

CONFERENCE

A conference is generally understood as a meeting of several people to discuss a particular topic. It is often confused with a convention, colloquia or symposium. While a conference differs from the others in terms of size and purpose, the term can be used to cover the general concept. A convention is larger than a conference; it is a gathering of delegates representing several groups.

At a conference, innovative ideas are thrown about and new information is exchanged among experts. Its purpose could be one of the following:

An **Academic Conference** is a gathering of scientists or academicians, where research findings are presented or a workshop is conducted.

A **Business Conference** is held for people working in the same company or industry. They come together to discuss new trends and opportunities pertaining to the business

A **Trade Conference** takes place on a larger scale. Besides businessmen, there are members of the public who come to network with vendors and made new connections. Such a conference consists of workshops and white paper presentations.

A **Un-Conference** differs from the traditional conference, since it avoids the high costs, top-down organizational hierarchy and sponsored presentations. All attendees are equally knowledgeable about the topic and the discussion follows an open mode; usually without a single speaker addressing the gathering.

Most conferences have one or more keynote speakers who will deliver the keynote speech. These are common at academic and business conferences. The speakers chosen are eminent personalities in the related field and their presence is meant to attract more people to attend the conference. There are various types of conferences:

A **Symposium** is a casual gathering and includes refreshments and entertainment.

A **Seminar** is organized to discuss a particular topic. They are usually educational in nature and attendees are expected to gain new knowledge or skills at the end of the seminar

A **Workshop** is more of a hands-on experience for the participants with demonstrations and activities; the amount of time one speaker addresses the group is limited

A **Round-Table Conference** is a get-together of peers to exchange thoughts and opinions on a certain topic, usually political or commercial. There are a limited number of participants who sit at a round table, so that each one can face all the others

Points to be considered as a checklist when planning a Conference:

For the smooth running of a conference, meticulous planning must be carried out well in advance. All important aspects of the conference must be covered, so it is better to maintain a checklist. A back-up plan to handle emergencies is always mandatory. The planning works better when individuals in the planning and administrative committee have clear roles and responsibilities assigned.

Firstly, the purpose of the conference must be clearly understood. The budget needs to be defined. While some companies have sufficiently large conference rooms to accommodate the event, an external venue is most commonly needed. The advantage of using a conference room in a hotel is that accommodation costs might be offered at a discounted rate. One needs to negotiate for the lowest price at several venues that meet the specifications of the conference. Once the date, time and venue of the conference are fixed, the availability of all presenters, vendors, attendees and special guests needs to be confirmed. Registration forms have to be sent out and as the responses come in, they must be recorded to get the confirmed number of attendees. This is needed to take care of the logistics for the conference, such as flight bookings, accommodation and car pick-ups for important attendees like the keynote speaker and special guests. Based on the theme of the conference, the invites, agendas and brochures have to be designed. Sponsors' names and logos must be included in these leaflets for advertising.

The rules of thumb when choosing a venue are as follows:

Is there Wi-Fi connectivity and technical infrastructure to support the number of attendees? This includes audio-visual facilities, projectors and communication equipment like phones, speakers and microphones. Does the building have air-conditioning or heating, depending on the climate and season? Is a separate meeting room required? What about infrastructure for speakers, for e.g., a dais and stand? Does the venue have catering facilities? Snacks and meals will be needed, and a private dining room is preferred. Is there ample provision for car parking? Is there security on the premises?

Before the actual event, a detailed program schedule has to be ready; this includes the order of activities, list of speakers and breaks for refreshments and meals. Volunteers must be assigned to help and guide attendees during the conference. The schedule and other important details have to be shared with these volunteers and they must be trained in advance to handle queries.

A lot of things are needed during the conference, such as basic stationery supplies, name tags for confirmed attendees and seating arrangements. At the main entrance to the venue, a registration table would need to be set up, with a receipt book for collecting participation fees. Arrangements must be made to provide water, tea and coffee throughout the duration of the conference.

As each of these points is being taken care of in preparation for the conference, the budget has to be continuously tracked and expenses have to be managed accordingly. Tracking of the master plan also needs to be done on an on-going basis. In this way, the conference will progress smoothly and will appear well-planned to all.