SURVIVINGCONFERENCES

Lawrie Phipps



Surviving Conferences

Surviving Conferences: Tips and tricks for conference goers

Lawrie Phipps and the SEDA JISCMail Discussion List

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If you enjoy some of the tips in this ebook and want to contribute – post them on twitter at me @Lawrie

Forward

The idea for this booklet stemmed from conversations with various colleagues who passed on tips and tricks when attending lots of conferences, and who often felt exhausted at the end of busy conferences. After posting on the SEDA mailing list if anyone had tips I decided to record them on a blog, and after that was published I then had to rewrite with all the suggestions from the comments.

I revisited the blog recently when I got an email from a colleague who came up to me at a conference and opened with "I've posted a couple of suggestions in the comments to the conference tips blog". I hadn't been and checked it for about 18 months and to my surprise it had received a lot more comments and a lot of traffic. It was at that point I decided that it needed a clean-up and an edit which is what I've done with this e-book.

If you've sent me a contribution and I've missed you from the list of contributors then I apologise and will rectify it in an update, if you haven't contributed and feel you would like to then please drop me an email, especially if you have a conference story to share.

Lawrie Phipps, 8 Sept 2012

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1. Pre conference preparation

Most people consider that pre-conference preparation occurs when you're giving a paper or workshop. But, whether you are presenting at the conference or not there are still plenty of things that you can do to prepare yourself for participating and ensuring that you get the most out of an event.

If you have registered for a conference, and paid in advance then it is unlikely that you will cancel unless in extreme circumstances. Early bird rates are common practice and can save considerable amounts and if you know where you will be travelling from then advance flights or train tickets can also be much cheaper.

Remember why you are going to the conference, don't waste the fees by turning up and spending all your time answering emails – put the out of office on and get your money's worth.

Most conferences as for your dietary requirements but if they don't, make sure you tell them well in advance and not on the day. My experience is that vegetarian or vegan food is not a problem as long as you have let them know before you arrive, but other cultural dietary requirements are not always obvious to conference organisers — if you don't tell them they won't know.

If you know what sessions you will be attending take the time to read around the subject, this especially worth doing with the keynote addresses.

Read the pre-information, conference materials / handbook in order to make informed choices of parallel sessions.

If you are attending an overseas conference consider shipping any heavy proceedings / conference material back to you institution (an average set of conference proceedings and trawl around an exhibition

can lead to several kilos of extra baggage). This can often be pre arranged with good couriers.

Don't just go to the sessions with titles that sound interesting, see what the conference information says about structure of sessions (for example, is it a workshop or a series of short papers?).

Most conference information will contain delegate lists, don't just scan them for people you may know, although this is an important activity, scan them for people you may like to discuss something with (perhaps by looking and seeing if they are presenting on something).

It is important to feel settled and 'at home' at a conference in order to get the most out of it — making some acquaintances is helpful especially if the conference is new to you. If possible arrive early, move into your room and scout out the rooms where the conference is based. It reduces the chances of getting flustered and lost later on!

If you have an especially busy diary block out a day after the conference, this will ensure that you have time to reflect and follow-up on any actions from the conference. It also means you won't rush off to get to 'that meeting', which will only leave you feeling stressed and unreflective.

If you are unsure it is wise to check there will be a hard copy of the conference sessions/abstracts either in advance and/or on arrival. I went to a conference in Europe a few years ago and its aim was to be paperless I think. Choices for the sessions were supposed to have been made online in advance. I (along with several other delegates) didn't do this assuming we could make the choices on arrival/registration drawing upon the conference proceedings. Eventually the conference organisers were able to give us a handout of the session titles and names of presenters, but not the abstracts. As you can imagine, it made it very difficult to make any informed choices.

Check out whether they are looking for volunteer helpers – often students or other network members are used for registration desks, gofers, traffic controllers, etc. This can have two positive impacts: 1. you get to meet (and be known by) the organisers as well as other staff / students from around the country (or world), and 2. you usually get discounted (or free) registration to the meeting.

2. On Arrival

Take the time to make yourself comfortable at the venue – move into your room properly, look around, relax into it, find the dining room, bar and parallel session rooms in advance. All this will make the conference feel like a positive break rather than a stressful merry-goround.

Have a look around the venue for spaces that you can use for meetings during the conference, or quiet spaces that will allow somewhere to sit and reflect (or fire off that all important email that you forgot to do before leaving the office).

Cruise the 'vendor' or 'project' stands as soon as you can, before all the cool freebies are gone.

When you put your badge on, make sure that it is visible (even if you take off an outer layer or put an extra layer on). You may remember everybody's name you've ever met, but not everyone can. The badges avoid embarrassing silences whilst people rack their memories for names and faces. Also make sure the badge is the right way up.

If you use twitter put your twitter name on the badge.

Think carefully about using the conference bag. Some people don't because It can easily (and embarrassingly) be mistaken for someone else's. If you do use it make sure you 'mark' it in some way. One suggestion is to use the conference bag from the last conference you went to, this has the added benefit of being a 'talking' point.

If there are other people there who you see frequently in your institution, agree beforehand that you won't talk to them during the conference (other than to say hello). Fix up to meet back on the institution as soon as possible after the conference, and share what you have learned, and what you might do with it.

However, considering the previous point, It can be particularly useful to personally introduce colleagues from your own institution to others you may know, especially if you have a wider or different range of contacts.

3. Going to sessions

Always attend the keynote, this often sets the tone of an event and may well be referred to by presenters of other sessions.

Before each session that you attend read the abstract and devise a couple of questions that you really want the session to answer for you.

Pace yourself and be selective; you don't have to go to everything and if you need time to reflect then build it in for yourself.

Get to sessions early if possible. It's not just polite, it's a good opportunity to network with colleagues who have explicitly expressed an interest in the same issue as you by also choosing this session.

Don't always expect sessions to deliver on the abstract – one good idea from a session – whether it comes from the presenter or your own reaction to it – is a good return.

Make a point of going to at least one session that you know is outside your comfort zone and will challenge you or introduce something new.

During each session, make notes on what other participants say as well as on what the presenter / facilitator says.

On the way out of each session you attend, have a conversation with somebody who was in the session. Elicit their view on the content, style or questions that were asked.

If, in the unusual circumstance, you can find no redeeming feature for the session you're in, don't leave! Plan how you would run the session to deliver the outcomes that were specified. If you're not enjoying a session always remember that someone may be enjoying it, don't spoil the session by letting your boredom or irritation show.

When a talk comes to an end and the chair asks for questions, there is usually a slight pause due to 'British' reserve. If you want to get your question in, get it in before this reserve is overcome!

If a session isn't proving useful for you then try to think about another person in your organisation who might benefit – make some notes for them for when you get back. Try to think of the range of staff that work with you and find someone who would find it useful. It might be for someone you have never spoken with before, but that opens a dialogue and they may reciprocate with useful information for you in the fullness of time.

4. Lunch and Breaks

Raid the Salad and have plenty of fruit. The usual fried and fatty delicacies will make you feel lethargic and quite tired by the end of a long conference.

If you have ordered a special meal make sure you get there early or jump the queue. The vegetarian food tends to be eaten very quickly, usually by non-vegetarians.

Don't overdose on the conference coffee, try herbal tea. If you do, however, need the caffeine (and find herbal tea smells great but tastes foul), ensure you get plenty at the morning break, as frequently conference organisers forget to ask for coffee and tea to be laid on during the lunch break, and on those occasions by the time your afternoon break arrives your head is breaking in two from the caffeine withdrawal. This goes double if you're at a venue that thinks only session speakers need access to water.

Delegate feedback overwhelmingly suggests that discussion between sessions or at the end of the day is the most valuable time. Network, catch up with old friends, and make some new ones. Establish some working relationships.

Don't be afraid to go up and talk to people – especially the 'great and the good 'in the field, it may not feel easy at first but it is the key to getting good contacts.

Get out to the doorstep. There's a subculture of smokers out there usually discussing the conference, join in – you don't have to smoke.

Get a new job! One person I know who wasn't looking to move jobs and so wasn't keeping an eye open for vacancies but a conversation got her so enthused and excited over lunch that she applied for a Head of learning and Teaching post. Because of that chat with someone over lunch her career was changed.

5. Plenary Sessions

Good plenary discussions can be wide ranging, make a note of any points that you would like to go back to and don't be afraid of returning to something that was said earlier in the session.

If you have a question write it down and read it back to yourself, this will help you phrase it correctly.

If you do have a comment or contribution to make in a plenary, keep it focused and relevant. The urge to deliver the extended highlights of your earlier paper – which so many of the delegates sadly missed – must be resisted!

If you are asked to report back on behalf of a discussion group resist the opportunity for a personal diatribe, be careful to include colleagues contributions and try to emphasize the positive.

If you have a question: Wait for the roving mike before stating your name and affiliation, and making your point.

Don't use the opportunity to ask a question as a way of grandstanding and telling your own story, delegates will resent it and you'll get a bad reputation. If you think you have an interesting story, submit a paper.

6. After the conference

Set aside time to reflect on the conference and digest the ideas. Too often an immediate return to the normal working environment drives them from mind.

Make a list of things you are going to do as a result of the people you've met, the things you've heard and the ideas you've had so that the event makes a difference and becomes a real piece of professional development.

Go back through your notes if they are not held in a searchable electronic format (a personal blog or wiki is very useful for keeping conference notes in a searchable form) and 'tag' items with keywords at the top of each page. When you are flicking through at a later date, trying desperately to remember who it was that did the really interesting presentation you know is relevant to today's task, just a cursory glance at your keywords will quickly locate the page you are seeking.

It is easy after a conference to simply relax on the train (etc.) or talk to colleagues travelling with you – both valuable things to do – but there is a short period of perhaps an hour or two when it is all still fresh in your mind, and yet you have space for something of an overview. It is very helpful to use this unrepeated slot of time to 'tidy up' your thinking, put your keywords at the top of the page, list what it is you want to say to whom, write a question or suggestion to yourself, note the further resources you are going to consult, note ideas for writing or funding, develop or re-evaluate your planned actions, and so on. Making best use of this period can drive you forward in your work.

One habit I now try to do is to send a short greeting email to people I particularly 'clicked' with at a meeting (whether socially or researchwise); pretty much just to say hello and how nice it was to meet them (and to send them anything they were interested in receiving, etc.). It

also makes sure they have your email address correctly if they are someone you want to collaborate with later on. I now have some email contacts that surface every 6 months or so (usually when planning the next conference), but also got contacted about one joint research project through this practice after sending a copy of a poster.

Just to add to point 3 – Connect with people via LinkedIn, follow on Twitter and circle on Google+. For those not so good at remembering names or organised enough not to lose exchanged business cards, this is a great way to keep in touch and bios/photos/avatars a good prompt to remind who they are!

7. Filling in the feedback form

At the start of the conference remember that the organisers will want feedback. Make notes as you go about what was good and what was not so good, when you fill in the form remember all the positives, not just the negatives and try and be constructive.

No need to complain about the coffee.

Act as a 'critical friend', giving your name and contact details, and reinforcing feedback you've already given in person.

Don't use the form to complain about things that could have been sorted out if you'd raised them at the time!

8. Using Technology

Post to your blog as you go.

See if there is chat room and other 'back channels' such as twitter where the conference is being discussed.

Tag all of your blog posts with the agreed conference tag and the date and name of presenters.

Using Twitter or other rapid microblogging tools can elicit quick responses to questions.

If you have a digital camera, use it to record events, information and even group work (with permission).

If you love your laptop, treat it to some spare batteries and keep them charged – venues may boast wireless internet access, but rarely wireless power.

If there's anything in an online delegate pack you want to keep referring to, print it out before you get to the conf – you may run out of power, not be able to got online, or have no business services desk to print it out for you when you get there.

If you aren't using a laptop take a memory stick (a fast USB 2.0 one) to use in any internet cafe. There are several options for installing portable browers, such as Firefox Portable, and they will have all your favourites bookmarked.

Where to find power points:

On walls behind curtains.
In floor boxes (lift the flap)
Multiplug under presenters table (sit on the front row)

Bar/reception – usually behind a pot plant, at skirting board level.

Make friends and influence people: bring a multiplug adaptor... let people you want to chat to have a "hit".

If you are using your laptop in a session, please don't sit in front of me checking email, playing with excel worksheets, surfing the internet etc. – it is really distracting.

9. General Tips

Write it up as you go along, you'll never get round to it once you are back in the office.

Often if you are attending on your own it may be difficult to break the ice, ask people for help with some aspect of the event even if you don't need it. If other people look lost or confused offer help, even if you don't know the answer – find the solution together.

Be curious about everyone and everything.

Many people believe that conferences are about meeting people and making contacts, the sessions are just a bonus. Make sure you write down names and institutions of the people you meet, and a note of why you wrote them down.

Follow up contacts as soon as possible after the conference.

Always have a notebook and keep one page for references/books/articles that you want to look up when you get home and one page for 'good ideas' or things you want to do as a result of something that was said or something you saw at the conference.

If publishers have a stall, talk to them about that idea you had for a book.

Don't surround yourself with your work colleagues.

Make sure you have an up to date business card.

Leave "dead space", for reflection, random conversation and a little bit for leaving the venue entirely and taking a walk to sort your head out. Aim to take at least one key point from every actual session you attend, but be prepared to take several more from conversations at the bar or over coffee.

If you want to get drunk, go for it. But you'll make a fool of yourself, and get nothing at all out of the second day. That said, do attend the social events, it's a good way to meet people you wouldn't otherwise talk to.

If you are presenting or promoting something, do it gently and with audience participation. Not only is this usually the best way of disseminating information, it's less stressful.

Finally, be nice to the person representing the major funding body. Don't badger them for funding or tell them off for allocating funding "wrong" (i.e not to you). They get this all the time – if you go over and start being friendly to them they will be very grateful. And then probably say something quotably "off message".

If you are not the sort of person who easily strikes up conversations with strangers, make yourself a large badge to use at all new conferences, which reads something like "I am new here — please talk to me". You might feel a bit of a fool wearing it, but most people are generous with their time and will not only talk to you and go out of their way to ensure you are included, but the badge provides an icebreaker and a way into more meaningful conversation. Those who are outgoing may scoff at the concept, but for those less socially confident it is a useful strategy in order to make the most of the conference.

Finally, take time to talk with the secretarial, support and other conference organisation 'ground staff'. They usually know who to ask if you need something sorting out behind the scenes. Folk on the ground rarely get the thanks they deserve for keeping events running smoothly – make someone's day by saying thank you!