

How to Get Approval to Attend an Academic Conference

Author

Enago Academy

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It's time to accept that conference attendance is no longer a right or entitlement for any researcher. As training and travel budgets get slimmer each year, getting approval to attend a [conference](#) is becoming tougher. For those of you who don't get a research presentation accepted or don't get invited to chair a plenary session, navigating the budget approval process successfully requires careful planning.

Understand the Rules

You may be tempted to compile a detailed PowerPoint presentation outlining your stellar performance this past year, but that does not make you the perfect candidate to represent your institution at the conference! That strategy would be better utilized in your annual performance review and salary negotiations. Getting to the conference is not just about you!

Remember that you are competing for funds from an amount that has been set aside for training, so focus on showing how the conference is a perfect fit for your individual training needs, and more importantly, how your department will benefit from you receiving that training. Make it less about "what's in it for me," and more about "what's in it for us."

Develop a Strategy

Even if you only need a signature from your immediate [supervisor](#) for permission to attend, you can help your case by giving your supervisor a comprehensive justification for your attendance, just in case he or she is called upon to justify spending that money from the training budget.

A well-structured and clearly documented request packet can make everyone's life a little easier:

- **A brief summary of your research**—your supervisor may be familiar with your work, but the person holding the purse strings may not.
- **A brief critique of the conference** to illustrate why you selected that event as opposed to others. Even if it's the annual conference for your research specialty, that's not a justification to attend.
- **A detailed list of which sessions/presentations** you plan to attend and why. Anything to underline your intention to work at the conference (as opposed to improving your golf handicap) will help your case.
- **Planned networking meetings**—if you already know fellow researchers from other institutions who will be attending, document how valuable such networking opportunities will be for you.
- **Commit to a full debrief when you return**—offer to make any and all conference materials available to the department. This doesn't mean sharing the conference t-shirt or any goodies you grab in the vendor hall. It means putting together a summary presentation of what you learned so that the colleagues who weren't able to attend can benefit from your attendance.

Be Willing to Compromise

The first response to your request may well be "There's no money in the budget this year." At that point, move to Plan B and offer to pick up some of the costs yourself. How much you're willing to pick up has to be a personal decision. How badly do you want to attend this conference, and how much can you afford to contribute? Based on that decision, you can come to an agreement on airfare, accommodation, food, etc. Offer to share a room with a colleague to lower expenses. If the conference is close enough, drive rather than fly.

If workload is an issue, commit to managing your conference schedule so that you can still participate in mission-critical meetings or project deadlines. The more you can establish the value of the conference to you and your department, the less likely it will be perceived as an institutionally funded vacation.

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