

Diversity & Inclusion 2018: Strategies for Success

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CAREER RESOURCES

Ways to Make the Most of Your Conference Networking

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(adapted from two blog posts originally appearing on the CFA Institute Annual Conference blog)

Most professionals intuitively understand that networking at industry conferences can help advance their careers. Here are three ways to make the most of your conference networking experience:

Knowledge Building

Live conferences are an efficient way to pack a lot of learning into a few days—and specifically, to absorb information about changing realities in your industry. This is an important type of knowledge building in terms of staying on top of your game professionally (which is of course a key career management strategy).

Keep in mind that we tend to learn best those things that are immediately relevant to us as well as those things that are repeated. This is where networking serves to enhance the knowledge building you can do at conferences. Discussing sessions with fellow attendees encourages repetition of the material and reinforces your learning.

Action item: During a networking break, ask a fellow attendee, “What were your key takeaways from the last session?”

Career Exploration

Networking at conferences can help you explore your career options in more ways than it makes sense to list here. The following are two examples worth highlighting though:

- **Understanding position responsibilities across different firms.** We all know that a position title does not necessarily convey the full story of what someone does at her firm. Broadening your understanding of what positions involve across different firms allows you to clarify and refine your career goals. This way, the next time you want to make a career transition, within your firm or to another, you will be better able to verbalize your interests and, in turn, to persuade others of your fit for the role or responsibilities you seek.

- **Gaining insights into corporate cultures at different organizations.** In today's environment, having technical skills is not always enough to secure a position you seek or to land a new opportunity. It is also essential that you fit within the corporate culture of an organization. If you feel right at home in your current organization, that's a pretty good sign of a strong fit. But if your long-term career goals don't align with you remaining at your current organization, it's never too early to start collecting insights into the culture of firms that you may be interested in joining in the future.

Action item: Meet someone new at the conference and ask what she does. Then go one step further and ask what she likes most about working for her firm. You might also inquire about what an average day on the job is like for this person.

Relationship Building

This is an obvious objective: Whether you are interested in building relationships for business development, career opportunities, mentoring, or friendship, the shared experience of a conference is always a great starting point. The important thing to remember is that a superficial exchange of details and contact information is rarely enough of a hook to justify follow-up communication, especially if you are ultimately hoping to ask something of the other person, such as engagement in a mentoring relationship or assistance with a job search.

Action item: Take a conversation one step further with a fellow delegate. Find something other than the conference that you have in common, or think of a way that you can offer something of interest or value. Make a plan to follow up, and actually follow through.

Identify, Pay Attention, and Participate: How to Network at Professional Events

In-person networking at industry events may not be everyone's favorite endeavor, but as explained, it can be a powerful way to advance your career and build your professional network. Here are a few ideas that can make networking at conferences easier and less intimidating.

- **Clearly identify what you want to gain from networking.** Before setting foot in the conference venue, think about your specific goals for interacting with other attendees. These may include sharpening your understanding of all things bitcoin, finding a group of people you can reach out to for job search support, or connecting with others who enjoy running as much as you do. Identifying specific objectives helps you stay motivated to network and focused in your interactions. Otherwise,

you could be struggling to come up with something interesting to talk about when you sit down next to someone.

- **Pay attention, and be on the lookout for tools that support your networking efforts.** Conference planners know that networking is an essential function of industry events, and they will work to support you. Many conferences offer ribbons or stickers you can add to your badge that match topics of interest. Look for tools to indicate your own interests and to quickly identify the interests of others.
- **Active listening is an important form of participation.** Many people dislike networking because they think they have to carry the weight of the conversation or be aggressively self-promotional. In fact, one of the best networking strategies you can use is active listening (see www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm for more on active listening). Asking thoughtful questions can help you build connections in a way that naturally makes it about your shared interests. Questions may be as simple as asking someone to tell you about herself or whether she has any hobbies/plays any sports.
- **Get to places early.** It can be overwhelming to walk into a space where everyone is already grouped up and actively in discussion: You feel like you're awkwardly hanging off to the side of a conversation at best—or outright interrupting to join in at worst. Arriving at locations early (and listening actively and using the tools provided by conference organizers) allows these groups to form around you.
- **Be a considerate networker.** Etiquette for networking is somewhat culturally dependent, but the following tips are likely relevant in most circumstances:
 - Repeat a person's name when you meet her, and use her name throughout a conversation.
 - Avoid joining a group of two unless you are invited into the conversation.
 - Introduce yourself and those you've been speaking with when someone new joins the conversation.
 - Do not monopolize another person's entire networking time.
 - If you feel you've made a genuine connection with someone, ask if you can stay in touch and don't let too much time pass before you do connect with them again.

Happy networking, and enjoy your conference.