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A BLAZINGLY SIMPLE GUIDE TO SURVIVING A CONFERENCE

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GETTING THE MOST FROM A CONFERENCE

{An unofficial guide}

Picture the scene.

You've got tickets for a conference. You've got your passport and visa sorted (assuming you need it).

You're looking forward to getting to the event and kicking about with other people in your industry.

But aaaarrggghh - you've never been to a conference before and you're now a little worried you won't get the most from it.

You're worried that you'll miss out on crucial conversations.

You're worried that you'll be all alone in the evening, or maybe you've just not got your plans sorted for what you're going to do at the event.

Maybe you're just not sure what to expect?

HAVE NO FEAR - ROB HERE.

What follows is a very quick guide to getting the most from a conference.

I'm a seasoned conference visitor and speaker, so what follows are some of the lessons I've learned through the years.

This guide was originally written sometime between 2012 and 2015. I can't remember. But it's been updated this year.

And a warning - it took no more than an hour to pull this guide together, so it may well be crap. (Although feedback tells me it isn't) ;).

Have a great conference.

Rob Lambert. Winchester. 2023

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Plan your travel

Enjoying your conference comes from ensuring you're focused on it. And not worrying about other stuff, travel being one of the many things to worry about.

It's always best to triple check your plans before you go, document them well and quadruple check you've not set yourself up for any complications - like tight transfers or overlapping travel times. (Unless you have to).

If your travel is sorted, planned and achievable you can focus on the important task of conferencing.

Here are some ideas:

- * Book your airport/railway return taxi when you get to the event.
- * Check-in for both the outbound and inbound trips before you go, if you can. And print / download details.
- * Use a tool like Triplt to organise your whole trip.
- * Use mobile boarding/travel passes if you can, but always print out paper copies - just in case your phone doesn't work.
- * Use a cloud based system to back up your travel details, in case you lose your digital device. You could use an internet cafe etc in a pinch. I use Dropbox.
- * Ensure you have suitable travel insurance.
- * Make sure you have the right payment options with you, like a credit card and a little cash. Check any foreign exchange rates or fees

for your card - some cards have whopping charges.

* Ensure you're mobile phone is set up for roaming and has enough credit if you're heading abroad.

* Note down the useful conference phone numbers in case you need to get in touch with someone.

* Add luggage tags to your suitcase

Triplt - <https://www.tripit.com/>



Find a conversation

Conversations outside of the conference presentations are where an array of opinions are aired.

They are where you get interesting, insightful, sometimes opinionated conversations about your industry.

They are where you get to find like-minded people and people with advice to share (sometimes even when you don't ask for it).

It's a chance to find out more from others, share your own views or simply sit back and soak up the dialogue.

You'll also get to connect to people, meet people from very different contexts to yours and enjoy the serendipity that comes from simply chatting to people you don't know.

Most people in your community are more approachable than you may think.

Many will spend time to get to know you.

Some will only spend time getting to know you until they find out you can't help them, offer any work their way or you disagree with a well reasoned argument to their core ideas. They'll make their excuses and go. Good. You'll be glad of that fact and you can move on and find someone more interesting.

The interesting conversations are happening all over.

There's a Tribe for you somewhere at a conference.

There is guaranteed to be someone at the conference who you'll get on with – your main challenge is finding them.

Social media and conference apps can help greatly, but so too can just talking to people.

If you go to a conference and come away having not spoken to anyone else, then you may have missed a trick. But not everyone is there for networking.

Saying that, social connecting at a conference can be great fun. It's a great chance to meet people.

It's not about smarming your way around people, slipping business cards in to people's pockets, laughing at bad jokes and generally being a "smooth operator".

It's about meeting people, chatting, making connections, putting faces to people you know on social networks and seeing where the action of talking to other people may lead you.

And remember, listening is one of the greatest compliments you can give someone.

Products and Demos

No conference can function without some sort of funding.

Typically, the funding comes from a number of sources, one being vendors who demo their goods and services - typically in some sort of lobby expo area.

The expo centre at conferences are often hit and miss. There's always a chance to meet vendors who sell stuff you like, stuff that makes you rage and stuff that's cool but not suited to your needs.

There are usually a varying array of freebies to be had - I always try to stock up on notebooks.

There are always product demos and interesting giveaways - so wander around, chat to people, seek out new tools/

approaches and seek out new connections.

The vendors are ensuring you get conferences to go to. Without them you might be spending the week at work instead - so, it's worth taking the time to say "hi" to them all.



Conference Talks

The talks and workshops are often the central focus of a conference.

Most conferences have some sessions that won't float your boat.

Most conferences have sessions that will awe and inspire.

Download the lineup (or get a printed copy), highlight the ones you want to get to and figure out a plan for the few days.

There is a lot going on at most conferences so ensure you save some time to visit the vendors, the live activities and the community stuff that's happening too.

Don't pack your schedule with just track sessions otherwise you might miss other stuff throughout the event.

Pre-planning will give you a greater chance of finding the sessions that suit your needs.

Of course, you may be at a single-track event (only one track of talks) so you'll likely have little choice on offer.

I'm a geek so I get electronic copies with various sessions highlighted (or use the many conference apps).

Alternatively, paper copies are often available - but check if anything has changed - these are often printed well in advance of the conference. And like all well planned events - things can still change.



Socialise

If you head back to the hotel/home after the conference and don't mingle with others then you could be missing a treat.

Sure, socialising is not for everyone. Some people are shyer than others, but to not spend the time socialising is to miss out on the networking, conversations and potential friendships that can form.

Some of my good friends have been people I have met at conferences. There are some people who I only get to see each year at conferences but it's like we've known each other for years.

The social side of a conference, for me, is the most important side. It's a chance to find like-minded people, or people to argue

with, or people to sit and chat to about all sorts.

It's not always a load of pros sitting and talking about the subject domain, it can be more or less.

It's whatever you make of it, but to skip the socialising is to miss out on the real insights, learning and value of a conference. And of course, the potential to find life-long friends.



Pack a bag

Being at a conference without a bag full of things that you need is upsetting, frustrating and annoying.

Planning before hand and keeping a checklist of things to take to the event each day, is a good idea.

At most conferences there are water stations, regular tea and coffee sessions and the typical amenities but it pays to take the things you need to keep you going.

This could be medication, more water, food, pen and paper, chargers for gadgets, business cards, and layers of clothing.

Whatever you need. Get it packed and your day will be more comfortable.

Get away from it all

Despite being highly involved in many communities and social activities, I often need to get away and get some peace.

If it's getting too busy or you need to reset your head then find some space, chillax for a while and get yourself centered again.



Take notes and share

Take notes - loads of them. And share what you learn.

Jot down stuff you like, stuff that inspires you, new ideas or approaches, new tools or products, people who are awesome, people and whatever else you might like to note down.

Use whatever system works for you; notebook, camera phone, Evernote, mind map. Whatever.

And share your notes if you think the community will benefit.

If you do nothing else with the notes then please do seek me out (@simplylambert on Instagram) and share your note taking method.

I'm doing a long-term study on note-taking and would love to know what system you use.

Seek me out, share your ideas and become infamous the world over when I finally get around to writing my book. :)

SHARE

This might not apply to everyone but I suspect that many people attending a conference are part of a wider team.

In which case it would be rude not to share what you've learned with your team.

Therefore it's important to think about how you are going to share your experiences when you're back at work.

Presumably you're not going to go back to the office and just say:

"Yep. It was ok. I learned some stuff. We're doing some stuff right, some stuff wrong but on the whole we're doing ok. The city centre was cool. The airport was nice and clean. The flight was good. I slept ok. I ate too much."

What a rubbish experience report.

When you plan how you're going to articulate your experience to others you start to absorb, filter and accommodate a whole new level of insights.

It makes you think about the event. It makes you live in the moment. It makes you listen. It makes you digest things truly - and being able to communicate what you've learned to others, is a wonderful way to ensure you learn.



Give feedback

One of the most frustrating things when organising an event is to receive no feedback on how it went, or how it is going.

Just as bad is to receive "meh" feedback - this is feedback where everything was "good" or "ok".

This is not useful either unless of course everything really was "ok".

If you're enjoying the event, then tell the organisers.

If you're not enjoying it, then tell the organisers.

Without feedback no-one can change the things that are niggling you, no-one can learn and make the event better next time and no-one has a solid idea of what is working and what isn't.

But, as with all feedback - ensure it is delivered kindly, is accurate, has evidence and is delivered with the right intentions.

Dress like a million dollars

If you fancy getting all trussed up in your smart gear then why not head to the after conference parties? (If there are any).

Some conferences don't have them, some do – find out and go to the event prepared.

Some conferences have posh evening dinners where I get to dress smart and pretend that I'm sophisticated, elegant and charming, and then scoff posh nosh with the movers and shakers at the event.

Some conferences just have drinks in the local pub.

Find out what's happening (ideally before you get there) and go prepared.





Enjoy Culture

When I travel to other countries I can enjoy different culture. This is fun, and why I'm lucky enough to chose which conferences to speak at - and I typically choose conferences in countries I've never been to before.

anything of Iceland. They had a good time though apparently - so each to their own.

It means I get to explore a different city, eat some different food and drink some different drinks.

Saying that, I know there are at least 20 fast food chain restaurants in and around the heart of most conference events, so if that's your bag, then that's cool too.

I once went for a cultural weekend to Iceland with a large group of mates.

Some of them spent the entire weekend in their tent drinking Vodka and eating peanuts - never to venture out to see

Take photos and video

Take photos. Plenty of them.

Take photos of the venue, the speakers, the delegates, the food, the expo, the city, the hotel - whatever (within reason).

You'll look back on them in years to come and they will trigger memories.

Memories of people who may no longer be with us, people who made you laugh, people who made you cry, conversations that are forever lodged in the deep recesses of your brain, ideas about your domain or industry and hopefully - memories of good times.



Don't take it all so seriously



Although you are at an event to learn stuff, network and gain insights to your domain or industry it's also important to have fun.

The easiest way to have fun is to not take yourself too seriously.

Taking yourself less seriously can be tricky.

Some people achieve this by dressing up in Fancy Dress, others through a genuinely natural ability to find anything funny and some through a lot of hard work and forced dis-comfort. And it's entirely up to you whether you want to have fun (and what fun is for you). But I've learned that by not taking myself too seriously, I've seriously enjoyed conferences more.

If you're finding having fun at a conference tough, and I know there are many reasons why people will, then don't despair.

Seek out some like-minded people, join a small huddle, chat to smiley people and seek out the activities that you find relaxing.

You need to do what is right for you, don't feel pressured and if it's all getting too much then find some space to reset your mind.

It pays to empty your head when it's getting full.

Spending a few minutes resetting or emptying your head can often

help you find the space and energy to have some fun.

Feel free to seek me out and laugh at my fashion sense if that will help you have fun.

Take your name badge off

I've ignored this advice before.

I've stood on a train with random people saying "Hi Rob".

Take your name badge off - or not, if you like people saying hi to you.



Dress comfortably

I once took nothing but smart outfits to a conference. I was so uncomfortable.

hat, gloves and fancy dress outfit (I'm trying to take myself less seriously this year).

The next conference I attended I took nothing but casual wear and I felt woefully scruffy.

Dress as you feel comfortable - noting whether there are any special events at the conference such as Gala Dinners etc.

Most conferences are pretty laid back when it comes to dress code, but there are events and meet-ups that may require smart dress, and don't forget; you are always representing you and your brand (your company or yourself).

It's also worth checking out what the weather will be like at the conference. I normally take a raincoat,

Look after yourself

It is very easy indeed to get lured in to the late nights and early mornings only to find you're a mess during the day.

Look after yourself as best you can, you'll find you get a lot more enjoyment from the conference.



Now what?

I know what you're thinking now. You're thinking:

"What an amazing guide that this nice chap has created for us, but where do I now go to find out more about what he does?"

Well, you'll find the newsletter, podcasts, YouTube channel, books and award-winning communication workshop at cultivatedmanagement.com

DISCLAIMER

I spent no more than about 1 hour putting this guide together. It might therefore be rubbish.

It comes with no claims of amazement – except in the closing "Now What" statement – but I made that statement up.

I offer no warranties. There is no refund. (What you paid for this guide?)

This guide is completely unofficial and not related to any conference or supplier.

I wrote this to help others, to connect to others and to raise awareness of how to enjoy conferences. I didn't get paid for writing this guide. I wasn't commissioned to write this by anyone. It is not an official guide. It may well be crap.

But I do sincerely hope you enjoyed it.
Rob

