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Capturing Your Next Conference

Getting Maximum Value From Attending A Conference

Several years ago, I was a speaker at an e-learning conference. Just prior to the session in which I was presenting on knowledge sharing, there was an outstanding keynote speaker. During my session, I asked the hundred people (mostly training managers) in the audience, “How many of you think the previous speaker had some interesting ideas that could be of

benefit to your company's CEO and other top officers?" Virtually every hand went up. Next, I asked, "How many of you plan to buy a copy of the speaker's book or the tape of his session and give it to your CEO?" Only two hands were raised! And these were *training managers*, the very people whose job is to spread knowledge in their organizations!

We do a poor job of learning from the conferences we attend, getting only a small percentage of the available value we can get from them. This article is designed to help you get maximum value, for yourself and your company, from the next conference you attend.

Why We Attend Conferences

You may attend a conference for a variety of reasons: because there are topics on the agenda that are of interest to you, to build your network of professional contacts, to learn more about new developments in your field, or to be a presenter yourself. You may also attend because you need a break from work and the conference is in a nice location and, secondarily, you might learn something useful.

When you attend a conference, you are exposed to many points of view, excellent practices, and alternative methods. You have an opportunity to ask questions of speakers, discuss ideas with other participants, and broaden your own view beyond the boundaries of your own company and, often, beyond your own industry. You can informally benchmark your own company's practices against other companies (represented by both the speakers and other participants).

While you can learn a lot at a conference by just listening to the presenters, you can learn even more if you actively engage the speakers and other participants in discussions about what you hear and what they are doing in their own organizations. These contacts can also serve you well in the future with respect to finding a new job, finding new talent to bring into your own organization, making contact with headhunters and consultants, etc. This is all part of the learning experience.

But most people realize only a small percentage of the potential learning available from attending a conference, for themselves and for the organizations they represent. By planning your own agenda for a conference, and by asking your colleagues who won't be attending the conference if you

can help them gain knowledge from the conference, you can multiply the value you receive from a conference many times.

The Costs and Benefits of Attending a Conference

When you attend a conference you (or your company) are making a substantial investment. Costs include:

- The conference registration fee
- The cost of travel and expenses
- Your salary for the days you are attending the conference
- The opportunity costs for other activities you would be doing if you were back at the office

So, what value do you and your company get from your attendance? For most people, any knowledge acquired at the conference rarely extends beyond the attendee. If the attendee shares this knowledge at all, it may be with his/her manager or one or two colleagues – and even then, it will typically include only one or two highlights from the conference. All in all, most conference attendees get very little personal value from a conference, and their companies get even less return on the investment.

People who have followed the advice in this article have reported that they have increased the value they and their companies receive from attending a conference by three-to-ten times!

Planning Your Conference Learning Agenda

Most conference attendees don't look at the conference program seriously until they register in person at the start of the conference. To maximize your learning opportunities, you should review the conference agenda and the session descriptions at least several days ahead of time. While you may not receive the full agenda prior to the conference, many conference sponsors keep an updated agenda on the sponsor's website, so check the website at least a week before the conference starts and print out the agenda and the session descriptions.

A Learning Challenge: Expand Your Horizons

Select at least one session that will be a stretch for you — a different area of expertise, a different industry perspective on a common practice, a new area of learning that you have been thinking about but have done nothing about until now.

Many annual industry and professional conferences and symposia have multiple concurrent sessions during the program. If this is the case, you may want to team up with other people so that you can cover the many different sessions. Plan together which people will attend which sessions. You can then share your learning, as well as session handouts, ideas, and contacts with each other.

Whether attending alone or with a group, spend time reviewing the agenda before the conference starts. Ask yourself:

- Which sessions appear to have the most potential value for me personally, for my group or team, for my function or business unit, for the company as a whole? Set up a schedule for yourself and for others from your company.
- What could I learn from the presenter that would add the most value? Write down your questions for the session. Use the Session Knowledge Worksheet to plan your questions before each session (a sample worksheet is provided at the end of this article).

During each session:

- Write down answers to your questions as the speaker covers each topic.
- Add questions to your list as they arise during the presentation.
- The questions that remain unanswered at the end of the presentation become your ready list for the question and answer session.

Learn By Challenging Your Own Assumptions

If a speaker's approach is totally different from your own, don't immediately dismiss it. Ask yourself:

Why did the speaker choose this approach?

What makes the speaker's company or situation different from your own?

**What if you viewed your own situation through the speaker's eyes?
Could you expect a different or better result?**

After each session:

- If you aren't able to ask your questions during the presentation or the Q&A period, find the speaker after the session.
- If the speaker is unavailable after the session, plan to follow up by mail, e-mail, or telephone. Many speakers put their addresses on their presentation handouts. If not, ask the conference sponsor for contact information.
- Use the session as a basis for discussion with other conference attendees. What have they done in their companies? How have their approaches differed from those of the speaker? What has worked, and what hasn't worked, for them?
- Make specific notes and list ideas that you want to try when you get back to the office, or of ideas that you want to discuss with others in your organization.
- Even if there is nothing in a presentation that you can use yourself, think about other needs in your company. Would someone else benefit from the speaker's ideas? If so, plan to share the ideas with that person. Write all of these ideas down on the last page of the Session Knowledge Worksheet. If you don't write them down, it is all too easy to lose the ideas when your focus moves on to a new speaker or topic.

A Learning Challenge: Put Ideas to Immediate Use

At the end of each session, find someone with whom you can discuss the ideas you just heard. Perhaps the speaker is free for lunch, or ask someone seated near you to discuss some of the ideas during a break or over dinner. When you continue discussing the ideas from a session, you are more likely to act on those ideas when you return to your job.

You can add even more value to your organization or group by sharing the agenda and session descriptions ahead of time and asking what topics are of interest to others. While you may not be able to attend all sessions of interest to others in your group or organization, you may be able to obtain handouts from presentations that you do not personally attend. Many conference sponsors also tape sessions and sell audio cassettes of the sessions.

A Networking Tip: Finding People With Similar Interests

If the conference agenda does not include a session that exactly matches your interests, plan your own discussion group. Ask the conference sponsor or moderator to make an announcement before lunch, mentioning your name and the topic in which you are interested, and to set aside a table at lunch for people who have a similar interest to sit down with you and discuss the topic.

The learning and networking you gain from this conference will have value only if you use it when you return to your office. Start by reviewing all of your Session Knowledge Worksheets — a great activity for the trip home. Make two master lists: on the first, list items titled “What I Learned” and, for each item, “How I can use this learning;” on the second, list items titled “Ideas for Others in the Company” and, for each item, “How I will share these ideas.” Then prioritize each list. Take responsibility for acting on at least the top five items on each list. Here are some ideas on how you can do this.

A Learning Challenge: Use What You Learn

A conference will have value only if you use the ideas you bring back to improve your own, your group's, or the company's performance.

Apply Your Learning

Perhaps you learned a new method to improve the work you are already doing. Unless the idea contradicts your company's standard operating procedures, there is no reason why you cannot apply it immediately. If the idea affects more than just your own work, you may have to introduce the idea to your work group, your manager, or to others in the company.

- You can make copies of the handouts, papers, articles, or other materials you collected at the conference and share them with the relevant people. While this is a good first step, it is not enough. You should attach a memo to the material highlighting your ideas on how you can best use the new material, what benefits you believe will accrue from adopting the new ideas, and a sketch of how you recommend adopting or adapting the ideas to your particular work situation. Follow this with a meeting to discuss the ideas, to measure their worth, and to develop an implementation plan.
- You can prepare a presentation for your manager, your group, or others in the company, in which you summarize what you have learned, make suggestions on how this learning might benefit the company, and recommend a course of action.

Improve Your Chances for Success

Your chances for success will be greatly improved if you put together a support system for the changes you want to make.

Even if you can adopt an idea from the conference on your own, without having to gain approval from anyone else, it is often wise to put some support in place in case you run into a problem or something you don't understand as you try to adopt the new approach. This support can take many forms:

- You can find another person in your group or company who attended the conference and who is interested in trying out the new idea. Even if that person works in another part of the company, you can still provide feedback and support to each other.
- You can share your ideas with a coworker or with your manager and try to implement them together, providing feedback and coaching to each other.
- You can establish a personal or e-mail link with the presenter from the conference, asking if you might occasionally ask a question if a problem arises during your implementation.
- You might find other people on the Internet, or on your company's intranet, who are interested in the new approach and who can provide guidance and support to each other. The group may include conference speakers or other conference participants with whom you established contact.

Sharing Ideas With Others

Even though you might have no personal or professional use for some of the ideas that you hear at the conference, they may have value to others in your group or company. Use your Conference Knowledge Worksheets to identify those ideas and how you might share them with others. Methods of sharing ideas include:

- You can send copies of presentations and papers to people you think might find them of interest. Not only might you add value to them and their work in this way, but you will also be building your personal network within the company.
- You can invite a speaker from the conference to speak at your company.

- You can arrange a site visit to the speaker's company to see how that company has implemented the ideas that you heard at the conference.
- You can get copies of a presenter's articles or books to share with others and then follow up with a meeting to discuss specific ideas that you think might benefit the company. Many conferences record presentations and sell the tapes to participants.
- You can post the conference materials on a (real or electronic) bulletin board with a note about the value you think the company could derive from the ideas. Alternatively, you could start a discussion on your company's intranet about some of the ideas.

Building & Maintaining Your Professional Network

Conferences provide great networking opportunities, but a network is valuable only if you keep it up. Have you ever returned to your hotel room at the end of a long day and emptied your pocket to find a bunch of business cards – only you can't remember why you have them? Or you are emptying out your business case one day and find a bunch of cards, but can't remember where you met the people or why you have the cards?

When you exchange business cards with someone at a conference (or elsewhere), you should immediately mark on the card:

- Where you met the person
- What interest(s) you share (both professional and personal)
- What/how you can learn from that person
- What/how you can help that person learn

You may never contact that person again. Or, you may find that two years down the road, your position is eliminated, and you would really like to contact that person whose card you have in your file, but you haven't been in touch for so long that you doubt the person will remember you. If you want to get value from your network, you need to add value to it.

Here are some easy ways to do that:

- Have you read an article that you think might be of interest to people in your network? Send them a copy or, even easier, a quick email with the link to the article.
- Have you been contacted by a headhunter about a job in which you aren't interested at this time? Send an email to people in your network asking if they might be interested, or they know someone who might have interest in the job. Not only does this keep you in the minds of people in your network, headhunters will appreciate your help – and you might need their help in the future.
- Are you on the planning committee for a conference? Keep in mind the people in your network as potential speakers or as sources of ideas for other presentations. They will appreciate the chance to present themselves and their ideas.
- Are you traveling on business to another city? See if there is someone in your network who works in that city and call to invite the person to dinner one evening. Not only does this help you keep up your network, it also gives you some interesting company for dinner, instead of ordering room service or sitting alone in the hotel dining room.

Building Your Personal and Professional Network

When you share new ideas with others, you build your personal and professional networks and you build your own reputation as a valuable learning resource for others, both within and without your own company.

Have a great conference!

Session Knowledge Worksheet #1

Use this first page for pre-conference planning. Use Worksheets #2 and #3 to take notes during the presentation. Use the last page to plan follow-up activities based on what you learned.

Session Title:

Speaker:

Date/Time/Location:

What ideas in the session description are related to my work or to that of my group, department, function, business unit, or the company as a whole?

What could I learn from this session that would add the most value to my work?

What questions do I want to make certain the speaker answers?

1. Answer:

2. Answer:

3. Answer:

4. Answer:

Session Knowledge Worksheet #2

NOTES

Session Knowledge Worksheet #3

NOTES

Session Knowledge Worksheet #4

• *What I Learned*

• *How I Can Use This Learning*

• *Ideas For Others*

• *How To Share Those Ideas*

Dan Tobin is a writer and consultant on corporate learning strategies. His focus is tying all learning activities (training, knowledge management, etc.) directly to corporate business goals. He has worked in the corporate learning field for more than 25 years and is currently the director of employee and organizational learning for a multinational software company. Dan is the author of four books, including *The Knowledge-Enabled Organization*. A popular speaker, he has given presentations, seminars, and workshops on three continents. He can be reached at 508 / 620 - 5447 or DanielTobin@att.net. BH SmartDocs™ are published by BrownHerron Publishing and are sold exclusively on Amazon.com (www.amazon.com/brownherron).

