

CONFERENCES HAVE AMAZING BENEFITS

Conferences can take a lot from delegates – in terms of time, money and energy required to get to often far-flung locations. But as the research of PETRA DUMBELL shows, conferences also handsomely repay participants and their workplaces.

Conferences give back more than they take. I know this, because I have been studying them in the course of my PhD for several years. I have read endless research and interviewed conference attendees about their experiences, which led to analysing data comprising more than 170 000 words. All this made me understand that conferences provide opportunities for magical moments of innovation, connection and inspiration.

For the conference magic to unfold, you need to take a lot of like-minded people out of their day-to-day jobs and provide them with a venue that is comfortable and accessible. A good mix of people is essential. It works best if they share common values but are otherwise different in terms of their jobs, experiences, careers and backgrounds.



Petra Dumbell

You then stimulate them with ideas and content and games and all sorts of bits and pieces of information, coming from movers and shakers, inspiring keynote speakers, presenters and other conference attendees. Next, you give people time to discuss these ideas with one another. Discussions will range in their depth and variety, and they will start the reflection process that is crucial to the impact a conference can make. Conferences automatically give attendees time to reflect on content, make it their own, link it to things they already know and ideas they already have, and align it with their current passions. This then sets the groundwork for magical innovation back at work.

The discussions at conferences make new connections happen, which will extend current networks and enrich projects and careers. We all know how motivating it can be to meet someone who gets you and gets excited about the same things. It's possible that you could be collaborating on a project or writing a research paper together in a few months' time.

In case you are wondering, yes, you are right: providing interesting content and platforms to facilitate discussions is not enough. You also need coffee. And good food – lots of it. Conference attendees need to soak up ideas, dream big and discuss issues they did not know existed with people they have just met. They don't have time to be distracted by basic stuff.

So, now you know about the magic. But how do you convince your employer that you need to fly to the Gold Coast for four days and need time off work and full funding in order to dream and innovate?

'Can't you do that from your desk?' asks your manager.

I don't think you can.

Other forms of professional development are equally important, but they don't provide quite the same opportunities that a conference does – a face-to-face conference, to be more specific. Virtual conferences have their place and benefits, and so does following the conference backchannel on Twitter, but it seems that people need to be in the same physical premises, away from work, for a conference to result in innovation, connections and inspiration.

My research has focused on the impact of conference attendance on academic librarians, and I have also investigated if there are factors that influence that impact. A few of these factors are summarised in the box to the right, and I have also written a paper



How to get more out of conferences

- **Think about expectations.** Yours, your manager's and your organisation's. Why are they sending you and why are you attending? It's important that those expectations align.
- **Don't worry about the networking.** Conferences are perfect places to extend your network in a casual, very relaxed way, even if you are an introvert and a room full of strangers makes you hyperventilate. Remember quality over quantity. Making two good contacts over three days may be just as meaningful as 20 superficial contacts.
- **Use social media.** It will help you to connect to others, can serve as an easy note-taking tool and keeps you on track.
- **Attend with a colleague.** Do this, if possible. My research shows that attending with a colleague has many benefits in terms of outcomes of conference attendance, especially when it comes to sharing and advancing new ideas within the organisation.
- **Reflect and plan once back at work.** Reflection time is crucial. Think about the ideas you brought back and what you might like to do with them. Who will you tell? How will you share? Also plan how you will get in touch with the connections you have made.
- **Know your organisation's culture around ideas.** Where do ideas go and in which forums are they discussed? What is your organisation's strategic plan, and do any of your ideas fit within your organisation?

summarising some of my results, which will be published in the first issue of the Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association (*JALIA*) this year. Please get in touch if you want to know more or chat to someone who is convinced that conferences are amazing. 🌟

PETRA DUMBELL AALIA

Graduate Diploma in Information and Library Studies
Curtin University, Perth, WA

BA (Hons), Karl-Franzens University, Graz, Austria

PhD candidate, School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts
Curtin University, Perth, WA

🐦 @peziii