

Building A Business Case To Attend A Conference

Are you and your organisation “too busy to stop for gas?”

A big part of what can make a conference effective is its ability to give you new perspectives and ideas. Techniques that extend your development progress.



Stop for gas – participate in conferences and training - fuel your own or your organisations progress.

Here are some tips and perspectives on conferences. How to make them more valuable and engaging experiences. How you might justify going in the first place. How you and your organisation can get more by attending them.

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.

Firstly, like all training and education, conferences demand that participants take more responsibility for getting value from the event. They are not, and should never be considered, “a few days away from the office”.

How to justify going to conferences

These days it's harder for folks to justify attending conferences. Here are a few suggestions that might help towards making the case to go.

- You are an asset to your company. All assets require maintenance and enhancements. If instead of being a person, you were a piece of machinery, part of the corporate budget would go towards maintaining and upgrading you. Well, despite being human, you are an asset to the company. They should be investing the same percentage of budget towards maintaining and upgrading your skills as they do for the rest of the corporate assets.
- Offer to share with others what you learned when you return. You can pitch your trip to a conference as a way to bring back skills and knowledge to the rest of the organisation. If you have any experience in training or teaching, you can use this as your justification and even if you don't it can

still work as part of your professional development.

- Trip report. Arguably one form of sharing with others, the trip report is a write up of the sessions you attended, written for other folks in your group. The best trip reports make it easy for folks to dig up the right reference, or trigger people to come ask you questions. There's rarely much value in 10 page trip report documents: no one reads them. Instead, a 2 or 3 page summary, with URLs and pointers to stuff for specific questions gets much more mileage.
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- Connect the value of the conference to business goals. If developing better business systems or project controls are company, department or group goals, you can claim that sending folks to conferences on those subjects will help pull in more expertise and knowledge towards helping the business. This argument puts less of the focus on your professional goals, and more on the organisation.
- Professional development. If you have career discussions with you manager, tie your career goals and future development to specific kinds of training or growth opportunities that you need. Often these are found and developed at conferences.

Getting more from going to conferences

Ask lots of questions

Learning is a contact sport. If you don't make your experiences engaging for yourself, you are guaranteed to be bored. Talk to speakers, the organisers, booth people, the folks sitting next to you, whoever. Ask for recommendations for books, websites or other conferences and training. If you don't become an active participant in your own learning, don't be surprised if not much of what you

experience is relevant to you.

Conversations are as valuable, sometimes more valuable than the sessions

One of the surprising things about most conferences is that the most interesting, informative and educational moments may not be in the sessions themselves: it's in all of the other interactions with peers from other companies and organisations.

Sometimes some of the slides from conference session can be obtained elsewhere. This is not true for all of the unique, personal, and insightful conversations you might have with other people.



A special thing about Software Education conferences is that because they are much smaller than northern hemisphere conferences, you can easily have one-on-one conversations with keynote speakers!

This means that you need to invest time in connecting with other people and speakers. It's like going to a party where you don't know anyone except the host: You have to have some strategy or plan for ensuring that you do not spend the entire time standing alone in the corner, holding a beer, hoping someone will talk to you. There should be workshops and ideas exchanges (or BOFs - bird of a feather sessions), where smaller groups meet for an hour or so, and talk about a specific subject of interest.

If the conference provides the opportunity to get into conversation with the speakers outside their sessions – coffee breaks, lunch, ideas exchanges – you can find that you'll develop even more insight than just at their session into any issues and solution you might be seeking.

The benefits and drawbacks of going with coworkers

It's common to attend a conference with co-workers. This can be great. You're likely to bond more, and spend time together in a way that doesn't happen at work. However, if you have 2 or 3 friends that you're at the conference with, you might find it easy to fall into a pattern where you spend most of your time with them. Odds are you're not going to meet many new people, experience other

kinds of social situations or discover many more insights.

You shouldn't ignore your coworkers but think about how you are using your time. Consider splitting up and re-grouping a bit later to discuss what you've discovered and how it may benefit you and your organisation.

Relax and have a good time



This is not to say that business trips and conferences should be converted into vacations. Instead, everyone should be thinking about what the real opportunities to learn are, and that they tend not to happen if you're fixated on cramming in as much knowledge or sessions in as short a time as possible.

Instructional design and educational psychology principles support this. The first rule of training you learn is that most people don't learn very much when they are under stress.

Many folks take conferences way too seriously. Often you find that you learn better if you're having fun and enjoying the people you're with. If you are relaxed and enjoying your time away from the office, you're more open to new ideas and approaches for what to do when you get back. This is probably the primary reason your employer is sending you to learn.

And as much as we like to think we're critical to our teams and companies, they can live without us for a few days.

Plan your time before the conference so that while you're away, you can stay away. If you have people that work for you, set them up to cover for expected situations that might arise. Give them your mobile number, and let them call you if they need you. Otherwise, you don't need to check in or check your email every hour. Really, you don't. You think you do, but you don't. If you find it hard, I bet it's email addiction, more so than a real logical reason to see what's going on without you.

Come up with a plan

Before the conference begins, sit down with the programme and mark up the sessions that should deliver the most value to you and your organisation. If two or more occur at the same time, flag the one you want to go to first.

With any time that's left in the day you could use it to:

- Review the sessions you have been at and developing an implementation plan for any ideas you'd want to try back at the office.
- Meet with a customer that you might not usually get to discuss business with.



- Visit sponsor booths (if they have them) – there is a good chance you'll have them pretty much to yourself, which means you'll be able to mine a lot more information and really get to play with that demo.

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- Check out the book store or other associated back-of-room materials that could lead to further learning.
- Attend those remaining sessions with an even more open mind. Sometimes insight and ideas come from seemingly unrelated sources.

Part of what can make a conference effective is its ability to give you new perspectives and ideas. Stop for gas and fuel your own and your organisations progress.