



Attending Conferences

Conferences are what you make of them. If you're not sure why you're going, or what you want to get out of the experience, you're unlikely to get it.

Events such as conferences can be overwhelming. You want to be prepared, go in with a plan, and have a good time.

Next time you attend a conference, remember:

Conversations are more valuable than the sessions - The surprising thing about most conferences is that the most interesting, informative and educational moments are not spent in the sessions themselves: it's in all of the other interactions with peers from other attendees.

Vary your activities - Submit a proposal, attend a workshop or panel discussion, wander through the poster sessions, and check out the local sights!

Have a plan - A day before the heart of the conference begins, sit down with the proceedings and the small guidebook or agenda that they often provide you with. (Sometimes this is available on the website, sometimes you pick it up at the conference when you register). Go through the guidebook with a pen, and mark anything that looks interesting. Then during the actual conference, go to the first session you've marked. Have a plan to bail after 15 minutes if you're bored. Odds are it's not going to get better. Go to the next session in that time slot that interested you.

Socialize after hours - Some conferences have scheduled social events or dinners one of the nights of the conference. If you can manage it, you want to try to have met enough people in the workshops and other sessions in the previous day so that you can wander around at the social, and say hi to people. Structured receptions aside, everyone at a conference eats dinner, whether there is something set up through the conference or not. If you can find other folks and take them to dinner, you'll find it's a great way to build some relationships.

Take advantage of the trip - Avoid chain restaurants and stores. Stay at the conference hotel in order to socialize informally. Take a road trip or extend the trip and enjoy the location for a few extra days.

Don't be attached to your co-workers - If you have 2 or 3 friends that you're traveling with, you might find it easy to fall into a pattern where you spend most of your time with them. If it's assumed you'll all eat dinner together every night, odds are your not going to meet many new people, or experience other kinds of social situations.

Don't use the conference bag, or lug around all the stuff they give you - Carrying the conference bag marks you as a tourist. Also, it's difficult to know your bag when all attendees have the same one. Bring a small bag so that you can carry essentials throughout the day.

Don't wear your badge outside the conference.

Sit near the back if your not planning on staying - Occasionally conference sessions can be disappointing. If you may leave early, sit near the back.

Ask lots of questions - Talk to speakers, paper authors, booth people, the folks sitting next to you, whoever. Ask for recommendations for books, websites or other conferences.

Get some exercise every day - Our mind functions better if your body has been active too. Most hotels have nice weight rooms or pools. Take the time to get some exercise at least every other day.

Relax and have a good time!