



Conference works: Getting the most out of conferences

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Conferences provide opportunities to meet and network with other researchers in your field, to share and hear the results of the latest research and encourage the formation of new working relationships and ideas. In this fact sheet, we outline ways you can enhance the experience of attending conferences. These suggestions have been collected from conference evaluations, discussions with delegates at a number of conferences, and personal experiences.

“Anything in a journal is last week’s news and anything presented at a conference is yesterday’s news, but anything you hear in a conference bar might just be tomorrow’s news”.

Dingwall (2003, p127)

Before the conference

- Selecting a conference to attend is often closely linked to abstract submission. Many organisations will only sponsor their staff if they have had an abstract accepted.
- Submitting abstracts and presenting will enhance your CV and help raise your profile.
- If you are struggling to find money to attend a conference significant reductions are often available with early bird registration. You can also apply for support through your organisation or contact the conference convenors.
- Visit the conference website in advance. The program is often accessible from the website enabling delegates to start planning which sessions to attend.
- Subscribe to the conference email alerts if this is available and follow the event through social media (Twitter and Facebook) to see updates as they happen.
- Wherever possible, plan your travel to avoid leaving the conference early. Convenors often plan the program so the last session is one not to be missed.
- If you are presenting a paper or a poster, read and follow any instructions provided. Ensure your presentation is well organised. Practice in front of colleagues. Make the presentation engaging and challenging, and allow sufficient time for questions.
- Posters should be attractive and easy to read. (see Resources)
- Start connecting with speakers before the conference through social media. Visit the speaker’s website and find their professional social media pages on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. It can be useful to research who you might like to meet at the conference.

During the conference

- Where possible, register early. This will give you more time to decide which sessions to attend, find out where they will be held, and to read the satchel inserts.
- If conference abstracts are provided, read them before attending the session so you can start to think of questions.
- Make your questions short but thought provoking to stimulate discussion.
- Consider the conference’s key messages, and if there is anything you have heard that has implications for you and/or your organisation, write it down. This will help with your reflections, and any reports you may be expected to write or present about the conference once you return to work.
- Engage with fellow delegates through social media. Many conferences will now have a Twitter #hashtag (#2014phconf) to encourage interaction.

Look after yourself

- Plan some exercise during the conference such as an early morning/evening walk or swim, or a lunchtime walk with other delegates as sitting all day can get quite uncomfortable and is conducive to sleep.
- Dress comfortably and in layers. Some rooms may get hot and stuffy while others are cold so be prepared for both.
- Take a bottle of water to all sessions and drink it, it will keep you hydrated and awake.
- Wear your name badge and check that your name can be seen.

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Networking

- Where possible, plan who you would like to meet. Identify speakers when they present as it will make them easy to locate later in the conference. Most conferences provide a list of delegates, which can be a useful networking tool both during and after the conference.
- If you don't know many people at the conference, introduce yourself to someone new. You might like to ask:
 - What is your area of research?
 - How did you get into this field?
 - Can you tell me more about what you are presenting here?

Most people love talking about themselves and their work and appreciate others showing an interest.

- Attend interactive sessions where they are available. Workshops are often held before the main conference and can be a great way to not only develop or learn new skills, but also to start networking with people who you will see throughout the conference. Other networking sessions include breakfast and lunchtime meetings, welcome receptions, cocktail parties, or conference dinners. These activities can be most enjoyable as well as productive.

Posters and presentations

- Posters are an integral component of any conference and are growing in both numbers and quality.
- If you are presenting a poster, make sure you stand next to your poster when required.
- As a delegate, make a point of viewing the posters when authors are present so that you can ask questions about their work. Distil every presentation down to one key point to take away. This will make your notes much more useful after the conference.
- If you can't view all the posters, collect handouts and read them later. They should contain contact details of the authors.
- If presenting a paper, arrive early, check any audiovisuals you will be using. Please keep to time – this is the most common complaint in conference evaluations. At best this reduces time for questions, at worst this encroaches on the time allocated for the remaining session speakers.
- If you are chairing a session, arrive early, introduce yourself to the session speakers and check how they would like to be introduced. Make sure speakers know when their time is nearly up so they can finish on time. Be prepared to ask questions and pull the discussion together.
- If you have any concerns about the conference, talk to the conference organisers. They are the people most likely to be able to do something about your concerns.
- Take the conversation beyond the conference by sharing your poster or presentation on social media and encouraging questions and comments from peers.

After the conference

- Write down your impressions of the conference as soon as possible and make a list of things you plan to do that have arisen from the event. In fact, you could be doing this during the conference. Then start working on the list.
- Can you or your organisation implement anything you have heard during the conference? Have you developed any relationships that need nurturing?
- Follow up on any contacts you have made even if only to check that their email addresses are correct. Stay in touch with key contacts and continue networking after the conference through email and social media.
- If you have promised to send information, do so as soon as possible and then follow up to see if it has arrived.
- Complete the conference evaluation, state not only what you liked but why you liked it as well. Include ideas and suggestions for what could be improved. Your comments will contribute to making the next conference even better.

Resources

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