

Making the most of the CPA Convention

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Attending conferences is an important part of professional development, and will likely be a practice that you maintain throughout your career. They give professionals and students a vehicle to disseminate valuable information related to their field of interest, provide opportunities to stay abreast with other topics outside of your area of concentration, and create opportunities to network. Conferences are also a good excuse to travel and see places that may not otherwise be on your priority list of destinations. Yet as enriching as conferences can be, they can become overwhelming; especially if you don't develop a conference plan.

I can recall the first CPA conference that I attended in 2000. It was held in Ottawa in June and I did not know what to expect. As a third year undergraduate student, I was mildly naive and overly ambitious. Although I was the only student that I knew of attending the conference from my university, I didn't let that hamper my spirits. When I received the conference programme, I perused the at-a-glance summary of events and highlighted all of the sessions that were of interest to me. My days began at 8:30am and I went right through until 5pm. I had even highlighted multiple symposia that I wanted to attend simultaneously. I found myself running from the first half of one to the second half of another. Needless to say, by about 2pm the presenters could have been speaking Greek for all I knew. It didn't take long for "conference burn-out" to set in. My problem

was that I did not have a plan going into the conference. I failed to outline my objectives and it resulted in saturation. As we approach the upcoming conference this June in Hamilton, I thought that it might be helpful to share some useful conference attendance tips that I have picked up along the way.

Identify Your Objectives for the Conference.

Individual objectives may vary depending on how far people are in their studies. As an undergraduate student, you may be on the look out for ideas for your honours thesis, or prospecting for graduate programmes and meeting with potential advisors. As a graduate student, you may want to use the conference to network with colleagues or professionals in your field of specialty. Regardless, identifying your objectives will help to prevent you from becoming burntout after the first day.

Review the At-A-Glance Summary.

CPA publishes a book of conference abstracts for each attendant. In the front of the booklet there is a multi-page summary of the entire conference programme called the "at-a-glance" (this will also be available on the CPA conference website). This is where all of the sessions will be listed, along with their times and locations within the conference facility. After you identify your goals, select the sessions that you wish to attend based on these objectives. Again, maintaining a focus will prevent you from becoming overwhelmed and may help you

to retain information. Be sure to schedule in some downtime throughout the day to reenergize.

Networking.

This is one of my favourite things to do at conferences. It doesn't matter how early you are in your studies because it is never too early to start networking. It allows you to attach some personal meaning to attending the conference and helps to create lasting professional friendships. I began to appreciate the importance of networking after I had attended a few different conferences. After a while, you begin to see the same faces again and again. Networking with these people can make the conference that much more memorable. So don't be shy to introduce yourself to people. Whether they are people sitting next to you in a symposium, or standing by you in the hallway, challenge yourself to meet 10 new people throughout the conference.

Live a Little.

Traveling to conferences are not all about work. I have a particular philosophy that I like to live by and it also applies to conferences that I attend. It goes something like this, "Work hard, and play hard". Don't feel that you have to attend sessions from the time the conference begins to the time it ends. Schedule in time for sight seeing. After all, conferences are an excuse to travel and poster sessions do not make for scenic

pictures! Travel information about Hamilton and the beautiful surrounding area is available on the web. You can also plan this out in advance. Hamilton is a 45-minute drive to the Niagara wine region in one direction, and the city of Toronto in the other. Take advantage of all that the "Golden Horseshoe" has to offer!

Lastly, make it a **PRIORITY** to attend the student social.

There is no better way to network with fellow colleagues than in a relaxed atmosphere such as this. The social is well attended, and the student section executive picks up the tab for **SOME** treats! Hess Village, a funky strip in downtown Hamilton lined with open-air cafes and nightclubs, is the destination for this year's social event. It is walking distance from the conference hotel so there is no reason for you not to attend. Bring your friends or bring yourselves. Look for information about the student social in your conference registration package. The student social is an event that you don't want to miss!

CPA conferences can be extremely educational and a lot of fun. If you have any questions about how to plan your conference agenda, or would like more information on student related activities, contact a member of the student section executive. Our contact information can be found on our website: www.cpa.ca/students.htm. Members of the section executive will be all around at the conference. We hope to see you there!