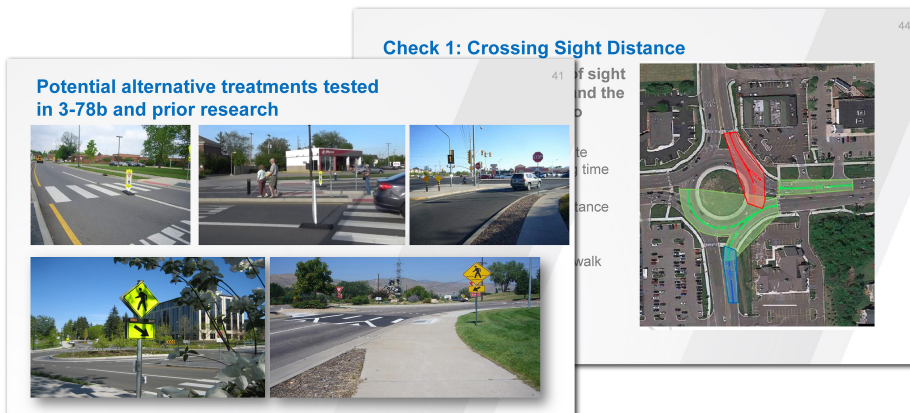


Webinars Bring Research Home for States

In the last decade, the Transportation Research Board's (TRB's) Webinar Program has become the go-to resource for transportation professionals who want to stay informed about the latest research results and get ideas on how to implement them—all without leaving their desks. Every year the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP), which is part of TRB, produces approximately 30 webinars, each conveying report highlights as well as illustrative narratives on using research in the field.



NCHRP webinars on roundabout research have been in high demand. A July 2017 webinar highlighted guidance provided in NCHRP Research Report 834: Crossing Solutions at Roundabouts and Channelized Turn Lanes for Pedestrians with Vision Disabilities: A Guidebook.

Getting the Word Out

Every year, NCHRP publishes dozens of research reports and other publications that address problems of immediate concern to state DOTs. For practitioners to take the next step of implementing these new research results, a personal connection can be worth a thousand printed words. NCHRP webinars have emerged as an effective tool for making those connections between researchers and practitioners.

Through online videoconferencing tools, the webinars bring together transportation professionals across the country to learn about the latest NCHRP research results directly from the research investigators. "We focus on getting the webinars to provide practical applications rather than diving too deeply into the details

of the research methodology," says Lisa Berardi Marflak, director of communications/media for TRB. "By sharing their successes and lessons learned in the field, presenters demonstrate through their own story how attendees can use the research or tool."

Complementing in-person learning opportunities such as conference presentations and workshops, NCHRP webinars have the advantage of being able to deliver new research findings to transportation professionals across the country on a just-in-time basis. Webinar presenters spend about an hour highlighting key points from the research, emphasizing ideas, techniques, and methods that practitioners can apply on the job. A 30-minute question-and-answer session follows each presentation.

Response to the format has been enthusiastic. "I think it's the way of the future," says Janet Whetstone, a regional traffic safety engineer with North Carolina DOT (NCDOT) who has attended several NCHRP webinars. "The benefit of webinars is the convenience. It's hard to find time to go to classes or workshops in

(continued)

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE

Reaching a Wide Audience

Webinars are effective at disseminating the latest research findings. Making more people aware of research results increases implementation.

Providing Access to Experts

Webinar presenters, usually technical experts in their field, play an important role in supporting active implementation of research results.

Providing Just-in-Time Information

NCHRP webinars provide practitioners with a concise summary of newly released research projects, explaining how best to put results into practice.

person. Webinars help me stay on top of the latest technology without leaving the office.”

A Great Value for States

TRB provides webinar access to state DOT employees at no cost. (Access to webinars and archived recordings is free to employees of TRB Sponsors and some TRB Global Affiliates; other attendees pay a small fee, around \$95, for some webinars.)

The value of attending a webinar can be significant. The implementation ideas Whetstone took away from one webinar translated into significant savings for NCDOT on a recent project. As NCDOT was planning a safety project that involved installing two roundabouts, Whetstone and her colleagues attended an NCHRP webinar on roundabout scalability (see trb.org/Main/Blurbs/173758.aspx).

“What the presenters talked about looked promising regarding right-sizing a roundabout to fit the location,” Whetstone says. “Most of our roundabouts have been topping out at over \$1 million. Based on our preliminary reviews of the data, we hope to be able to reduce our costs significantly—possibly down to around the \$700,000 range.”

Whetstone is quick to point to another valuable aspect of TRB webinars: Professional engineers can earn professional development hours for attending. “As a licensed engineer, the webinars enable me to stay up to date and get the educational credits that I need,” Whetstone says. Having staff earn professional development hours at no cost through TRB webinars saves money for state DOTs, which often pay for their engineers to take continuing education classes.

A Proven Approach

The webinar program got its start nearly a decade ago as TRB staff saw the benefits of communicating research results through online meetings. Before the launch of the official webinar program, a few NCHRP senior program officers informally conducted their own webinars as projects were completed.

“If I wanted to communicate the results of a project that I worked on, I would use an online

meeting tool and send out invitations to a limited number of attendees,” says Waseem Dekelbab, a senior program officer for NCHRP. His colleague, Ed Harrigan, also an NCHRP senior program officer, employed the same tactic. “It was a good way to publicize the results of the research,” Harrigan says.

Based on the success of the first few sessions, Dekelbab and Harrigan continued to offer more webinars, and other NCHRP senior program officers began to contribute to the growing list of webinar topics. The audience expanded as word spread about the online learning option, and in 2009, TRB formally launched its webinar program. NCHRP webinars now make up nearly a third of the more than 100 webinars that TRB offers each year, says Marflak, who was instrumental in developing the webinar program.

Connecting with Experts

On average, 350 transportation professionals attend each webinar to hear firsthand perspectives from NCHRP researchers, who are often leading experts in their fields. At the end of each webinar, a question-and-answer segment lets attendees connect directly with the researchers and obtain detailed answers to specific inquiries.

“Questions are an important aspect of the webinars,” says Elmer Marx, a senior bridge design engineer at the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities who has served as both a presenter and a moderator. “They are part of the interaction that participants see as particularly beneficial.”

Presenters are often available after webinar sessions to respond to follow-up questions about the research. This accessibility is an important aspect of providing support to agencies interested in implementing research findings.

“Webinars make it possible for researchers to talk to a wide audience about what they are



Steven Andreadis, Reginald Gillum, and Elaine Ferrell (left to right) are part of TRB’s communications team, which provides planning and support for NCHRP webinars and other TRB programs.

doing, including people at state DOTs that they wouldn’t normally get to talk to,” Harrigan says.

Looking Ahead

Marflak credits her communications team with growing the webinar program to reach an estimated 35,000 viewers each year. TRB is continually improving the webinar program to enhance attendees’ experience. To facilitate on-demand learning, the TRB communications team makes archived recordings of the live webinars available. For some topics, the team has begun disseminating webinars recorded without a live audience. These webinars are free to the public and designed to be viewed in shorter increments, targeting viewers who may not be able to attend full-length live webinars.

TRB’s communications team also conducts surveys immediately following each session and incorporates attendee feedback into future sessions. Based on participant feedback, TRB plans to continue offering at least 100 live webinars per year. “TRB responds to what’s going on in the industry,” Marflak says. “If something needs to be put out there immediately, then we try hard to get it out.” Webinars have proven to be a particularly effective tool for making that happen.

Upcoming webinars are listed at webinar.mytrb.org, and archived webinar recordings are available at trb.org/ElectronicSessions/RecordedSessions.aspx.