

6.4 Networking at conferences

Networking at conferences is a core skill that you will need to develop as an assistant professor. Success in academia depends a lot on being invited to things – to program committees, to journal editorships, review panels, etc. Getting invited is a combination of three factors: the work that you do, who knows you and your work, and luck (as with everything in life). Networking is about increasing the set of people who know you and your work, so that the next time they need an expert in your area, they'll think of you!

So the first thing to realize is that the best way to attend a conference is *not* to sit through all the talks. Really! You might feel like that's the "best value" (given how much you spent to get to the conference) but it's really not.

The talk marathons that we have in CS conferences are a consequence of our unique conference-first publishing model, where we publish our work in conferences rather than in journals. In most other fields, journals are meant for publishing research, and conferences are meant to meet people. As a result, there is a lot more time planned for interaction.

The way to make the most of a conference is to attend a few sessions, but spend the rest of the time meeting people.

Go through the schedule beforehand and mark out a few sessions you would like to attend. For those sessions, pay attention, and go up to the microphone and ask any questions that come to mind. Speakers love when folks have questions! There is nothing more deflating than practicing endlessly and giving a good talk only to be met with no questions. So your questions will be appreciated.

There is this wrong notion that for networking to be useful, you have to talk to "important/famous people". And because it's scary to talk to famous people you haven't met before, you get stuck and don't get started. This is closely tied to the notion that you should have a goal in networking ("to impress Prof. X").

The goal. Here's what I'd recommend instead. Your goal is to be able to go up to a new person and have a conversation for five minutes without having anxiety or panic attacks.

That's it. It could be anyone, like a new student at another research group. There doesn't need to be a "payoff" in the conversation, and you don't need to explicitly ask for anything or say you are looking for jobs or anything like that.

What should you talk about? Have a short introduction and one-two sentence elevator pitch (see [this](#) from John Wilkes at EuroDW 2018) about your work ready. *"Hey I'm Vijay Chidambaram, an assistant professor from the University of Texas at Austin. I work on storage*

systems for emerging technologies and applications". Cap it to a minute or so – give the other person time to absorb and respond. Ask them about their work. People love to talk about their work, so this is always a ready topic!

One of the nice things about academic confs is the shared context that provides material for conversation. Talk about the food. Talk about the keynote. Talk about the poster session!

Obviously, this comes easier to some than to others. It is harder for introverts and shy folks. Regardless of how naturally gifted you are at this though, it's a learnable skill that gets better with practice. Once you get better at this skill, you will then be able to approach people you want to talk to.

Poster sessions and evening events. Make sure you go to the poster session. Look for the stuff close to your work. Introduce yourself and ask questions! Again, authors love when folks come and ask questions at the poster session! If there are other evening events, attend those if you can. Sometimes there are fun Ask Me Anything or similar sessions later in the day.

Taking a break. Feel free to take a break and recharge as much as you need. Weaving in hallway sessions and talk sessions gives you a change and a break from each type of activity. I'm usually exhausted at the end of each conference day. It can be exhausting having to be "on" all the time. This is normal, and okay. Get a good night's sleep!

To summarize, attend a few sessions, and spend the rest of the time in the hallway. Practice introducing yourself and talking to new people.

"Success" in networking just means meeting people, learning about their work, and spreading the word about yours. You don't need to have tangible outcomes like a new collaboration or interviews or something like that for it to be successful. Focus more on the process (being able to introduce yourself, holding a conversation) than the outcomes. You will rapidly get better at this, and as the set of people you know grows, it will become easier at the next conference. With time, you won't have to consciously do this – conferences will just become a place where you meet friends and talk about the cool work your group is doing.

Other Resources

Check out this excellent advice on [attending conferences](#) from Michael Ernst and David Notkin.