
The Five P's: Make the Most of Professional Conferences

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The AAAS Annual Meeting is quickly approaching! This year's meeting is in [Seattle, WA, from February 13-16, 2020 \(https://meetings.aaas.org/program/\)](https://meetings.aaas.org/program/). Whether you're a first-time attendee or have been attending conferences for decades, we hope you can use these five tips to get the most out of this amazing gathering of scientists.

These tips are not just for the AAAS annual meeting. They can be applied to large professional conferences in any field. All you need to do is remember the five P's: Plan, Present, Pac-man, Professional, and Protect.

#1 Make a Plan

Making a plan is especially important for very large conferences with thousands of attendees. These conferences will have many sessions going on simultaneously, and it can be overwhelming to try to decide what to attend at the last moment. These days, most conferences are abandoning paper program booklets in favor of the more eco-friendly online equivalent. Many will also have a

smartphone app containing the full schedule. Take advantage of these online resources! Spend some time creating a plan for yourself, and try to find the must-see speakers for you. Don't forget to give yourself time to visit the expo booths and catch up with colleagues and friends. It is also a good idea to schedule some networking time (e.g. coffee and catch up) with folks ahead of time. This is a lot easier than trying to find each other in all the conference chaos!

#2 Be Present

When you are in a session, be in the session. Do not try to answer email or finish your slides while you are listening to a speaker. Not only is this rude, but it is also ineffective. When you try to multitask during a talk, you are not doing your best work and you are not learning anything from the speaker. Studies have shown that multitasking can even be bad for your health, in addition to [making you less productive and inefficient \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-squeaky-wheel/201606/10-real-risks-multitasking-mind-and-body\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-squeaky-wheel/201606/10-real-risks-multitasking-mind-and-body). So, turn your email notifications off, close PowerPoint, and focus on the presenter. You may also want to take notes, whether with a notebook, a note on your phone, or in a document on your computer. No matter what method you choose, try to eliminate distractions and just be present. If at any point you need to work on something or answer email, remove yourself from the presentation room and find a quiet place to get your work done. You will get more done this way, and what you do will be of higher quality because you are not distracted by a speaker.

#3 Pac-man

One of your goals when attending a professional conference should be to build up your network, whether that means creating new connections or maintaining and strengthening existing ones. When you find yourself networking and chatting with people, adopt the [Pac-man rule \(https://www.ericholscher.com/blog/2017/aug/2/pacman-rule-conferences/\)](https://www.ericholscher.com/blog/2017/aug/2/pacman-rule-conferences/): “when standing in a circle of people, always leave a gap so that someone new can join.” The Pac-man rule, named after the video game character, shows others that you and your group are welcoming and open. It also helps new attendees who find networking intimidating to more easily move out of their comfort zone. By Pac-man-ing, you show others that you're approachable, and you will meet more people to add to your network!

#4 Be Professional

For many, conferences are a mini-vacation, or are the beginning of a longer vacation. Unfortunately, this vacation attitude can bleed into the conference setting. There are a few simple ways to maintain professionalism at a conference:

1. Dress appropriately. Depending on your field, full business attire may be required, or jeans and t-shirts may be appropriate. If you're uncertain, err on the side of more formal, then gauge what others are wearing and adjust if necessary. You should also aim to be comfortable, as conference days can be very long and involve a lot of walking. Also, do not forget a sweater, because conference venues tend to run cold.
2. Maintain professionalism with everyday politeness and good manners: say “please” and “thank you” to the conference staff, shake hands when you meet a new person, avoid harsh language and swear words, etc. *If you wouldn't do it or say it in front of your boss, don't do it or say it at a conference.*
3. Be mindful of your alcohol consumption. Most conferences have opportunities to enjoy open

or cash bars. These events can be the highlights of the conference, where you build up connections and friendships. But they can also be the time where you say something you do not mean or do something you regret. Before you begin drinking, set a limit for yourself, and drink a glass of water in between drinks. *Remember: you are with colleagues at a work event, not at a bar with your friends.*

#5 Protect your Time, Space, and Health

Conferences can be just as stressful as a week of work, and maybe more so. There are many things to do, people to see, and you may have much longer days than you are used to. Remember to care for yourself in addition to having a good conference experience.

- Make sure you get enough sleep. If you had a small time zone change (1-2 hours), try to keep to the same sleeping schedule you usually do.
- Do your best to eat well, eating fruits and veggies whenever available. Conferences tend to provide a lot of snacks, but they are often things like sweets and muffins. These are fine in moderation, but they will make you feel more and more lethargic as you depart from your typical eating routines. *Finally, be sure to drink water as well as coffee.*
- Listen to your body and your emotions. If you are feeling overwhelmed, go for a walk. You do not need to attend a talk in every single session of the conference. If you're in a new city, try to see a sight or two while you are in town, or attend a play or a sporting event. Consider going to the spa at the hotel and get a massage or relax in the hot tub.

Do your best to avoid perfectionist thinking about maximizing your conference attendance, getting the most information, or making the most network connections for your dollar. You are there for work, but you are also a person. Take care of yourself.

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