

Attending Professional Conferences

Professional associations hold regional, national, or international conferences on a regular basis. Conferences provide opportunities for professionals to present their work, learn more about trends and hot topics in the field, network with others of the same profession, and – at some conferences – interview for open positions. If you’ve never attended a conference, you may feel a bit intimidated by the prospect of attending one. But they can be great learning experiences and once there, it is likely you will start to feel more comfortable. Use the following tips to help you get the most out of your conference attendance.

First, **decide which conference you want to attend**. If you belong to a professional association, you may want to attend that group’s conference. Most associations post conference programs to their websites well ahead of time, so you can review the programs to ensure that the topics and presenters are of interest to you. Most conferences offer discounts to students, new professionals, and early registrants. You may be able to qualify for reduced registration fees by volunteering to serve on the conference planning committee. You can also ask your school or employer if there are professional development funds available to cover or supplement the cost of conference attendance.

You might want to **consider participating in a conference**. If you plan ahead, you can submit an abstract to make a presentation or present a poster. You can work with colleagues to organize a roundtable or panel discussion. You can also contact the event coordinator and volunteer to staff the registration table or to participate in the conference in some other way.

Before you arrive at the conference you should **set some goals**. What do you want to learn? Who do you want to meet? Thinking about what you want to accomplish at the conference ahead of time will help you to have a much richer experience.

You should also review the conference program ahead of time to **determine which sessions and events you want to attend**. It is likely that you will be interested in more than one presentation per session. It’s a good idea to mark your program with some sort of priority system; if your first choice presentation is full or does not live up to your expectations, you can continue on to your second choice. Use presenter bios and presentation topics to determine which sessions to attend.

Bring copies of your resume and lots of business cards. Networking and meeting new people is one of the primary purposes of attending a professional conference. **Practice an “about me” statement** so that you can powerfully introduce yourself. If you don’t already have business cards, have some printed at a copy shop. Although it’s generally not appropriate to pass out your resume at a conference, it is a good idea to bring a few hard copies or an electronic version with you just in case someone asks for your resume. Some conferences have recruiting/interview sessions; in this case, it is certainly appropriate to bring and pass out copies of your resume and cover letters.

Invest time talking to people. Arrive early to presentations to chat with the presenter or other session attendees. At meals, sit with people that you don’t already know and attend mixers and networking events hosted by conference organizers or sub-groups. Try not to stress out about attending every single

presentation session. If you get caught up in a conversation with a new contact or receive an invitation to try a local restaurant, take the opportunity to make new connections. Although the information you learn in conference presentations is useful, the contacts that you make at a conference can often be more fruitful than the conference content. You can also make new contacts by checking the program for alumni from your educational institutions, asking a senior colleague to introduce you to people with areas of interest similar to yours, and spending time in the conference poster or exhibition hall.

While you attend conference sessions, **take notes**. At the end of each day or of the entire conference, **write a summary of your experience**. This can help you condense what you learned, remember ideas to put into practice, remind you of people to follow up with, etc. A summary of your experience may also be useful in sharing what you gained from the conference with your colleagues and justifying your attendance at future conferences.

Follow up with people that you meet at the conference. Make connections on LinkedIn, send an email with an article relevant to a conversation, and collaborate on projects or future conference presentations. Your conference experience can be of enduring usefulness if you develop professional relationships with the contacts that you make.