

Ideas to Action: Ten Hints for Getting the Most from a Conference

Planning ahead, dividing the workload, and effectively sharing the knowledge gained from attending a conference can maximize your results

By **Joan Getman** and **Nikki Reynolds**

You probably registered for EDUCAUSE 2002 with high hopes and enthusiasm because it is one of the biggest conferences for information technology professionals in higher education. By attending, you get exposure to new ideas, leading-edge and emerging technologies, effective practices, current policy and law, and technology products. In addition, there are 6,000 potential contacts with whom you can network, both at the conference and when you get back home. What a great way to raise your awareness and to invest in both your organization and yourself, right? Or does all of this come across as simply exhausting and overwhelming?

Everyone in higher education has experienced the satisfaction and frustration of venturing out on the Internet — Web searches extend your reach and bring an incredible volume of information to your desktop. But too much of a good thing can become worthless if you have no means of sorting through it, not to mention figuring out how to use it. Just as specific search engines help you find valuable resources and focus your efforts, the following ten hints can maximize your conference experience. We hope that by using some of these strategies, the wealth of ideas and information you find at EDUCAUSE 2002 or any other conference you attend will not bury you but instead inform and motivate you to action when you get home.

1. Plan ahead.

The days leading up to departure for a conference are often packed with last-

minute assignments, meetings, instructions to leave behind, and even packing up all the work you plan to do on the road. However, if you can find the time to start bridging the distance between what faces you at home and what the conference offers, you'll have a better chance of focusing on information and ideas relevant to you. Before you leave for the conference, make a commitment to your staff that you will share information with them. Watch them hold you to that promise when you return!

As you prepare, consider both the type of information your organization needs most and how you will disseminate that information when you return. Take inventory of current projects, concerns of senior management, potential initiatives, and professional development goals for you and your staff. Add to the list any particularly challenging issues you face. Ask your staff if they have any burning questions, and have them review program offerings and highlight topics of interest. Are you looking for products and vendor solutions? Are you looking for process and program plans? Are you looking for collaboration partners? Armed with this information, you can choose the most promising sessions for meeting your organizational needs and interests. The Itinerary Builder (available for most EDUCAUSE conferences) and conference program are excellent tools for mapping out a plan and organizing your schedule for the conference.

Consider options for effectively sharing what you expect to learn with your

staff. Write an overview of themes and hot topics, develop a list of contacts in particular topic areas, or create a product comparison. What about a summary of a program or best practices? You might consider whether it would be useful to do a presentation for administrators or faculty. Another option is to invite speakers you will have heard to your campus for a seminar. Consider targeting ideas and information at particular staff members according to their stated interests and current projects rather than letting one long report sit in everyone's inbox. These choices will guide how you organize and package the information you gather while at the conference.

2. Set realistic expectations.

Understand the reality of how much you will be able to do when you return from the conference. Understand, too, that you are not alone in feeling overwhelmed by the thought of acting on all of the good ideas that you will encounter.

You might collect a hundred great ideas and act on only one. Does that reflect a lack of competence? Definitely not. What it does show is a strong grasp of reality and an ability to focus. (If you surveyed your colleagues on this issue, you would likely find you're not alone in feeling inundated by the possibilities.)

Remember that change is incremental, and choosing a direction may be as important as taking strides toward change. Attending a conference gives you the opportunity to assess potential

directions available to your organization. Hopefully, you already have a sense of your organizational priorities and areas of need. With that road map in your head, review your long list of good ideas and be selective. If you do end up implementing even one idea and it addresses a long-standing issue or major challenge, or it launches a new initiative, the time invested in attending the conference was well spent.

3. Use e-mail to keep yourself on track, both at the conference and afterwards.

E-mail is a convenient way to remind yourself of “to-do’s” regarding ideas, contacts, and projects and how they relate to your programs back home. E-mail notes to yourself at least once or twice a day. That way you’ll clear some brain space to take in more! If you have included colleagues in the planning process, start sending back tidbits of information, contacts, e-mail lists, Web links, and other references so that you can start having meaningful conversations as soon as you return. The only caveat for e-mail is to beware of getting sucked into reading the mail piling up in your inbox while at the conference and missing out on what’s going on around you. Limit your e-mail reading and focus instead on making quick notes now about things that might slip your mind later.

If the lines at the e-mail kiosks are long and you don’t have time to wait, consider carrying a “light bulb” sheet with you. When the light goes on, jot down your idea. Be succinct and specific.

4. Write a daily summary of what you learned.

Be realistic: if you wait to write summaries of your experiences and findings until you are on the plane or, worse, back in the office, it probably either won’t happen or at best will be a superficial overview. Too much information will have accumulated to sort through easily, and you’ll start spending time on the daily business of your organization.

Try using breaks and a few minutes in the evening at the conference to go back

Pass ideas on to staff, and don’t worry about how rough they seem. It’s content and the thinking around it that counts.

to the initial planning you did and write summaries that focus on key issues. It might also help to write for a specific audience, whether it is your colleagues, management, faculty, or administration. Again, it helps to get the information out of your head so that you can focus on the next day’s offerings.

5. Share all of your ideas and experiences with your colleagues.

Sometimes good ideas languish simply because we think they are not sufficiently organized to share with others. We should realize that our colleagues who need ideas will pick up on the interesting and significant points we pass along, even if they are not polished. Pass ideas on to staff, and don’t worry about how rough they seem. It’s content and the thinking around it that counts.

6. “Divide and conquer” the program for the most benefit to your institution.

Frequently institutions will send teams of people to larger conferences, such as the EDUCAUSE Annual Conference. If you will be part of such a team, get together before you leave for the event (or even on the flight out) and plan ways of splitting up the conference to get the most information back to your institution. Consider the interests of each individual, as well as the needs of their teams or departments. Think about individual learning styles as well: Who will get the most from the formal presentations targeted at a particular problem? Who will be able to use panels or overviews of hot topics to assist in future planning? Who will gain the most from individual conversations on specific projects and programs or products? These considerations will help decide who

should attend which kinds of sessions that the conference offers. In this way, you and your colleagues can plan your attendance so that your institution gets the best return on the conference, without overtaxing any of you.

EDUCAUSE conferences provide a wide array of planning tools to help you organize your time and make selections. Using comprehensive, cross-referenced track descriptions and an online session planner that inventories your interests and suggests a customized conference schedule, you and your colleagues should be able to plot your way through the conference offerings quite effectively.

If you’re representing your institution on your own, consider it an opportunity to meet national and international colleagues. Offer to trade summaries with someone who is attending a session you are interested in and vice versa. If all else fails, EDUCAUSE and many other organizations offer audio recordings of each major session.

7. Talk to people at the sessions you attend to create a network of colleagues.

This hint may be a no-brainer. For many, however, the spirit is willing, but it isn’t always easy to make connections with conference attendees you don’t know. Talking to strangers is difficult at first.

If your tendency is to run off to a corner lounge or stand at an e-mail kiosk at lunch time, try this instead: Make a commitment to practice (and we do mean practice) introducing yourself and describing your organization or institution to your table companions, finding out a little bit about each of them. It only takes a few repetitions before you have what the folks on the vendor floor call a “talk track” that will break the ice for you any time you need it. We’re not suggesting a phony or insincere approach — just a jump-start to get your conversation going. If you decide to make the effort, the reward is a much richer and probably more fun conference experience, one that may yield references, resources, and collaborations down the road. Don’t forget, you are

probably not the only one who feels uncomfortable, and the person you approach might really appreciate that you opened the door first.

The EDUCAUSE Annual Conference offers many avenues for meeting and getting to know people. Try attending at least one constituent group meeting — you'll be talking to others in a small group setting on specific topics. Constituent groups are designed to bring together professionals with a common interest and begin discussions that will ideally lead to the building of communities of interest and practice. It's a great way to get past the introspective barrier so many "techies" seem to carry.

8. Attend sessions that will introduce you to new ideas rather than those where you might feel the most comfortable.

Try to arrive at a balance between seeking validation for directions you have taken, both safe and risky, and allowing yourself to be introduced to new or different perspectives and practices. Networking with colleagues facing the same challenges and trying the same solutions

can be a rich and fruitful experience. Not only can you compare notes and give each other support, you can often learn from mistakes others have made. When you decide to seek out alternative approaches and differing strategies, you may benefit by discovering useful ideas that could be applied to current or future concerns on your own campus.

9. When you return home, set up an action plan (with milestones), and commit yourself to reflect on, and assess, what you have learned.

If you have decided to heed some of the hints above, you will return home to an inbox of notes that will jog your memory, a staff that will speak the same language as you, and summaries of solutions, product comparisons, or practices that can be shared both internally and externally to your organization. This will provide you with a good head start. Give yourself enough room and time to reflect. Create a timeline with milestones marking how and when you will take steps to share and hopefully to act on specific ideas and information.

10. Realize that the effect of attending a conference could be as subtle as a change in attitude.

Attending a conference will affect change because it gets you out of the office and away from the regular routine. While most think their work environments are dynamic and rapidly changing places, people fall into institutional ruts — enjoyable ruts perhaps, but ruts nevertheless. Conferences give you a chance to get out and check up on your attitudes. Immersion in, or exploration of, timely and relevant topics, and the camaraderie of professionals who share your passions and interests, can remind you why you chose your career path in the first place. You get recharged and return with renewed enthusiasm and confidence that you are putting our efforts in the right place.

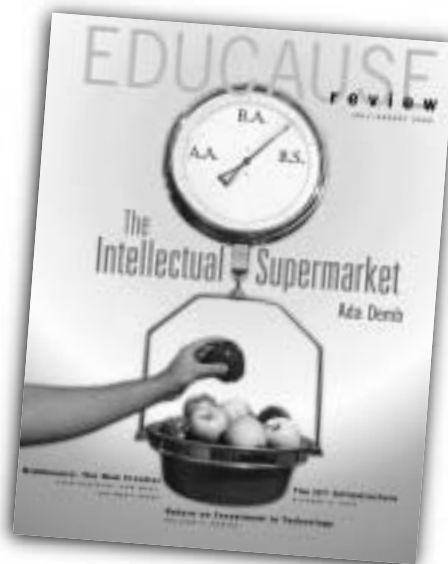
Attending a conference makes it possible to find time to think and to get some distance between yourself and your organization. Doing this often enables you to take a broader view and to regain your perspectives, which may lead to new insights and solutions. You cannot be an agent of change in your organization or institution without also changing yourself. Often, it is vital that you are the first one to change, to do things differently.

If you return from the conference with a sense of dissatisfaction, it may indicate the need for some as-yet undefined organizational change. A sense of confidence and affirmation will probably help current initiatives progress toward successful completion. These subtle changes are indicators of professional development and growth and should be nurtured if you expect to survive the shifting demands and rapidly changing needs of supporting information technology in higher education. *e*

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