

The Human Connection

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As we continue to see changes in the way we do business, it's important to remember the foundation upon which business was built—before technology became part of the workplace. That's face-to-face human contact. Now PDAs, webinars, podcasts, and teleconferences have become common ways for us to collaborate, network, and share information. Working in today's

business world is no longer limited to all-day meetings and week-long conference events. Although conferences still remain a staple in most of today's fast-paced industries, they compete for our time and attention since technology has the advantage of instantly connecting people anywhere. It's a mistake, though, to underestimate the value of in-person events.

Seize the Opportunity

If you've only recently started your career, it's likely that you won't have a proper frame of reference to compare conferences of yesteryear. Before the technology boom in the late 1990s, regardless of industry, an annual conference was often revered as



one of the most important events of the year, and sometimes only the upper echelon of a company were allowed to attend. Since we now do a great deal of communicating electronically, why spend days traveling and taking time away from other activities to go to a conference when

you can simply participate in a webinar or download instructional materials from the Internet? The answer is simple: There is no substitute for the human connection. Aside from the educational aspects, conferences offer myriad professional development and networking opportunities. Being able to discuss current trends or industry news or to commiserate with other practitioners who share

the same (or even different) perspectives as you is something that in-person conferences deliver best. Throughout my career, I've seen connections made at conferences that resulted in new job opportunities, business opportunities, and the expansion of personal networks. Finding new opportunities, after all, is the inherent benefit of bringing together large

groups of people who share common interests.

Breaking the Ice

At IMA, we realize the value of conferences and will continue a long-standing tradition at IMA's 88th Annual Conference and Exposition this

June in Phoenix. Conference first-timers can “break the ice” through some special networking events, popular at many of today’s top conferences. At the First-Timers’ Orientation, newcomers can participate in a speed-networking session where they will chat with other neophytes, exchange business cards, and quickly establish a handful of new acquaintances. After two minutes, participants rotate and begin “networking” with someone new. Because they eliminate any apprehension and awkwardness normally associated with meeting strangers in a new environment, I find these sessions to be extremely beneficial, and they get your adrenaline pumping.

Another great opportunity at IMA’s Annual Conference is our mentor program, which we initiated last year and which pairs new members and Conference first-timers with more seasoned attendees to help them become familiar with the Conference environment. Those paired with a mentor will have already made their first Conference contact, so it becomes much easier for them to relax and begin meeting other members. Having been mentored, new members later become mentors-in-training and eventually full mentors during future conferences. What better way to quickly get connected than with a Rolodex full of other ambitious professionals?

A Blast from the Past

Conferences can be beneficial to professionals of all ages and skill sets, not just newcomers. If you’ve been a working professional for any length of time, you’ve undoubtedly witnessed changes in the way people work. Many of the people I speak with recall some of the most rewarding times of their career taking

place at in-person meetings and conferences. They walk away from the event with a reaffirmation of their career choice and a sense of pride about being affiliated with a professional association. If you haven’t been to a conference event recently, it may be worth convincing your boss of the benefits associated with attending. Not only will it be a welcome break from the office, but the exchange of knowledge can be invaluable. One good idea at a conference can change the way you or your organization does business forever.

Time Management

Today’s fast-paced world necessitates around-the-clock availability. Working 9 to 5 is all but a distant memory. Many companies are demanding more and more from their employees, which limits the time they are able to spend outside the office. To keep up with the changing times, many conference organizers have adjusted their conference schedules to provide a maximum amount of activity in the least amount of time. The concept of “white space” is becoming less and less common, much like recess at grade school. Since time is such a valuable commodity, many conference schedules have been condensed to a few days compared to the week-long events of the past. If you absolutely can’t spend several days away from the office, consider attending a conference that’s being held locally. You also can register for a single day at many events instead of paying a full registration fee. And, as an absolute last resort, consider attending a conference that takes place over a weekend, and try to make it there on your day off. While you might think that’s the last thing you want to be doing on

your downtime, it’s guaranteed to be time well invested.

While times have changed, conferences still remain an ideal center of networking, learning, and enjoyment. More important, they serve as a unique platform that allows for face-to-face communication, undoubtedly a key factor to continued business success. No matter if you’re at the early stages of your career, a seasoned veteran, or somewhere in between, there are more than enough valuable reasons to make it to a conference this year.

To learn more, read my previous article titled “What Makes a Professional Conference Worth Attending?” in *Strategic Finance*, March 2007. ■