TRAINING 101

Conference Island

Here, you don't get voted off; you eliminate yourself by not preparing.

By Claire M. Kilian and Dawn Hukai

Illustration by Ben Fishman

Each year, businesses spend billions of dollars sending employees to conferences. But most companies don't express what they expect employees to bring back from their experience. As a result, many new ideas are left on the conference island.

To keep that from happening in your organization, approach conferences with explicit preparations, expectations, and plans for bringing useful information and concepts back.

Preparing for conference

Think about why you're attending. Are you investigating trends? Gathering data? Getting away from work to gain some perspective? Networking? All are legitimate reasons. To make the most of your conference experience, set aside time beforehand to plan and assess your priorities. You'll have many offerings vying for your time, which can be overwhelming. Figure out why you're really going.

Conference Summary Template

Session Title and Topic: _____
Conference: _____
Date: _____
Session presenter(s): _____
Phone/email: _____
Affiliation: _____
Website: _____
Session objectives: _____

Key points
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Key learnings relevant to individual or organizational goals
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

General comments:
_____
_____

Who would benefit from this information? Forward to
☐ Executives/administration   ☐ Knowledge managers
☐ Human resources   ☐ Operations/manufacturing
☐ Education/training/learning   ☐ Finance
☐ Information technology   ☐ Other

Evaluate presenter on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high):
   Presentation skills _____
   Subject expertise _____
   Applicability/relevance to our organization _____

Attendee name: _____   Phone/email: _____
Materials available for review: (handouts, articles, promotional materials, samples)

uct, the topic you were discussing, or the reason to keep in touch.

Plan for the office (and home) to run smoothly. Delegate authority to the appropriate people to minimize emergency calls from the office. Remember to reschedule appointments around conference dates.

At conference

Increase your base of contacts. Introduce yourself to the people sitting around you before a session begins, and make an effort to sit with people you don't know at dinners and luncheons. Keep in mind that you can learn a lot through informal networking activities. Ask for business cards, and don't forget to jot a note on the back. Follow up if necessary.

Use the proceedings. Try to identify the concurrent sessions that best meet your needs. If colleagues are attending, collaborate. Attend different sessions and later share notes, presenter handouts, and new ideas.

Take notes using a template. The summary template at left will help you take focused and meaningful notes. Employers may want to supply a template to employees to improve the information they bring back from the conference. The template focuses on key decision makers, organizational vision, where a new idea fits in, and ways to share the knowledge.

Maintain concentration and persistence. Given the overwhelming variety of activities available, it's easy to tune out and turn the conference into a continuous party. Maintain a professional focus, and take short breaks.

Gain perspective. Getting away from the office and daily routine helps you separate important work issues from insignificant trivia. Allow yourself some reflection time; every moment needn't be filled with an official conference activity.

Plan ahead for follow-up. Will you be expected to report back? On which topics? To whom? How detailed should your report be? Consider those questions in advance to focus your time and effort. Bring note-taking materials, and gather any information necessary for follow-up. If you're attending with co-workers, consider going to different sessions.

Use the speaker or attendee list. Before the conference, contact the people you'd like to meet. For example, set up a lunch appointment with a promising contact instead of hoping to run into that person. List questions you'd like answered at the conference, and then target the people who can answer them.

Don't forget your business cards. How many times have you asked people for their business card and they don't have one? Bring many and make use of them. When handing one out, jot a note on the back to remind the person of your prod-

Bringing ideas back

"Bring it back to work" policy.
The costs associated with conference and workshop attendance can be astonishing. But it's the rare organization that requires employees to bring knowledge back. Consider starting a policy that instructs employees to bring what they've learned back to the organization—whether in a report, meeting brief, or mini-conference with other participants. Knowing that they will be held accountable later helps employees focus their attention while at the conference.

Post summaries. Your employer may allocate space for conference summaries on the corporate intranet. Ideally, other employees can search the postings based on key words and, therefore, share in the knowledge that you and other conference attendees have brought back. At the very least, you can circulate the summaries.

Share notes and ideas. Sharing may be done in a variety of venues. You can present what you learned at a staff meeting, participate in a Bring Back the Learning session with other attendees, or make a formal presentation to key decision makers.

Experiment strategically. In implementing a new conference idea, first test it on a small problem that you can solve quickly. After its success, you'll find it easier to convince decision makers to try it out on larger and more complex problems. For example, use your newly learned inclusive listening technique in a departmental meeting, and, if successful, apply to interdepartmental communication.

Both employers and employees should plan ahead to maximize training dollars. Surviving the conference island requires some focus and direction, a little perseverance, and a tool or two to help bring ideas back to work.

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