

Attending a technical conference is about far more than just showing up. It's about having a high-quality experience that can be directly translated into meaningful knowledge and information of benefit to your employer.

The challenge of conferences is that they often offer more intangible than tangible benefits, which presents a daunting task in demonstrating real-world value. This situation naturally leads to the question, "Is it worth companies' while to send personnel to technical conferences?"

Let's preface this discussion by first saying, yes: companies should absolutely send personnel to technical conferences and training programs. It is very important to get staff out of the office, meeting other people and seeing what else is going on in the world.

Many martial arts schools champion the philosophy that it is beneficial to train under other black belts once you've begun to master the art. Similarly, in technology you cannot afford to live in a vacuum. The world changes rapidly: to keep up, you must see new things, meet new people, confront new ideas, and learn new techniques. This exposure will help you—as an employee and team member—to tackle problems in new and innovative ways, develop out-of-the-box concepts, and avoid unproductive ruts.

There are four keys to having a good conference in this sense. By pursuing these keys, you can help ensure a productive conference experience, while demonstrating value to your employer. And this will, in turn, help ensure you are allowed to attend other conferences in the future.

First, you need a conference plan that includes learning objectives. Second, you must get out and talk with vendors on the expo floor. Third, you must get out and be sociable with your colleagues. Fourth, to smooth the path to future conferences, you must be prepared to present a positive report on your experiences once you're back in the office.

How to Get More out of Technical Conferences

A REALITY-BASED GUIDE



GO WITH A PLAN

Learning opportunities are valuable only to the extent of the effort you put into them. Entering a conference with a modicum of curiosity—at least in specific topical areas related to the conference—will greatly increase the value of your experience. Find out ahead of time what is being offered and develop an your own conference action plan to reflect the conference value proposition to the company. Make sure that the plan looks at what is important to your job (and professional growth), even beyond your basic interests. Set learning objectives that help you home in on knowledge or information that directly applies.



TALK TO VENDORS

Although you might cringe at the prospect of chatting with vendors on the expo floor, booth staff can be a unique and valuable information resource. Yes, they might try to scan your badge or get your business card, invoking visions of zealous and obtrusive sales calls. Don't panic! Talking to vendors can reveal not only what they have to offer, but also—and more importantly—what's coming down the pipe. Vendors often invest millions of dollars into research, so you might as well make use of their work. Fork over your contact information only when you're sure that a follow-up conversation will be worth your time.



BE SOCIABLE

Someone knows something you don't. Hopefully they're friendly! A great way to find out is to go hang out with them. You can meet some amazing people and even learn a few things along the way. Conferences are, by design, packed with displaced strangers: everyone is in the same boat. Even if you're a natural introvert, this scenario fosters non-threatening, low-commitment opportunities to meet new people and swap stories. You'll quickly find you're not the only person fighting the good fight. You might even discover a sense of camaraderie amongst your displaced peers that can't be found in your normal work environment.



REPORT POSITIVELY

Before you go home, start developing a story line about how the conference was good, useful, and educational. Your managers and co-workers will want to hear that your time and capital investment was worthwhile. Refer to your learning objectives for talking points about how your conference experience supports the company's needs. Use notes from your vendor chats to show the potential of technology solutions to address outstanding challenges. Assuming you want to go to future conferences, be prepared to put a positive spin on your past experience. This does not mean you should lie to management. Just illustrate the value of your company's investment.

WRITTEN BY BENJAMIN TOMHAVE, MS, CISSP

[EXTRA]

EXPO STAFF THREE PURPOSES, THREE APPROACHES



THE FLACK

A good primary source for solution overviews, relevance, and market insight. Consider what s/he's saying and omitting. Control the conversation. Share contact and other info only if you're comfortable.



THE TECHIE

Tap for deep knowledge about solution architecture, functionality, compatibility. Might occasionally reveal something the sales staff wouldn't like. A preferred resource for candid demos, but mind your time.



THE MAGNET

Vendors often employ special staff to draw people in. These staff can also serve as gatekeepers and gophers. Grab literature and tchotchkes, then move on. Leave contact info for a qualified follow-up.