



**ASSOCIATION FOR FEDERAL  
ENTERPRISE RISK MANAGEMENT**

**FOCUS GROUPS REPORT  
OCTOBER 1, 2019**

## Acknowledgements

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We extend our gratitude to the AFERM members who actively participated in the focus group sessions.

### Primary Contributors



Association for Federal  
Enterprise Risk Management

[www.AFERM.org](http://www.AFERM.org)



[www.kearneyco.com](http://www.kearneyco.com)

### Additional Contributors

Kim Orłowski  
Sukriti Gujral  
Gwen Muse-Evans  
Dayna Davitz  
John Goodwin  
Joshua Forbush

Mark Linn  
Frieda Cardwell  
Nathan Poma  
Christopher Page  
Kateryna Pyatybratova

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<https://cepl.cps.gwu.edu/>

## Overview

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The Association for Federal Enterprise Risk Management (AFERM) strives to be a professional organization dedicated to the advancement of Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) across the Federal space. The association serves its members by providing a forum for discussion of issues relevant to participants in the federal risk management profession, sponsoring appropriate educational programs, encouraging professional development, influencing governmental risk management policies and practices, and serving as an advocate for the profession. AFERM endeavors to advance the practice of ERM in the federal government through thought leadership, education, and collaboration in order to be recognized in the public sector as a credible authority and leader in promoting the effective application of ERM.

To fulfill its mission and objectives as a professional organization, AFERM maintains three goals, including:

- I. Education, Collaboration, and Thought Leadership** – Provide specific programs and opportunities to educate members and collaborate with stakeholders on the benefits, tools and leading practices of government ERM.
- II. Stakeholder** – Collaborate with organizations/stakeholders to build and leverage our collective experiences and strengths to establish and mature ERM in the public sector.
- III. Organizational Development** – Develop and grow the association by building an agile, highly effective organization to robustly execute its mission.

In support of these goals, AFERM offers a wide variety of resources and event offerings including ERM communications, annual AFERM summit, Risk Chat podcasts, newsletters, luncheons, educational workshops, and member exclusive trainings.

On August 9th and 16th, 2019, AFERM held three focus groups sessions at the George Washington University (GWU) Cloyd Heck Marvin Center. The focus group participants included 15 federal employees and eight contractors and other private industry professionals, totaling 23 participants. The focus groups provided AFERM members an opportunity to share their feedback and ideas directly on how the organization can improve and expand. The focus group discussion topics were divided into three sections and concentrated on key areas:

- I. Value provided by AFERM and member expectations
- II. Current satisfaction with AFERM offerings
- III. Future offerings

AFERM president and Chief Risk Officer (CRO) for the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Thomas Brandt, presided over each of the three focus group sessions, facilitating the discussions and ensuring each participant was allocated adequate time to provide input. AFERM provided facilitators to obtain feedback through a candid discussion format. As a result of the focus group sessions, several key themes were distilled from the discussions and common to all three groups of participants. The key themes from each section include:

- Strengths and Mission of AFERM
- Top Challenges as an ERM professional
- Popular AFERM resources and offerings
- New events and resources
- Fee increases
- LinkedIn established as the preferred social media platform for AFERM outreach

This report details each of the key themes in addition to the other responses provided by focus group participants. The sections on the following pages detail how the participating focus group members have responded to AFERM as an organization and the offerings and benefits it provides. In addition to live feedback obtained during the focus group sessions, **Appendix I** of this report details responses obtained to other questions and results from the Focus Group Questionnaire which respondents were asked to complete.

## Focus Topic I – Value Provided by AFERM and Member Expectations

The release of the updated Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-123, *Management's Responsibility for Enterprise Risk Management and Internal Control*, marked a shift in the expected role and purpose of ERM as an integral mechanism for managing risk across Federal enterprises. However, while the updated circular requires agencies to develop and maintain a risk profile for annual submission to OMB, ERM is still a developing concept within many organizations. Therefore, AFERM requested feedback on the strengths of the organization and challenges facing it to determine how the organization can develop and better serve its members.

### **Key Theme – Strength and Mission of AFERM**

In support of AFERM's mission and goals, the association continuously explores opportunities to expand and enhance its offerings and benefits. The discussions for the first section of the focus group requested input from member participants on the strengths and mission of AFERM to determine alignment with member expectations. The majority of participants across all three sessions noted that AFERM's purpose is increasing awareness of ERM within the Federal community, while fostering connections and a community of practice. The participants also went on to say that AFERM accomplishes this goal through many of the resources provided by the organization, such as AFERM sponsored presenters and facilitating member communication and exchange of best practices. Based on the responses provided by participants, AFERM's stated goal aligns with the perspectives of the focus group participants.

"I see AFERM as a one-stop shop, the hub to the spokes, for everyone trying to get more involved and learn."

Coinciding with the discussion of AFERM's mission, session participants were then solicited for feedback on the strengths of AFERM as an organization. The participants noted that AFERM excels in its ability to involve core groups of people across the industry, including Federal and Non-Federal members, to exchange information in a practical, visible way. Through this strength, AFERM has developed into a more mature organization powered by a growing body of knowledge, passion, and energy.

### **Key Theme – Top Challenges as an ERM Professional**

Following the discussion on the mission and strengths of AFERM, the session topic transitioned to the challenges facing ERM professionals. The consensus among participants of the three focus group sessions was that the primary challenges consist of limited ERM education and awareness across the Federal government.

Participants noted that they had encountered difficulty in communicating the concepts, requirements, and associated benefits of ERM, finding that their colleagues remain entrenched in a culture of silos and viewing ERM under a "check the box" mentality. Additionally, participants noted that due to the recent development of ERM in the federal space, some organizations possess a limited number of dedicated CROs, risk managers, and officers. For those organizations with dedicated staff, participants noted those individuals may struggle without the positioning to encompass the entire enterprise. In alignment with the strengths of AFERM, participants noted that AFERM helps address these challenges through fostering a community where members can share and develop practical solutions.

"My challenge is making ERM more of a team sport ..."

***Key Recommendation***

Based on the responses provided by the session participants, AFERM should continue to tailor resource and event offerings to address the top challenges identified in order to continue meeting its stated goal as a professional organization. Specifically, AFERM should develop methods and resources to assist members in communicating ERM concepts to their agencies. Such resources could be used by members to further promulgate ERM awareness, thereby assisting agencies in developing more robust ERM programs.

## Focus Topic II – Current Satisfaction with AFERM Offerings

To provide the best value to its members as a professional organization, AFERM offers a variety of offerings for the ERM professional, each designed to be accessible to its diverse membership. Existing offerings include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Luncheon and Networking Events
- Online Resource Library
- Annual AFERM Summit
- Newsletter
- Communities of Interest and Practice
- Ask the Experts Publication
- Risk Chat Podcasts
- Job Postings
- ERM News Feed

As AFERM matures and expands within the ERM community, the organization embraces opportunities to enhance its existing catalogue of resources to ensure there is an offering that meets the needs of each member.

### ***Key Theme – Popular AFERM Resources and Offerings***

During the second discussion topic, participants were asked to provide feedback on which resources from the above list they valued the most. While each of the offerings were mentioned to varying degrees, the majority of participants across the three focus groups noted the annual AFERM Summit was the primary offering from which they derived the most value. The annual summit consists of various presenters from across the Federal space (including non-federal service providers) discussing the current ERM environment and provides the opportunity for members to develop methods for applying ERM best practices at their organization. Second to the annual summit, the focus group participants also noted the Risk Chat podcasts were a valuable resource. The podcasts provide a candid environment for CROs and risk management professionals to discuss insights and perspectives. The risk chats specifically were praised for their easily accessible format.

Questionnaire responses noted 18 of 23 participants had attended the annual AFERM summit at one time during their membership.

### ***Key Theme – LinkedIn Established as the Preferred Social Media Platform for AFERM Outreach***

Following the discussion of the current AFERM resources and offerings, participants for each session were asked to provide the frequency of use for the social media platforms including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Based on the responses from the three focus group participants, LinkedIn was the most common choice for professional use. Other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were noted as being less professionally oriented, with respondents preferring to maintain a buffer between the personal and the professional. The AFERM LinkedIn page allows the association to provide event updates, articles, and other ERM news directly to followers in a format equivalent to other platforms tailored to personal use.

Questionnaire responses noted 16 of 23 participants had either “Occasionally” or “Regularly” consumed the Risk Chat podcasts.

### ***Key Recommendation***

The focus group participants across all three sessions indicated that the favored AFERM offerings included the annual summit followed by the Risk Chats. The annual summit is already well attended and lauded for its ability to resonate with members. AFERM should continue to expand the frequency of the Risk Chat podcasts to increase their consumption and increase visibility to members that may be unaware of the offering. Additionally, AFERM should leverage the preference for LinkedIn as a communication resource to enhance communication and networking between AFERM members.

## Focus Topic III – Future Offerings

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The final topic of the focus group sessions related to future events, offerings, and membership fee increases. To better serve its members and attract other individuals interested in ERM, AFERM wants to identify potential events to add to its current catalog of offerings and resources. However, as a part of this discussion AFERM recognizes that any additional events and resources may require a membership fee increase to compensate for the increase in costs.

### ***Key Theme – New Events and Resources***

Prior to discussing potential fee increases, the discussion started with a request to participants on what events they would like to see AFERM host in the future and the topics of said events. Across the three focus group sessions, the majority of participants noted they wanted more collaborative events with organizations such as the Association of Government Accountants (AGA), Information Systems Audit and Control Association (ISACA), or other professional or organizations to enhance the credibility and advocacy for ERM across the industry. In addition to more collaborative events, focus group participants also noted the desire for more workshops and networking opportunities.

Questionnaire responses noted 21 of 23 participants had either “Occasionally” or “Regularly” attended a AFERM luncheon, workshop, or networking event.

### ***Key Theme – Fee Increases***

Coinciding with inquiries of potential future offerings, the discussion shifted to the topic of membership fee increases occurring with an expansion of programming, and the level of comfort of the session participants. The majority of participants across the three focus sessions were open to paying a higher membership fee, noting that AFERM membership provided a significant level of value for the existing price, stating that AGA membership fees were notably higher. Participants fielded varying payment plan suggestions during this topic including membership fee structures based on tiers depending on the professional background of the member (e.g. Federal employee, private industry, vendors, recent graduates, etc.). While on the subject of fee structures, an idea was offered in one focus group for AFERM to consider offering lifetime memberships. However, participant responses were mixed, noting that paying the fee in that manner would be burdensome, given the government does not reimburse federal employees for membership. Additionally, the majority of session participants also noted they were comfortable with paying more for the annual AFERM summit, taking the opportunity to respond strongly on the value provided by the event.

Questionnaire responses noted 23 of 23 participants were “Very Likely” to renew their AFERM membership.

### ***Key Recommendations***

On the subjects of new events, resources, and potential fee increases, the focus groups provided several insights. The majority of focus group participants indicated the desire for more collaborative events with other professional organizations such as AGA and ISACA to enhance the credibility and advocacy for ERM across the industry. Therefore, AFERM should identify professional organizations for collaborative events that would provide the most value to members. Additionally, based on the responses regarding fee increases, AFERM should consider the development of fee tiers in order to attract new members and maintain accessibility to members within the public sector with limited funding for training and professional development purposes.

## Conclusion

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The three focus group sessions provided a variety of insights that will assist AFERM in expanding as a professional ERM focused organization. The challenges detailed by the participants will help AFERM in developing tailored solutions that support the ERM community as a whole. Generally, the participants were satisfied with the current offerings and resources provided by AFERM as a part of their membership, commenting favorably on the annual AFERM summit and the Risk Chat podcasts. The majority of participants also responded positively to the prospect of fee increases or a modified fee structure were it to include an expansion of programming. ERM is a complex concept that will require the community of collaboration that AFERM has begun to establish. The organization will continue to strive to fulfill its mission and objectives as a professional organization through thought leadership, with a focus on stakeholder and organizational development.

# Appendix I – Other Topics and Questionnaire Responses

The table below includes feedback consistent across the three focus-group sessions that did not constitute a key theme but provides valuable feedback on how AFERM communicates and interacts with its members.

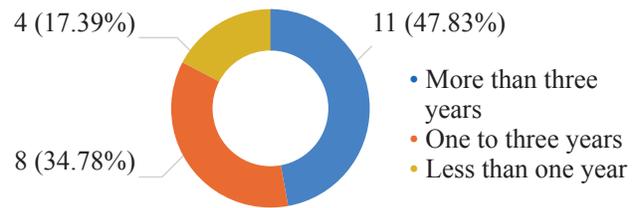
Section	Question	General Focus Group Response
1	What benefits do you seek belonging to a professional organization such as AFERM and how can AFERM help with the challenges just discussed?	Participants across all three focus groups noted that the primary benefits sought from AFERM was the ability to share experiences. Participants noted that AFERM has provided the ability to share success stories, case studies, and developed a community in which members can comfortably reach out to other members for input and guidance. Respondents also went on the say that being a part of AFERM as a professional organization adds visibility to ERM, allowing the organization to help elevate issues and challenges to obtain buy-in from across the industry.
2	How often do you open and read email messages and announcements received from AFERM?	The majority of focus group participants across all three focus group sessions noted they regularly opened and read AFERM communications and messages.
3	Do you find the volume of communications and messaging to be too much, just right, or not enough?	The majority of focus group participants across all three focus group sessions noted the frequency of communications and messages was overall, appropriate.
4	What ideas do you have for recruiting new members?	Participants across all three focus group sessions indicated that AFERM should explore more partnership opportunities with AGA or other professional organizations such as the Institute for Internal Auditors. Additionally, participants noted that AFERM should consider teaming with other communities that would derive value from ERM, such as the Cybersecurity community

The section on the following page provides the questionnaire responses submitted by participants as a part of focus group participation. These questions relate to subjects covered during the focus groups.

## Survey Questions and Responses

### 1. How long have you been a member of AFERM? Of the 23 responses received:

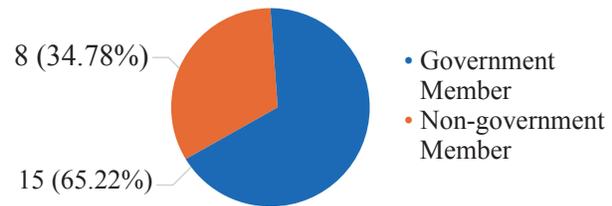
- 4 (17%) – Less than one year
- 8 (35%) – One to three years
- 11 (48%) – More than three years



### 2. Are you a government or non-government member?

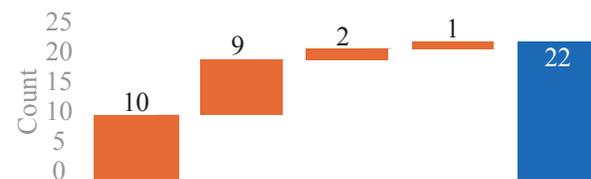
Of the 23 responses received:

- 15 (65%) – Government Member
- 8 (35%) – Non-Government Member



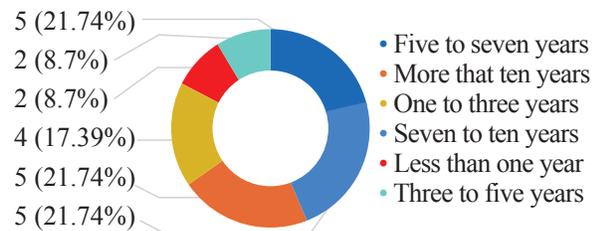
### 3. How did you first hear about AFERM? Of the 22 responses received:

- 10 (45%) – Co-Worker
- 9 (41%) – Professional Colleague
- 1 (5%) – Search Engine
- 2 (9%) – Professional Conference



### 4. How long have you worked in an ERM-related field? Of the 23 responses received<sup>1</sup>:

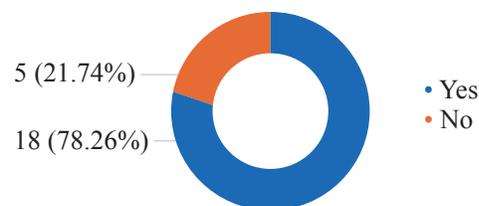
- 2 (9%) – Less than one year
- 5 (22%) – One to three years
- 2 (9%) – Three to five years
- 5 (22%) – Five to seven years
- 4 (17%) – Seven to ten years



### 5. Have you ever attended the annual AFERM Summit? Yes/No.

Of the 23 responses received:

- 18 (78%) – Yes
- 5 (22%) – No

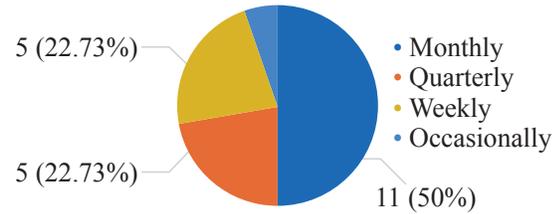


<sup>1</sup>Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

## Survey Questions and Responses (continued)

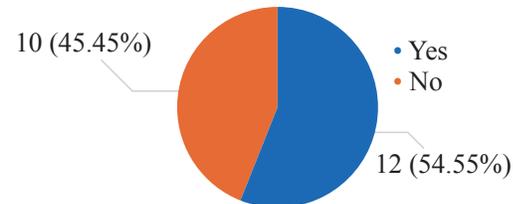
**6. How often do you visit the AFERM site for resources, training, podcasts, etc.? Of the 21 responses received:**

- 5 (24%) – Weekly
- 11 (52%) – Monthly
- 5 (24%) – Quarterly
- 0 (0%) – Not at all



**7. Have you ever volunteered to assist AFERM? Of the 22 responses received:**

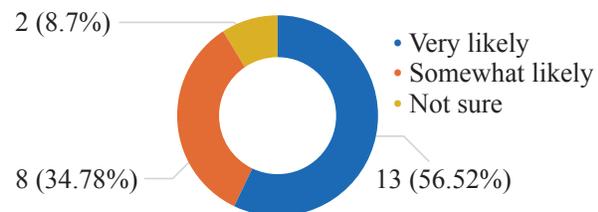
- 12 (55%) – Yes
- 10 (45%) – No



**8. How likely are you to volunteer in the future?**

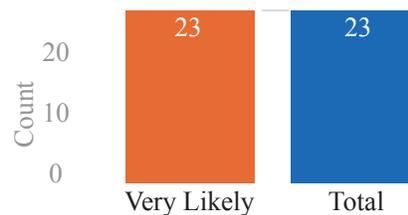
**Of the 23 responses received<sup>2</sup> :**

- 13 (57%) – Very Likely
- 8 (35%) – Somewhat Likely
- 0 (0%) – Not Likely
- 2 (9%) – Not Sure



**9. How likely are you to renew your membership? Of the 23 responses received:**

- 23 (100%) – Very Likely
- 0 (0%) – Somewhat Likely
- 0 (0%) – Not Likely
- 0 (0%) – Not Sure



**10. Did you know that AFERM is an all-volunteer organization, entirely dependent upon its members and sponsors to operate?**

**Of the 22 responses received:**

- 22 (100%) – Yes
- 0 (0%) – No

<sup>2</sup>Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

11. Here is a listing of events and resources offered by AFERM. Please indicate the extent to which you have participated and/or utilized each.

Event	Regularly	Occasionally	Not at All
Luncheons, Workshops, and Networking Events	11 (48%)	10 (43%)	2 (9%)
RiskChats (Podcasts on ERM related topics) <sup>3</sup>	7 (30%)	9 (39%)	7 (30%)
ERM Newsletter	11 (48%)	9 (39%)	3 (13%)
ERM “Ask the Expert”	5 (24%)	5 (24%)	11 (52%)
ERM Communities of Interest Meetings (Data Analytics, Cyber, Small Agencies) <sup>4</sup>	4 (18%)	8 (36%)	10 (45%)

12. If you’ve attended other AFERM events (other than the Summit) in the past year, please list them here:

- Spring 2019 luncheon
- Luncheons and networking events
- Spring workshop with AGA
- Podcasts

<sup>3</sup>Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

<sup>4</sup>Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

## Focus Group Questions and Representative Responses

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### *Value/Expectations of AFERM Questions*

*How would you describe the purpose and mission of AFERM?*

- To further the education of the Federal community surrounding ERM
- To leverage best practices from an ERM perspective, from which members can learn from big and small Federal agencies
- Facilitate a community of practice
- A forum to share perspectives and experiences
- Enhance capabilities in an emerging discipline

*What do you see as the strengths of AFERM?*

- The body of knowledge that AFERM has collected since its inception
- Brings credibility and visibility to ERM
- Bringing people together from across the industry, both public and private sector
- AFERM leaders are very passionate and energized about the work they perform

*What are the top challenges you currently face as an ERM professional?*

- To make ERM a priority with operationally focused colleagues, to make it more of a team-sport, between the operators, planners, and evaluators
- To get buy-in from across the organization, some people see it as merely a task to accomplish for the day
- From the internal control perspective, the struggle relates to communicating that not every control is significant, that the need to prioritize and streamline exists, to prevent the “check the box” mentality and prevent false compliance
- The number of dedicated CROs, risk staff, and contract dollars is limited and highly uneven
- Agencies with ERM programs may not be positioned to get buy-in from the entire entity, to execute appropriately
- The notion that ERM is only the responsibility of the CRO, and moving away from the “check the box compliance exercise”, to create a cultural shift
- Communicating the benefits of ERM to the entire organization
- Siloed mindset, in which individuals take ownership of their component, and fail to see an entity level perspective
- Methods of measuring success in ERM implementation and execution

*What benefits do you seek belonging to a professional organization such as AFERM and how can AFERM help with the challenges just discussed?*

- Lessons learned, success stories, and case studies are some of the biggest benefits, to hear different perspectives and learn how to apply concepts at other agencies
- Training opportunities and networking

*How well does AFERM currently meet those needs?*

- Being part of a professional organization like AFERM adds credibility to ERM
- Some of the events attended have included success stories and how to respond to challenges

## *Current Satisfaction with AFERM Offerings Questions*

*What current resources/offerings from AFERM do you value most? Which do you value the least?*

- Lunch meetings/networking events
- Online resource library
- Annual Summit
- Newsletter
- Communities of Interest/Practice
- Ask the Experts
- Risk Chats (podcasts)
- Jobs
- ERM Newsfeed

*Responses:*

- The Risk Chats, it provides a way to learn while driving
- The lunches and the Summit provide the most value
- The Risk Chats are extremely valuable and the luncheons as well
- The Summit and the Risk Chats are the preferred offerings
- Everything is valuable to a degree, with the top resources being the summit and the newsletters
- Attended the Summit for several years
- The Risk Chats are valuable, they provide a variety of topics and perspectives

*How many of you are familiar with the AFERM website?*

- Participants either raised hands or provided a “Yes” or “No” affirmation, with the majority noting familiarity with the AFERM website.

*What recommendations do you have for improving the site?*

- Calendar of events or a bulletin board
- Payment interface could use improvement

*Have you visited AFERM social media sites including Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter?*

- From a professional stand-point, LinkedIn
- The only social media used would be LinkedIn
- LinkedIn used exclusively

*How can AFERM better leverage social media?*

- Creation of sub-groups to share thought pieces

*How often do you open and read email messages and announcements received from AFERM?*

- Open emails regularly
- Opened every-time an AFERM email is received

*Do you find the volume of communications and message to be too much, just right, or not enough?*

- Frequency of communications are acceptable

***Future Offerings Questions***

What type of events would you like to see us host in the future? What topics would you like to see covered?

- Informal gatherings and meetups
- Centralized, region-specific AFERM groups (e.g. AFERM Old-Town, outside of D.C.)
- Bringing in CROs from non-Federal industries
- and identifying areas of intersect
- Collaborative events with AGA or ISACA
- Expansion of Webinars
- Workshops

*What additional or new resources are you interested in?*

- Additional Online tools
- Whitepapers
- Webinars
- Mentoring
- Certification
- AFERM events outside of the DC area
- Partnerships with universities to explore funded ERM-related research
- AFERM advocacy of ERM community issues with OIG, OMB, Congress, etc.

***Respondents noted interest in:***

- AFERM Advocacy
- University partnerships
- Mentoring programs
- ERM-related research

If AFERM paired a fee increase with an expansion of programming, would you be willing to continue your membership at an increased cost? How much of an increase would be viewed as reasonable? \*

Employee Type	1 Year	3 Year	5 Year
Government Employees	\$40	\$95	\$145
Non-Government Employees	\$85	\$200	\$310

\*If prompt is needed – compare to AGA (Association of Government Accountants)  
 Current fees: Govt employee \$100/year; Private Sector \$160/year. In addition, AGA has reduced rates for young professional and retirees.

- Reasonable to ask for more given the demand for services
- Consider tier-based fee structure, dependent on entity size for example, individuals junior in their career, or dependent on number of events the member wishes to attend
- Consider fee rate increase depending on member type (e.g. vendors)

*What ideas do you have for recruiting new members?*

- Incentive for current members such as reduction in membership fee for referrals
- New/additional benefits and expansion of existing offerings
- Methods to attract younger members, such as recent graduates (e.g. reduced fees)

*Do you have any further suggestions or comments regarding AFERM that have not been previously discussed?*

- Creation of urgency and enthusiasm for ERM, noting involvement and AFERM event attendance was higher when ERM-related changes were first imposed by OMB
- Desire for publications that focus specifically on ERM implementation (e.g. do's and do not's)
- Prep course before or directly after the annual summit for the RIMS-CRMP certification
- Development of resources for individuals completely new to ERM
- Creation of a linking library for members to share articles privately