

Getting the Most Out of Academic Conference Attendance: Five Key Strategies

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Conferences are a vital part of academic life. Our conferences range from small local meetings of 30 people to several hundred people or more at major international events. Conferences provide a means for people to present their work, learn from and about others, and interact informally (McCarthy, McDonald, Soroczak, Nguyen, & Rashid, 2004). Conferences are also social spaces—in which all manner of disciplinary conventions, gender norms, and contested dialogues are enacted (Biggs, Hawley, & Biernat, 2017). Getting the most out of your own conference participation entails navigating many such issues but can bring considerable personal satisfaction and career rewards. Yet, making the most of your conference is not going to happen by magic. From our collective experiences, overseeing 40 major events for the *International Institute for Qualitative Methodology* (IIQM) and talking to hundreds of delegates across the world from all career stages and disciplines—what have we learned about making the most of conference attendance?

Prepare Ahead Well

Different people interpret the same event differently: this happens to witnesses to crime scenes, museum visitors (Falk, 2006), and even users of Facebook (Robinson, Callahan, Boyle, Rivera, & Cho, 2017). Reflecting this Rashomon effect, the tendency for discrete segmented groups to attend conferences for different reasons is an important consideration for conference organizers and delegates. Thinking deliberately before your conference to pinpoint your personal rationale, motivations, and needs allows you to get the most out of the conference experience. Being mindfully aware of your success indicators for attendance allows you to plan your time and energy more deliberately and strategically.

Plan Your Priorities for Participation

Conferences demand you use time and energy effectively. IIQM conference days can start at 7 a.m. with meetings with

colleagues over breakfast before sessions start and usually finish with social events that go very late—or even very early! Yet, your success at meeting your conference priorities is likely to come from a smaller number of activities: meeting particular people or attending certain sessions. So avoid feeling compelled to attend everything or too much—this is counterproductive—and you risk ending up spread too thin or exhausted. Instead, put your most important sessions in your schedule first and work back from these to fill your day as much as you prefer. Asking to meet a person you don't know in advance over e-mail or social media is not unusual, and preintroducing yourself is a great way to break the ice and establish a personal connection before you meet face to face.

Different people have different levels of endurance, preferences, and needs for their conference time. Knowing your preferred level of intensity is important and ensures that you get sufficient time to unwind and socialize. While staying in the designated conference hotel may be a little more expensive, having a private rest space only a short walk away from the conference floor allows you to maximize the use of your time and provides accessible opportunity for a quiet and restful private space whenever you need it.

Getting involved in the conference itself can add an extra and rewarding dimension to your participation. It provides opportunities to play a role in ensuring the conference goes well—whether you are a volunteer, chair, or presenter—and gives the opportunity for others to benefit from your

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contributions as well as a chance for you to meet other conference delegates.

Strike Up That Conversation

Conferences seem to have a life of their own and many of us feel uncomfortable at such a big event. The last thing we often want to do is go to talk to people we don't know. Yet, we have been consistently encouraged by how passionate, friendly, and open delegates at conferences are once you break the ice. If you are going to a conference for the first time or know few people there, recognize that feeling uncomfortable is normal: most of us (particularly introverts), want to run a mile when faced with the prospect of moving outside of our normal group. Yet, you only need to be courageous for a few seconds to strike up a new conversation with a new person—and it's as or more important to listen more than talk. Attend some of the peripheral conference social events to meet other delegates in less formal relaxed settings. Time and time again at our conferences, we have seen such spontaneous conversations lead to affirming shared understanding, new relationships, and even new major collaborations. Indeed, one of the most important benefits of conference attendance is meeting new people—and the conference space is an important part of continuing to grow and develop ongoing relationships as well.

Utilize Technology: Social Media and the Conference App

Social media is now an integral part of the experience of academic conferences. While some academics hold back from social media at conferences due to concerns over privacy and lack of integration with the program, most recognize the added value that social media, especially Twitter, brings to academic conferences (Levy et al., 2016). Social media postings during presentations allow for parallel conversations about sessions, content to be shared with other delegates and those unable to attend, and new relationships to be started in both the online and physical conference space. Usually themed around the dedicated conference #hashtag, contributing to this social media conversation allows you to connect to other scholars but also be aware of others views' and interpretations of conference content even when you don't attend sessions physically. While you don't have to produce your own posts, many are surprised by how much fun engaging and sharing online content is at conferences—it adds a new and different dimension to the conference experience for very little additional effort.

As well as social media, conference organizers increasingly provide online tools to improve the conference experience. For example, many conferences now use a dedicated app to allow delegates to see and search the full program, integrate selected sessions with calendars, and even contact other delegates in

real time. Alongside social media platforms, these tools are a powerful means to help be best informed and immersed in the conference, free from the distraction of e-mail. These better enable you to engage with sessions that may pop up, or are suggested by others, that you may not have otherwise discovered.

Deliver on the Carry Forward

After the "high" of a busy conference day, it's easy to fail to capitalize on that conference magic—your new enthusiasm, connections, and insights. Take a few minutes during a break, lunch, or at the end of the day to write down key points you want to remember for further action or consideration for further action or consideration. This could be a big idea that connects to your work or the greater direction of your field, something new you have learned or a concept you need more time to think on.

At the end of the conference, while a collection of new business cards will weigh down your pocket, without action, these alone won't make your prospects soar. At the end of each day and each conference, get into the practice of reviewing what your action points are and start working on them. Avoid waiting too long to follow-up with new contacts via e-mail or social media to better ensure you are still fresh in their minds. If you enjoyed your conference, share your positive experiences and learning with colleagues in your own networks or work-places—this helps ensure that vibrant conferences have reach even beyond those present.

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