



# A Post-Conference Checklist to Lock in Your Learning



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**So the professional conference you attended was great—** plenty of interesting sessions, lots of business cards swapped, and yes, the croissants at breakfast were as soft as you could hope for. But now you're back in the office, and the clock is ticking on the knowledge you were given.

Run down these steps to guarantee you get what you pay for at a training conference, and can share its highlights with your colleagues who aren't lucky enough to attend.

**1. Get your notes straight—fast.** It's not just your memory you're racing the calendar against; it's the dwindling embers of your post-conference enthusiasm. Transfer your jottings to a format worthy of the event's weight instead of just creating a list of vague bullet points, and highlight the most important points with unique markers. Beware of losing the subtleties of good instruction in a sea of rapidly written phrases whose meaning will get fuzzier and fuzzier.

One technique some use is to imagine you're writing an article for someone else to read. Become a kind of conference trainer yourself by using the written word alone to convey what they shared.

**□ DONE!**

**2. Create action steps.** Our natural instinct is to simply file our takeaways with a nebulous plan to return to them when they're needed. Well, they're needed *now*, otherwise you wouldn't have gotten on that plane, right? Build a short list of things to do with your new information. The very act of making this list will cause you to draw new connections between the sessions you attended and the business you face each day, guaranteed.

And if you ever need to convince someone above you that you're a real conference pro and worth sending off to places far and wide, putting your knowledge quickly into action will certainly do the trick.

**□ DONE!**

**3. Rate the sessions.** Who doesn't enjoy ranking things from 1 to 10? The exercise of putting those speakers through the mathematical gauntlet, even if no one else sees the scores you assign them, is a terrific lesson in public speaking. By noting instances of superior speaking skill as well as noticeable communication flaws, you'll become a better presenter yourself, whether it's in a formal situation or just relating concepts to co-workers on a daily basis. Remember, *you'll* be at that lectern one day soon.

**□ DONE!**

**4. Ask questions.** Conference presenters almost always remind you that the conversation can and should keep going; that's what their contact info is for. You should feel free to ask questions of the speakers after the conference is over.

To really get something valuable from the sessions, play this game: Write down one, and *only* one question, that you'd ask of each speaker. Make it the one thing you really, *really* want to know. Now send all those questions off. Keeping things tight and edited like this will command attention and respect, and certainly get you a good response.

**□ DONE!**

**5. Contact someone you networked with.** They likely won't even be expecting it; you know how empty those hotel hallway connections can be. Don't just toss off a request for a LinkedIn fix; that will usually lead you nowhere. And don't ask for something—or even offer it—in your first message. Instead, remind that person in a subtle way of how you met and make an observation or comment about the conference that will get their attention.

If the person is someone you feel is professionally valuable, contact fast but build slowly, over weeks and months. If you're simply following up with someone who just seemed nice or interesting, contact fast and then kick back and make the assumption it won't develop into anything usable. Put enough casual hellos out there and you'll be pleasantly surprised someday—it really is a small world, and every connection can matter.

**□ DONE!**

**6. Send feedback to the organizers.** It's an inexact science, trying to give people what they want at a conference; so many people come to them with different agendas. Help the organizers out by indicating what you liked and what you didn't. It's rarely some smooth, professional tiger team that puts a

show like this together from beginning to end, and obvious things can be missed by busy and stressed people.

You'll be attending lots of these events during your career; shape them for the better!

**□ DONE!**

**7. Check out social media to see what you missed.** This can be a real eye-opener, and it provides the bonus effect of offering you some new connections if you choose to be so bold.

Those conference hashtags can make for interesting reading. Ever noticed that almost none of the online chatter seems to bring much of a critical eye, as if everyone is just crazy excited to be there? That doesn't have to be you—to become the cool kid at the conference, speak up about everything that strikes you, both the good and the bad.

**□ DONE!**

**8. Build an archive and a database.** If everyone at work who goes to the conference gets on the same page and uses the same structured format for their notes, lessons and ratings, you'll have quite the collection of wisdom to stage a one-off meeting at which everyone can exchange observations, lessons and ideas. A post-conference meeting can double as a general brainstorming session and give staff an outlet for their thoughts and inspirations. And putting each conference's written takeaways onto your network for future use will gradually shine a light on the overall value of attending the same annual conference.

**□ DONE!**

***The ultimate lesson:*** Take note of how much positive energy attending an industry event can generate among your co-workers and in you personally, then protect that energy through fast action when you return. It can slip away quickly, and events that pull you away from your daily work are too costly in terms of time and financial investment to squander their lessons by waiting to pounce on them.



**Of course, these tips are more easily achieved** when you're on top of your game *during* the conference. Remember to:

**1. Choose your sessions before they choose you.** You don't want to make these decisions two minutes before the sessions start, or base them on how far a walk they'll be from your current spot, or discover that you already know two co-workers who have a topic covered. Improvising your way through a conference is a way to have

regrets later.

**2. Master the space.** There may well be things going on at a big conference that you miss out on simply because you didn't know they were there. We tend to stick to spots we feel comfortable in, so our geographic patterns inside a big unfamiliar place shrink quickly. Do a little old-school exploration and get a grasp on the full layout.

**3. Know when to solo.** If you've come to a conference with colleagues, you'll likely have a tendency to stick close to them. That can often interfere with you

learning exactly what you want to learn. This is a chance to break out of office patterns; seize it!

**4. Own your tech.** You don't want to be wandering around looking for a charger or having laptop woes in the middle of the action. And you *really* don't want to pay hotel prices for printing, copying or thumb drives. In addition to electronic tools, an old-fashioned, dedicated notebook and a baggie of pens and pre-sharpened pencils could save you some frustration.

**5. Be a nerd!** When you show up at a session nice and early, not only are you less stressed and better organized, you have first crack at talking to the speakers, who usually don't mind a little pre-session chat. In addition, you have a much better opportunity to talk with fellow attendees in an atmosphere where you can hear yourself think. Punctuality is an excellent means to making friends—and sitting in the front row means you'll hear everything, miss nothing and get just a little natural priority when it comes time for the Q&A.

**6. Spot the sales pitches.** At every conference, there's a risk of winding up in a session that's more a platform for the company the speaker works for and the service it provides. Learn to spot these from the wording of the agenda and from word of mouth. Not that they can't have value, but you'll often have to work a little harder to get that value.

**7. Know who you are.** Don't lose time and confidence fumbling for words when you meet people; get that (very short) elevator pitch down pat. Make sure your business cards are up to date and don't need any excuses or elaborations as you pass them off.

**8. Get good with names.** Whatever trick you prefer to remember names, know it in advance and be prepared to give it some use. We're all far worse at recalling things in the middle of a conference atmosphere. If there's a way to spruce up your own name tag so it stands out more vividly, go ahead ... there's no rule against it, and what better way to get people to take notice of you.

**9. Be selfish.** Feel stuck in a session that seems like it's turning into a dud? Get right up and exit—if you feel bad about it, hey, it'll likely just be assumed you

remembered you had to be somewhere else, or had to catch a plane. And if you're not alone in your departure, well, that's probably good feedback for the presenter.

**10. Don't over-record.** Stay in the moment and don't spend so much attention on note-taking that you fail to really listen. At the same time, don't be lulled into complacency by getting audio or video of the entire session, or skip one entirely just because you know you have access to the slides later. Like watching a football game long after it's over, your enthusiasm for the session will dim when you come at the material a week later, and you'll miss much of the nuance of the live presentation, along with the ability to interact.

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