

Getting the Most Out of a Conference



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Many of you will be attending the Annual CAWC Conference in Quebec City this year, or you may be planning to attend other similar events. Conferences are an investment of your time and money, so you want to make every second count. Here are some tips for getting the most from any conference you attend, whether you're a first-timer or a seasoned conference-goer.

Before You Go

- Book off a vacation day or two to see the sites. Quebec City is one of Canada's most beautiful locations!
- Arrange to meet with colleagues that you only see at conferences. Book "dates" to make sure you connect with everyone you want to see.
- Make checklists of everything you think you'll need, such as clothing, personal care items, medications, stationery, electronics, chargers and fitness gear.

"On breaks, I sit and take five to 10 deep breaths to create some silence for a moment. I also do ankle rotations during sessions to promote circulation. It is a long time sitting for a nurse!"

—Maryse Beaumier, Trois-Rivières, QC

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- Visit the hotel Web site and check it out on a map so you know where it's located, if there's parking, how long it takes to get there from the airport and so on. See if there's a pool or workout facility in the hotel or nearby.
- Register for any sessions that need pre-registration.
- Create some objectives for yourself. Be realistic and specific about what you hope to accomplish.

When You Arrive

- Depending on the time of day, take a walk in the

neighbourhood around the hotel and conference venue. It's good to know how far away the nearest drugstore, convenience store and restaurants are and how long it will take you to walk to the conference site.

"I work out a plan with colleagues and divide attendance to different presentations."

—Diane Grégoire, Gatineau, QC

- Register as soon as you can. In the mornings, just before the sessions start, the line-ups can be long. Don't risk being late for a session because you hoped no one else would be at the registration desk.
- If it's your first time at the conference, plan to go to the first-time attendees' event. It's a great way to meet people and to learn about where to go and what to do.

Preparing for Each Day

- Dress in layers. Conference rooms, large or small, are impossible to keep at a constant temperature, and everyone's idea of a perfect temperature is different. Layers are the best solution.
- Not sure how to dress? Comfort is an important consideration, but so is making a good impression (you never know who you'll meet). Most experienced conference-goers dress in casual business attire with comfortable footwear.
- Make sure your bag contains everything you'll need for the day so you don't have to return to your room. Preparing a checklist is a good way to ensure you don't forget anything important.
- Eat a good breakfast. Think of yourself as a thinking-marathoner for the days of the conference and feed your brain with high-quality nutritional foods.
- Bring some easy-to-eat foods along with you.

Conferences often supply snacks and meals, but they may not be what you want when you want it. You know yourself, so come prepared.

Choosing Sessions

- Once you get your registration package, check out the confirmed agenda and finalize which sessions you want to attend. If you're attending with colleagues, discuss whether you want to split up or attend certain sessions together. The syllabus will contain an abstract for each session and will give you details on what to expect.
- As tempting as it is to go full throttle for the entire conference, if you're exhausted because you're trying to do it all you probably won't be able to get the best value for your time. So identify your A-list sessions and your B-list sessions. If you start to flag, drop a B-lister so you'll be fresh and alert for your A-list sessions.

“I purchased a couple of pairs of compression socks before the last conference. Wearing them improved my energy level and made a big difference in how my legs felt by the end of each day.”

—Kyle Goettl, London, ON

- Consider attending a session on something completely outside your area of expertise. It's surprising how much you can learn from people who don't do what you do.

During Sessions

- If you want a good seat, arrive early. This is a good time to introduce yourself to someone seated nearby and expand your network.
- If you arrive late, quickly and quietly take a seat.
- Turn off your cell phone or put it on vibrate.
- If a session doesn't meet your needs, leave it and join a different session. All CAWC sessions start by stating their objectives (these are in the syllabus, too), but it sometimes happens that a session isn't what you thought it would be.

“Nothing makes me more grumpy than sore, tired feet. Forget fashion; I wear comfortable walking shoes since there are usually great distances to walk and lots of standing.”

—Gail Woodbury, Toronto, ON

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- Participate as much as you can. You'll get the most out of sessions if you put something into them.
 - Take notes, but don't bury your head in your notepad.

The Exhibit Hall

- Bring business cards if you have them. Some exhibitors have prize draws.
- Ask questions! The company representatives at the booths are extremely knowledgeable about their products.

Getting Through the Day

- Hydrate adequately. Water's the perfect choice.
- If you're sitting a lot, get up, walk around and stretch when you can.
- If you normally have a fitness routine at home, try to continue it during the conference. Do you run or walk in the morning before work? Do it here. Pack your yoga mat. Use the hotel swimming pool. Check out the fitness room.
- Set aside a few minutes to find some quiet time or go outside for a change of scene.
- Know where the washrooms are.
- At the end of each day, write a mini-summary. With so much going on it's easy to lose track of important ideas if you don't write them down.

“Participer à un congrès représente pour moi l'occasion idéale de mettre à jour mes connaissances : j'apprends des conférenciers, de mes échanges avec les gens que je rencontre, et je suis informée des nouveaux produits en visitant les exposants.”

—Louise Forest-Lalande, Montreal, QC

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