five or fewer papers over this period. We generously labeled the nine percent of conference attendees who have presented more than five papers over the 23 year period, as “Prolifics”.

The combined results of Exhibits 2 and 3 demonstrate that over 80% of presenters at ABSEL conferences make one or two presentations and then present no more papers at later conferences. The consequence of this low retention rate is that ABSEL conferences need a constant flow of new presenters to maintain a consistent number of paper presentations. And this assumes that the long standing

ABSEL presenters will continue to produce papers at a rate consistent with their past behavior. But will they? Have they?

move on non-academic pursuits; they lose access to students as a data pool for their research; etc.

NUMBER OF PAPERS PRESENTED BY PROLIFICS

Exhibit 4 shows that with the exception of years 2004-2007, the number of papers presented by Prolifics has fallen dramatically since 2005. In 1998 a total of 80 of the papers presented at that year's conference were presented by Prolifics. But in 2008 the Prolifics presented only 51 papers and by 2012 they presented just 28 of that year's conference papers.

Another way of viewing the activity level of Prolifics is shown in Exhibit 5. It shows that both the Prolifics and Non-Prolifics have a declining trend in the number of papers they are presenting. This is particularly true since 2005.

Exhibit 6 further shows the decline of both the Prolifics and Non-Prolifics. The average total number of papers presented is in a steady decline.

The declining trend of the Prolifics most likely reflects the "aging" of the core of this group. As they reach the end of their careers and enter into retirement, they are likely to discontinue publishing for a variety of reasons: their focus on research wanes as they no longer need to publish; they

CONCLUSIONS

The trends clearly indicate that relying on the Prolifics to maintain a vibrant ABSEL conference is ill-advised. It is also apparent that having conferences that are attractive to "temporary attendees" (i.e., those that will attend two or fewer conferences) is critical to its future. Without a core of both groups, ABSEL is in danger of reaching a tipping point where the number of attendees is insufficient to fund a viable conference or to create a vibrant culture that entices attendees to return for subsequent conferences.

ABSEL's leadership needs to develop a three-pronged strategy: 1) focus on developing and supporting a new cadre of Prolifics; 2) attract a sufficient number of first-time attendees; and 3) increase the retention rates for presenters attending ABSEL for the first time.

EXHIBIT #1

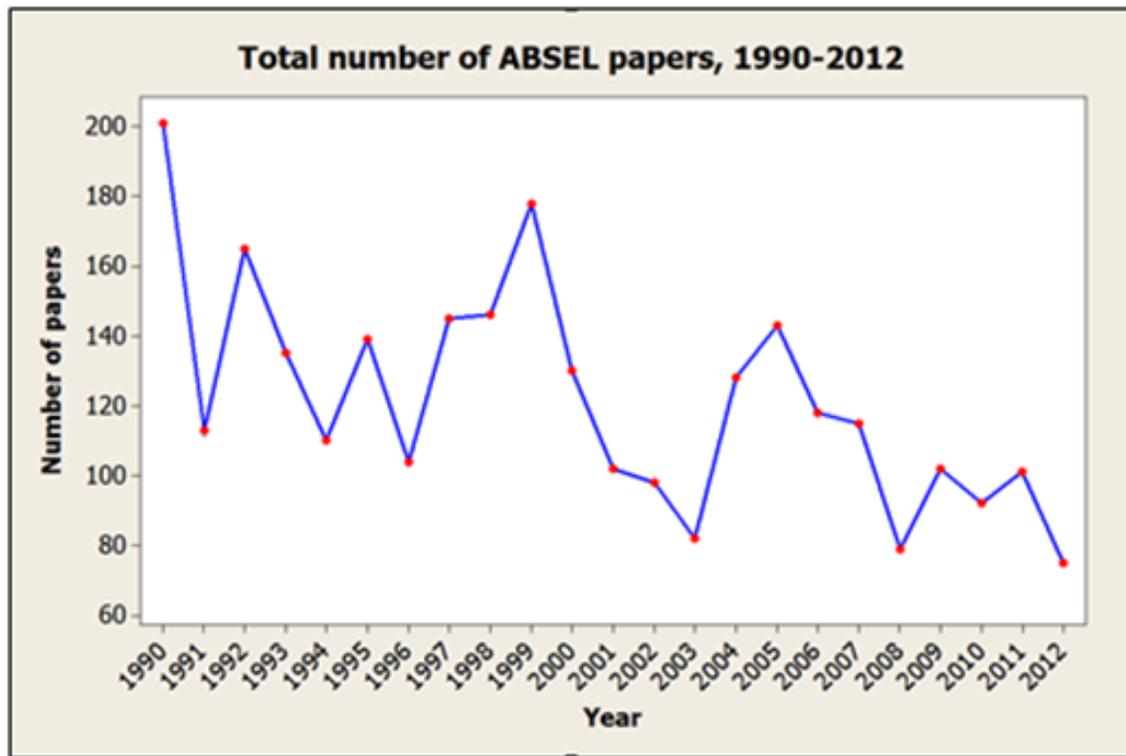


EXHIBIT #2

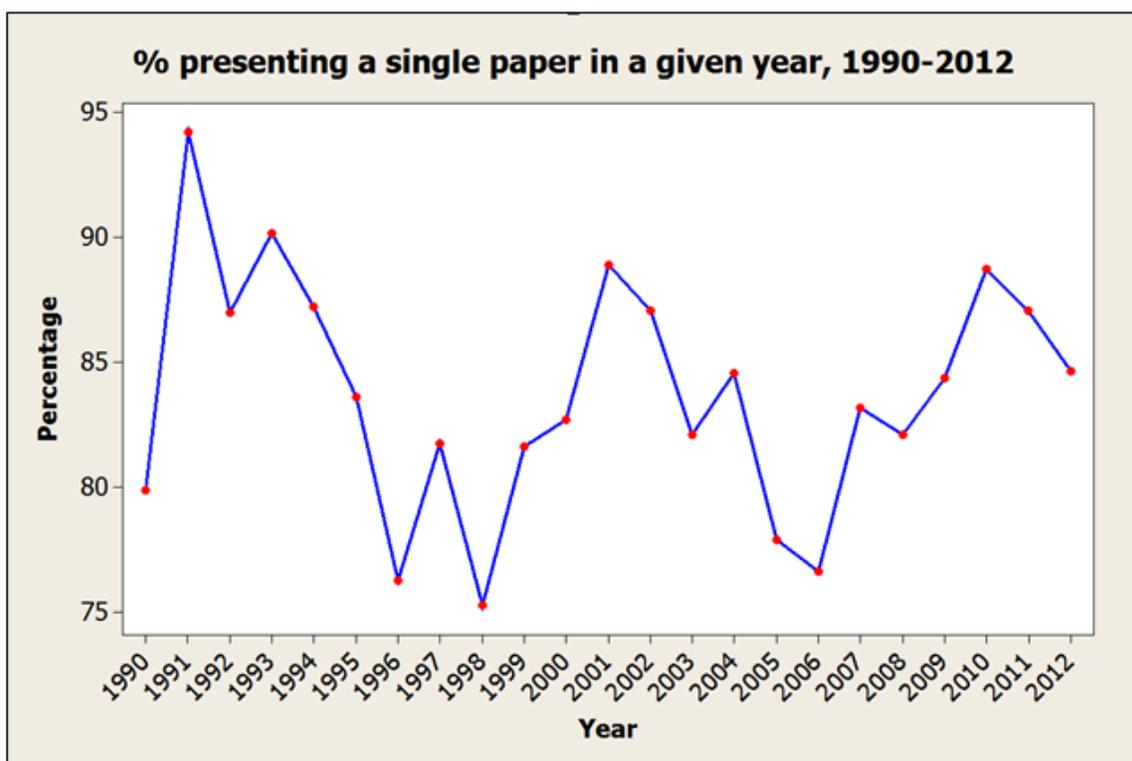


EXHIBIT 3

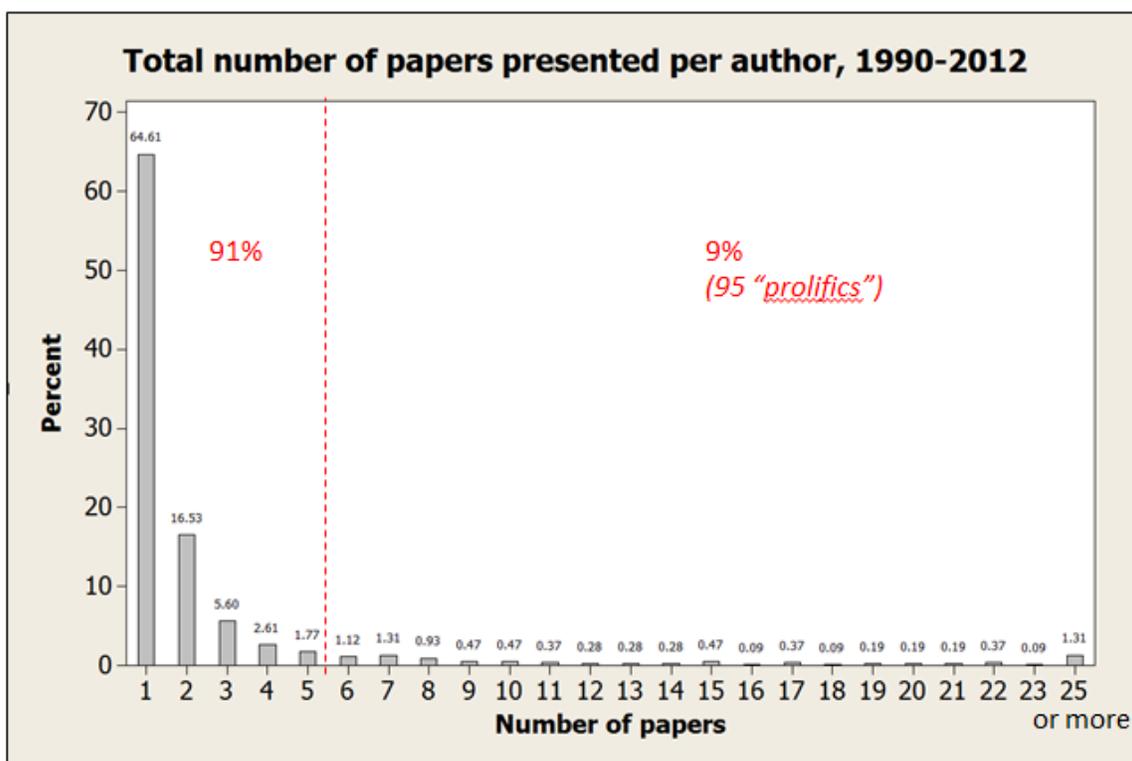


EXHIBIT 4

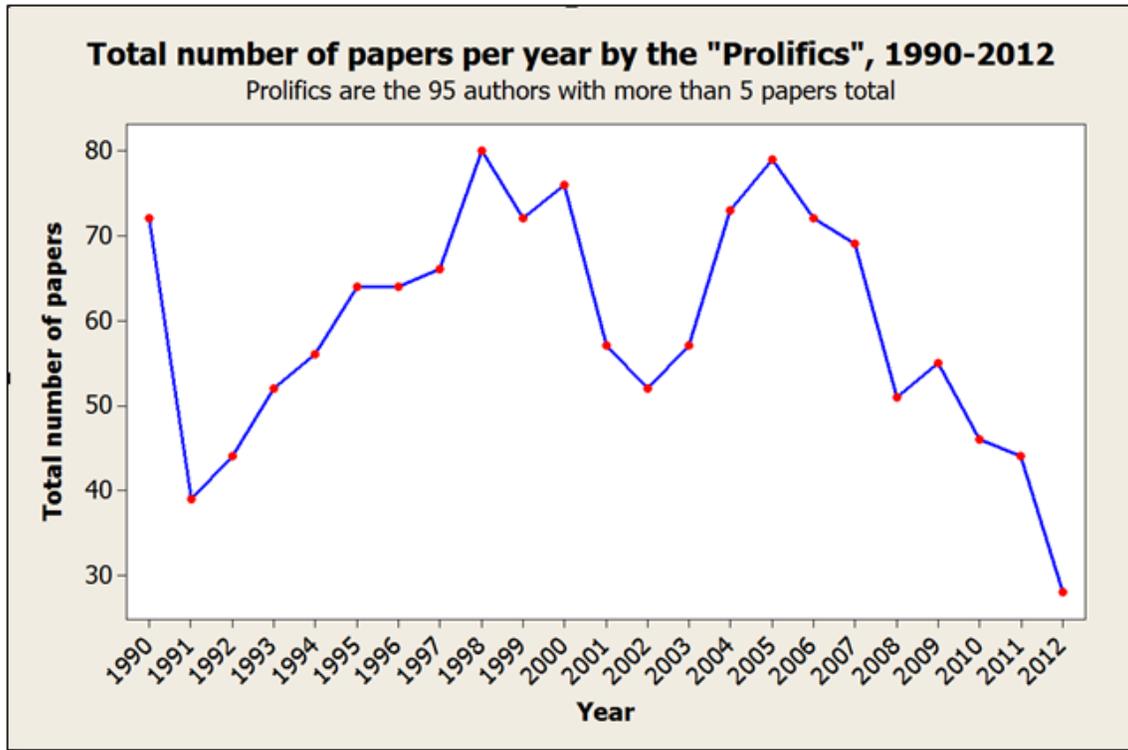


EXHIBIT 5

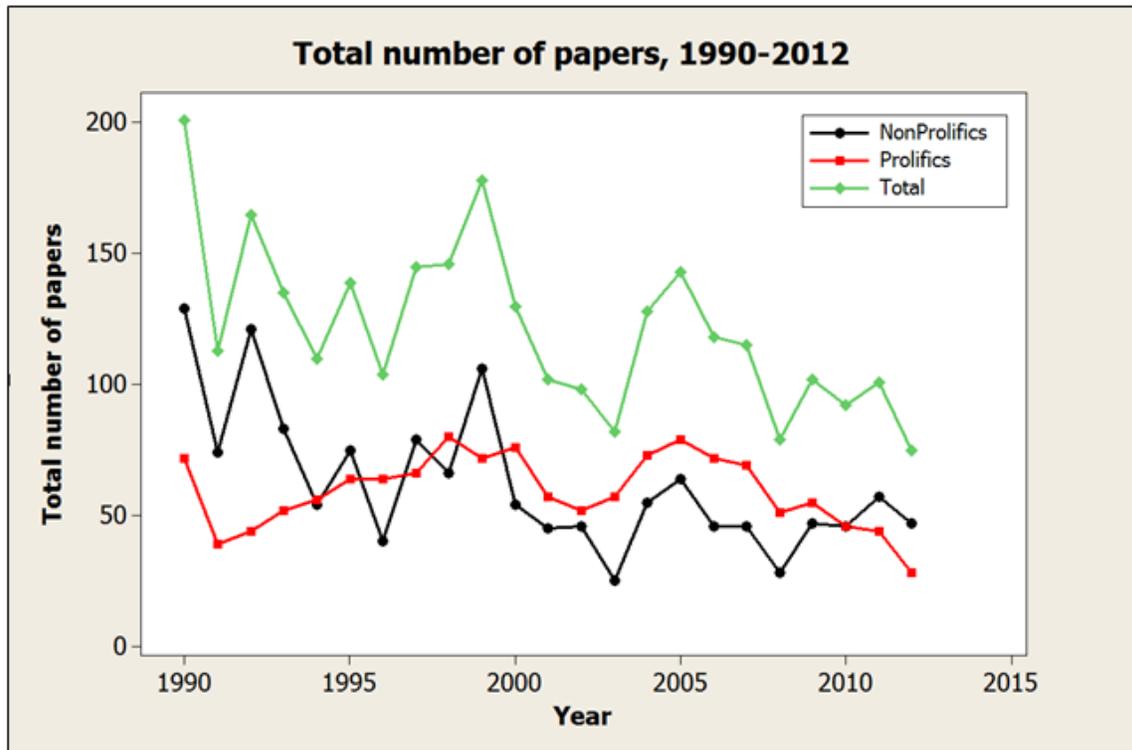


EXHIBIT 6

Six Year Averages of Papers Presented (Five for last set)				
Years	Prolifics	Non-Prolifics	Total	Prolific % of Total
1990 – 1995	54	90	144	38.4%
1996 – 2001	67	65	132	52.0%
2002 – 2007	67	47	114	59.3%
2008 – 2012	45	48	93	51.6%