



# Maximizing the Conference Experience: Tips to Effectively Navigate Academic Conferences Early in Professional Careers

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## Abstract

Most behavior analysts who are certified or licensed regularly attend professional conventions to obtain required continuing education credits and remain current with advances in clinical applications and research findings. As the number of behavior analysts in the profession grows, so, too, does the number of novice conference attendees at professional events. Attending conferences can be exhilarating to those who are new to the field and the context of professional events. The purpose of this article is to provide practical guidance on the topics of how to thoughtfully select a conference, how to set goals for attending (e.g., strengthening skills, developing new skills, networking), and how to proactively plan for an upcoming conference, as well as some consideration for after the conference has ended.

**Keywords** conference · continuing education · convention · professional development

By the end of the first 10 years in which the Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) certification was available, there were 5,731 BCBAs. In the following 9 years, from 2009 to November of 2018, that number climbed to 30,540 (Behavior Analyst Certification Board [BACB], n.d.a); that is an increase of over 400%. As our field grows, so, too, have the number and size of conferences, along with the offerings at those conferences. For example, the annual convention for the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) is the largest professional convention in the field, with 93 ABAI affiliated chapters. Many of the 51 affiliated chapters within the United States, as well as the 42 affiliated chapters outside the United States, hold annual conferences (ABAI, n.d.). In 2018, there were 5,528 registrants for the 44th Annual ABAI Convention (M. E. Malott, personal communication, January 3, 2019). There are myriad annual and semiannual

conferences offered throughout the nation and world each year (see Table 1 for a sample list).

There are many reasons why behavior analysts attend conferences. One primary reason is professional development (Houston, 2013), including earning continuing education units (CEUs) to maintain professional credentials (Robertson, 2017). Professional conferences also provide a means for you to present your work, learn from and about others, and interact informally with other professionals within the same field (McCarthy, McDonald, Soroczak, Nguyen, & Rashid, 2004). According to the BACB's® *Professional and Ethical Compliance Code for Behavior Analysts* (the Code; BACB, 2014), participation in behavior-analytic professional and scientific organizations is an obligation of every behavior analyst. In fact, the BACB requires certificants to obtain a number of CEUs each 2-year recertification cycle (BACB, n.d.b). In 2018, the BACB conducted a continuing education survey and reported that out of 5,875 BCBA respondents, 60.1% preferred to obtain continuing education in person. However, 74.4% reported that expense and 61.7% reported that travel were barriers to obtaining in-person continuing education (M. R. Nosik, personal communication, March 9, 2019). Conferences encourage access to the newest research and procedures in the field, and the events can provide professionals with new techniques, best practice procedures, new areas of research, and new networking contacts. When attending conferences, you have the opportunity to listen to talks or

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**Table 1** International, National, and Regional Behavior-Analytic Conferences

Conference	Organization	Month
National and International Conferences		
ABAA Conference	ABA Australia	July
ABAI Annual Convention	Association for Behavior Analysis International	May
ABAI International Conference	Association for Behavior Analysis International	September (biannual)
ABAI Autism	Association for Behavior Analysis International	January
ACBS World	Association for Contextual Behavioral Science	June
APBA Convention	Association for Professional Behavior Analysts	April
EABA	European Association for Behavior Analysis	September
J-ABA	Japanese Association for Behavior Analysis	August
OBM Network Conference	Organizational Behavior Management Network	March (biannual)
SQAB	Society for the Quantitative Analysis of Behavior	May
Regional Conferences		
4CABA	Four Corners Association for Behavior Analysis	March
BABAT	Berkshire Association for Behavior Analysis and Therapy	October
BALC	Behavior Analyst Leadership Council	March
HLABA	Heartland Association for Behavior Analysis	March
MABA	Mid-American Association for Behavior Analysis	October
SEABA	Southeastern Association for Behavior Analysis	October
Thompson Center Autism Conference	Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders	October
VBC	Verbal Behavior Conference	April
WIBA	Women in Behavior Analysis	February

*Note.* To conserve space, we did not list state or local conferences in this table. Readers are encouraged to research and attend conferences in their home and surrounding states.

discussions from prominent researchers in the field. There is no substitute for listening to experts in the field. By attending conferences and hearing others present their research, professionals may be reenergized and more enthusiastic about their own work or a new area of the field (Hickson, 2006). The result may be that professionals are motivated to do better in their own areas of the profession.

Conference events also set the occasion for attendees to ask questions and debate over topics at conference panels and talks (Hickson, 2006). These events stimulate conversations among attendees and allow hundreds of people to formally discuss their positions at the symposia or after the talks at the conference social events. Conferences provide a forum for you to observe notable scholars debate with authority about topics important to them and the discipline (Hickson, 2006). Observing these live, and sometimes passionate, discussions provides the audience an occasion to hear both sides of the conversation immediately. More recently, these discussions and notable presentations have provided attendees with perspectives to reevaluate their own position on important topics including, but not limited to, functional assessment methods, cultural inclusion, and gender representation.

Capitalizing on all the experiences and resources a conference has to offer can be overwhelming—even well-established researchers have described this feeling (Hickson, 2006). Those of you who are new to the practice of “conferencing” might be unfamiliar with how to select and navigate a conference to best meet your needs and goals, how to deal with conference etiquette, and how to balance socialization and self-care during the conference. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide novice conference attendees with some guidance to increase the likelihood that a conference experience will be purposeful, meaningful, and successful. It is also our hope that employing some of these strategies will result in attendees having some fun!

We conducted an informal review of the available literature on the topic of conference success, which, not surprisingly, was fairly bereft. We also relied on our combined experiences from attending conferences over the course of our careers. Collectively, we have attended over an estimated 114 professional behavior-analytic conferences, beginning as early as 1998. We have attended conferences as practitioners, volunteers, students, presenters, supervisors, researchers, and academicians. Across these roles and throughout the years, we have all had varying levels of success. One author is not

ashamed to share that her first ABAI convention produced a mild panic attack resulting in a swift midsymposium rush to the bathroom to deal with a few tears and myriad unpleasant private events with some self-talk in the mirror. It is our hope that readers who may be less familiar with the conference experience can use this article to avoid the need to have their behavior directly shaped by such experiences.

We will begin by briefly describing the different types of conference events and other general conference terms to help you navigate a review of the conference program. These events may vary slightly depending on the organization that is hosting the conference, so we encourage you to search for descriptions of these events on the conference websites. There are different types of conferences offered throughout the year, many of which offer topics to target the dissemination of diverse content areas across behavior analysis. Other conference conventions and special events may be designed for distinct populations (e.g., regional conferences, autism, organizational behavior management). Conferences range from small, 1-day, single-track events to extremely large conventions with hundreds of events spanning several days, sometimes across multiple physical locations. Undoubtedly, the larger the conference, the more confusing or daunting the experience might be. However, for a first-time attendee, a smaller local event can also produce some anxiety.

Regardless of the type of conference, invited speaker events are hosted by experts in the field who are selected by conference planners for the purpose of discussing new and innovative areas. Specifically, keynote speakers are scheduled at prominent times in the conference (e.g., at the beginning or end) during which there are no conflicting events because these talks establish an underlying theme or tone of the entire conference event. The audience at these events is typically larger, whereas workshops contain smaller audiences to allow for focused learning, often from individuals who are experts in a specific topic. Workshops may present novel applications of behavior analysis across longer duration events with more detail and resources. However, there may be an additional fee for attending these events. During symposia events, presentations from different speakers are arranged regarding a similar topic. The presentations are moderated with little interaction between speakers or from the audience. During symposia, a discussant may be present to highlight themes across the paper presenters. When reviewing the different symposium events within the program, note the affiliations of each paper within the symposium. Some symposia are composed of paper presenters from the same organization or institution, whereas others contain presenters from a variety of locations. Similarly, panel discussions are moderated by a panel chair. The panel of experts includes different speakers describing a similar topic among themselves and the audience. Audience members are encouraged to participate by submitting questions. Another setting in which attendees have the opportunity

to ask the presenter many questions is a poster session. These sessions are slightly less formal events where individuals present poster displays depicting research, theories, or resources. Conference attendees are encouraged to search around the poster locations and speak with many poster presenters about their work. Poster sessions are typically located near the conference exposition (“expo”), in which employers, organizations, and university programs provide more information and resources to interested attendees. Finally, business meetings are held by conference committees, special interest groups (SIGs), and regional organizations to recruit members and provide their members with updates, while planning for future initiatives. Although some business meetings are open for anyone to attend, others may require an invitation. Therefore, it is important to review the program book to determine the availability of events. Now that we have reviewed common terminology located within the conference program, we will address common goals for attending conferences for professionals who are early in their careers as behavior analysts.

## Goals of Attending a Conference

We approached this article with the goal of providing a practical framework for evaluating the purposes of attending a professional conference. We have sorted the various potential goals of conferencing into three categories: advancing current skills, discovering and exploring new areas of interest, and networking while socializing. Putting some forethought into evaluating what you want out of a conference experience allows for effective, goal-oriented behavior before, during, and after the event. We provide specific considerations for strategies to maximize the conference experience depending on your reasons for attending. We have also included some tips and ideas to assist the novice conference goer with planning logistics, applying self-care behaviors to promote a pleasant experience, and performing follow-up activities after the conference is over.

## Strengthen or Advance Existing Skills

One of the primary functions of attending professional conferences is to strengthen or advance existing knowledge or repertoires. Whereas graduate school and clinical training provide foundational knowledge and skills for applying behavior-analytic services or research, it is critical that behavior analysts continue to ensure that their repertoires are strengthened and remain in line with developing best practices. For those who are Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts®, BCBAAs, or doctoral-level BCBAAs®, Code 1.03 (BACB, 2014) requires that individuals work to maintain content knowledge, as well as competence in the applied skills

within their particular area of practice. Maintaining knowledge and skills might be interpreted as simply ensuring that what you learned in graduate school and clinical experience remains relevant—a sort of passive check-in and self-reflection. However, we suggest that the maintenance of behavior-analytic knowledge and skills requires a more dynamic and active approach. It may be helpful to consider the concept of honing one's knowledge or skills. *Honing* is defined as refining or perfecting a skill over time (Hone, n.d.). Applied to the repertoires needed in each of your areas of practice, honing knowledge and skills places a focus on small and precise advancements. When you define these goals, a skill set might move from competency to mastery or expertise. Likewise, content knowledge may evolve from a solid understanding to an advanced critical conceptual analysis.

Behavior analysis is an ever-developing field, wherein a strong bidirectional relationship between research and practice exists. Practitioners and researchers can—and do—read scholarly articles to stay abreast of the developments and needs in their areas to continue to build their content knowledge and skills. One difficulty with scholarly articles is the many months or years required to publish the pieces for the general public (Björk & Solomon, 2013). By regularly attending conferences, one can learn about recent advancements and begin to use that information long before it is in print (Naseman & Weber, 2013). Code 1.03 (BACB, 2014) specifically identifies conference attendance and workshop participation as methods for this undertaking. Attending professional conferences may provide more timely opportunities for practitioners and researchers to hone their skills, which may translate to the provision of more effective treatment to consumers or more thorough or effective instruction for trainees and students.

When you attend a conference with the primary goal of honing existing skills, a helpful strategy is to highlight events in the program presented by individuals who frequently publish in your area of practice or research or about whose work you have questions (Holstein, 2013). These events will allow you to evaluate whether your clinical or research practices are in line with those who are considered experts in the topic. Paying close attention to the way these presenters talk about the topic can also advance your conceptual understanding and may produce ideas for innovative applications or ways to solve clinical or research problems. Furthermore, observing the public speaking of others provides you with examples and nonexamples of presentation strategies. Public-speaking skills are required to present behavioral information across many of the roles that behavior analysts occupy within the field (e.g., parent education, supervision, trainings, conference presentations). Therefore, if the presentation content did not add to your advanced repertoire, you may still leave the event with more presentation strategies to implement in your practice.

Attending panels that are made up of experts on a topic can provide insight into how others approach solving problems. Panel events typically allow for audience interaction, affording the occasion to submit your own question. This provides an opportunity to see how the panelists respond to questions from the audience, which may produce a deeper understanding of concepts or widen your verbal repertoire for explaining concepts or procedures to others.

In addition to planning out what events to attend, it may be helpful to apply some other preconference preparation when the focus is to strengthen existing repertoires. Download recent or seminal articles by authors who are leading events that you plan to attend and read them in the days leading up to the event. Doing so can help clarify your areas of strength, as well as areas that may still need some development. This may also provide an opportunity for you to develop questions that you have regarding the researcher's study or applications to practice. These may be questions that you intend to ask the speaker during or after the presentation, or they may just be questions that you want to try to answer using the information from the presentation. Having these questions prepared ahead of time can facilitate active listening and may streamline your note-taking during the presentation. If you are attending the conference with fellow students or colleagues who are at a similar experience level as you, consider meeting for a conference-planning session to review the offerings and share questions that you have. Preplanning by yourself, or with others, can increase your ability to gain useful information that you can actively implement to advance your knowledge and skills.

During the events, practice active listening and note-taking (Robertson, 2017). Avoid the temptation to get work done by multitasking. Give the speaker your full attention and engage in some covert verbal behavior. In other words, ask yourself questions about what the speaker just said, think about how you might apply what the speaker is talking about to your own work, or try to reframe what the speaker said in plain language. Pull out those questions you drafted ahead of time and use them to guide your note-taking. Include a “to-do” or “task list” section in your notes, where you can list things that you want to do following the talk. For example, the presenter might mention an article or book that you want to read or describe an application of a strategy or procedure that you want to implement. An added benefit of active engagement in the presentation is that you are behaving in a professional and respectful manner and communicating to the presenters and audience members that you value the information being presented.

## Explore and Discover

Although the primary focus of attending conferences for many individuals is likely advancing existing skill sets, it is also important to dedicate some time to explore and discover areas

outside of one's expertise. There are several reasons to use conferences to expand your knowledge. As discussed by LeBlanc, Heinicke, and Baker (2012), there may be various circumstances that could lead a behavior analyst to pursue working with new populations or in new settings. For example, you may need to relocate to a geographic area that does not offer funding for the population with which you previously worked (LeBlanc et al., 2012). In such a scenario, a behavior analyst would likely need to "branch out" in order to continue practicing. This will be a much easier task if you have some knowledge of other subdisciplines and applications of applied behavior analysis (ABA) to different populations. As LeBlanc et al. (2012) stated, "A forward thinking behavior analyst could enhance his or her viability in future markets by diversifying their consumer base to enable responsiveness to dynamic marketplace contingencies" (p. 5). Conferences are a perfect place to expand your knowledge and gain training in new areas.

Of course, attending a talk or a workshop on a new topic does not mean that you are automatically qualified to begin practicing. According to Code 1.02, "All behavior analysts provide services, teach, and conduct research only within the boundaries of their competence, defined as being commensurate with their education, training, and supervised experience" (BACB, 2014). Behavior analysts must still behave ethically by seeking further training and supervision in order to become fully competent before beginning to practice their new skill independently (see LeBlanc et al., 2012, for a full discussion of how to expand your professional competence). Some suggestions regarding obtaining further training or mentorship opportunities are described in the next section (i.e., Network and Socialize).

Another reason to use conferences to explore and discover new areas is to enable yourself to be an advocate for your clients, yourself, and behavior analysis as a field. Code 2.09 states that behavior analysts have the responsibility to "advocate for and educate the client about scientifically supported" treatments and also have the responsibility to "review and appraise the effects of any treatments about which they are aware" (BACB, 2014). Code 6.01 states that behavior analysts must "uphold and advance the values, ethics, and principles of the profession of behavior analysis," and 6.02 states that behavior analysts are responsible for "promoting behavior analysis by making information about it available to the public" (BACB, 2014). You will be better equipped to advocate for your clients if you are more broadly familiar with applications of ABA. Further, you will have the information and tools to more successfully advocate for yourself as a professional and for the field of behavior analysis. This may be achieved if you continue to expand your own knowledge regarding the scope and efficacy of behavior-analytic principles and technologies.

A third reason to use conferences to expand your knowledge is simply to continue to learn and to enable yourself to be

a knowledgeable citizen of the broader field of behavior analysis and to maintain contact with the history and underlying philosophy of behavior analysis. The term *ABA* has become closely associated with "treatment for autism spectrum disorder and other disabilities," despite the fact that the field of behavior analysis has vast applications. If there are organisms that behave, then behavior analysis has—or at least has the potential for—an application for behavior change. Behavior analysts work with both nonhuman and human populations across a wide variety of applications. Translational behavior analysts studying behavioral economics have begun to explore methods for enacting large-scale behavior change. For example, Dr. Gregory Madden worked on an effective low-tech gaming system implemented in public schools to increase fruit and vegetable consumption (Madden, 2018), and Dr. Derek Reed worked with a start-up tech company to create a system to nudge users of a driving app to divert themselves off of busy highways to enable faster and more efficient commutes (Reed, 2017). Animal behavior analysts have developed preference assessments for large predatory cats (e.g., lions) in order to identify the most potent reinforcers possible. The reinforcers are used to increase positive control over big cats in captivity, which allows implementers to minimize aversive control techniques (Alligood & Miller, 2018).

There are likely many other reasons to use conferences to expand your knowledge and discover new applications of behavior analysis, but we will allow the readers to identify those for themselves. Once you have identified *why* you want to use conferences to expand your knowledge, you will also need to identify *how many* and *what* new areas of the field you will explore and *how* you will do this during the conference. Deciding *how many* areas to explore will depend largely on your overall goals for the conference you are attending. If your primary goal is to learn more about making modifications to a specific procedure that you are implementing with a client, then you may dedicate most of your conference to honing your knowledge and only save a small amount of time for discovering something new. If your primary goal, however, is to discover new topics, then you may decide to dedicate most of a conference to exploring. On the more extreme end, a behavior analyst could choose to attend an entire conference that is dedicated to a topic or area of application that is outside of his or her expertise. For example, a behavior analyst whose primary area is applications in special education might attend the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science conference to explore and discover contextual behavioral science.

Determining *how* and *what* you want to explore and discover will depend on the conference itself. Multitrack conferences that offer a variety of talks per session will give you more options to decide between honing and discovering, whereas single-track conferences will make this a bit easier by minimizing the alternatives. However, most conferences will usually provide the opportunity to explore and discover.

Some conferences will offer pre- or postconference workshops, which can be an excellent way to expand your knowledge, as workshops often involve smaller groups of attendees and may include hands-on activities. Some conferences will also hold business or organizational meetings within the conference location for SIGs, which can provide additional opportunities to learn about and become involved in a new area.

## Network and Socialize

Another significant benefit of attending conferences is socializing and networking with other professionals who have shared interests in the field. These individuals may become future mentors, new collaborators, or simply information-sharing acquaintances. Professional friends from conferences can help you when you encounter a research or teaching problem. They can help you when you need advice on projects and with data analyses and can act as a sounding board for ideas or ethical dilemmas (Hickson, 2006). Those connections can come in handy at any stage of a professional's career—for getting help with clinical cases, looking for supervision or mentorship, or preparing for a job (Robertson, 2017; Severt, Fjelstul, & Breiter, 2009). Behavior analysis is a small, but growing field; therefore, acknowledging the occasion to have many influential individuals in one location is the key to developing future opportunities for professional growth.

One benefit of networking at conferences is obtaining materials and resources, potential employment prospects, and new roles in the related association. A simple method to begin networking is to view any exhibit materials that are available at the conference. Exhibits are events in which professional or academic organizations showcase their products or services, as well as career or educational opportunities. This format provides you an occasion to speak with representatives from different companies or academic institutions and review resources, all in one location. Also, the exhibits are often in places where people congregate, which provides excellent locations to interact with others in the field (Hickson, 2006). Employment prospects may become available by contacting the leaders of organizations. A simple conversation over coffee or dinner can be an excellent method to assess job opportunities. Discussing career options in informal contexts will likely give the job seeker additional insight into the positions and potentially an advantage over other candidates (Naseman & Weber, 2013).

You may choose to begin your networking experiences by determining goals related to both reconnecting with colleagues and meeting new professionals at the conference. When attending these events, it may be tempting to spend much of your conference time with colleagues from your own organization; however, doing so may limit your ability to connect with colleagues and friends outside of your current work or school context and to make new connections.

Additionally, the professionals from your organization may have their own list of professionals to meet (Holstein, 2013). If you find that colleagues are attempting to monopolize your time at the conference, draw clear boundaries—this will benefit both parties. Tell your colleagues, “I need to meet new people tonight, but tomorrow I am going to a session that I think we will both find interesting”.

To cultivate stronger networks, it is helpful to strategize before the conference begins. Prepare a list of people you want to speak with (Belsky, 2011), as well as potential topics that may provide an opportunity to have a quality discussion (Knight, 2015; Stone & Rossiter, 2014). Conference events only last a few days, and everyone has a demanding schedule, so advanced planning is essential to coordinate the best use of limited time (Naseman & Weber, 2013; Robertson, 2017). If there is someone with whom you are especially interested in building a mentor relationship, a good approach may be to arrange for a mutual friend or colleague to introduce you, even via e-mail before the conference begins (Knight, 2015). Additionally, previous mentors and supervisors or individuals who are more advanced in the field may be better prepared to tactfully approach unfamiliar professionals in order to introduce themselves and you. This process minimizes any barriers you may be facing when approaching an expert you do not know. Asking individuals in your current network about possible topics to discuss can also prepare you to strike up a conversation on shared interests. If you do not have any mutual colleagues, but you are planning to attend a talk where the person is presenting, e-mail the person before the conference and tell him or her that you are going to make it a point to attend the session and that you look forward to meeting after the talk (Holstein, 2013). If the person is not presenting, ask if there are any talks he or she is interested in attending, and if you can join him or her (Knight, 2015). Attending the same talks at the conference provides an opportunity to discuss the content of the presentation. Simply asking how others liked the presentation is a great way to begin a conversation.

Although conferences provide a unique occasion to interact with individuals on a personal level, it may be intimidating to interact with famous scholars, and even the best of us might wonder, “What are we doing here?” (Hickson, 2006). Although many well-known behavior analysts are happy and flattered to talk to you about their work, you might continue to feel apprehensive about approaching them. Luckily, there are a number of situations that can be contrived to maximize the reinforcing value of successful interactions and minimize the occurrence of potentially punishing interactions. You may find that your private verbal behavior (e.g., “I’m too new to the field, I don’t know what to say, and this person doesn’t want to talk to a newbie like me.”) is inhibitory. A potential strategy to overcome the inhibitory effect of such thoughts is to acknowledge those statements (e.g., “I am having the thought that . . .”) and then commit to engaging in some

interaction with an individual you would like to meet. This could be as simple as introducing yourself and paying a compliment to the individual about his or her work. Perhaps you are up for a brief conversation or grabbing coffee or a drink to discuss a research article with someone whose work you admire. Alternatively, you could commit to a more substantial gesture, such as arranging to attend a meal together. Another strategy to support networking is to bring books and research articles with prepared questions to start conversations. As a note of encouragement, we have been consistently impressed by how passionate, friendly, and open delegates at conferences are once you break the ice. It has been our collective experience that researchers and important figures in our field are happy to talk about their work.

When reviewing the program to plan staged meetings with other professionals, keep in mind that the presenting author is the only person guaranteed to attend the talk. The presenting author will usually be indicated in the conference program. Additional authors listed under the presentation will not necessarily be at the talk or the conference. If you see that a researcher you want to meet is listed as an author and want to use the symposium as a way to introduce yourself, check to see if the person is the presenting author. If not, you might still consider attending that symposium to meet collaborators who work with the author you were hoping to meet. These professionals likely have similar interests and may facilitate a future meeting with the author.

Another method to practice networking behaviors, for those of you who find the previously suggested behaviors particularly challenging, is to seek volunteer positions within the conference association. These positions provide an activity on which many individuals can collaborate. If creating meaningful conversations from small talk is unpleasant, then conversations created from discussions about project planning and task execution may come more easily. In some cases, volunteer positions are stationed within conference events, which allow you to attend presentations during your service. Becoming involved in the conference through a volunteer position not only allows you the chance to meet other volunteers and attendees (Sousa & Clark, 2017) but also engages you in service to the science of behavior analysis. To represent yourself as a volunteer is a professional commitment to the advancement of your field. Furthermore, involvement in the conference itself can provide you with more information to navigate the event better and make it a more reinforcing context. Finally, if registration fees are a concern, early enrollment for volunteer positions may offset costs.

Remember, all manner of opportunities can arise from making professional connections, so plan ahead and book time during the refreshment breaks to meet people you want to connect with (Croxall, 2009). According to Robertson (2017), professionals have shared some of their best learning opportunities, conversations, and networking outside of the

talks they attended at conferences. Therefore, although it may be great to see the city, remember that you are ultimately in attendance at a conference to take advantage of all opportunities. If you would like to take a break from formal conference activities and are not sure what to do, going to the hotel bar for some educational socializing is always an option (Robertson, 2017).

As you develop these new connections, it is important to note the dynamics of the relationships you are cultivating. An essential component of networking is reciprocity and responsiveness (Khoo, 2011); politeness, reliability, and appreciation are further important factors in networking (Hubrath, 2014). For new professional relationships to flourish, both parties should benefit from the new relationship. People will start to avoid you if you contact them only when you want something, but if you can help others become more successful, they will value the relationship and help you too (Ferrazzi, 2005). Simply sending an appreciative e-mail about the content of the talk or quality of the discussion at the end of the conference can plant a networking seed that may bloom by the next conference (Robertson, 2017). Finally, make notes of important meetings or discussions on professional business cards. These are prompts to add to future communication (Robertson, 2017).

## Steps for Attending a Conference

### Selecting a Conference

When selecting a conference, begin by considering why you are choosing a particular conference or event. It is important to determine your areas of interest, scope of practice, and schedule. Selecting a conference for the first time may be a difficult decision, given the many options currently available to professionals. Determine the benefits available for your own professional development, for your clinical or academic work, and for your organization (Stone & Rossiter, 2014), as applicable.

One method for selecting a conference is to choose based on the overall content described in the conference program. Recently, conferences make programs available a few months in advance and in different formats (e.g., mobile apps, online programs, preordered hard copies). Reviewing the program for event content areas or audience knowledge levels provides information about the scheduled presentations. For example, if you primarily work providing clinical services to individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), you may select a conference that focuses on clinical application generally or that focuses specifically on ASD. However, if you are a graduate student who practices clinical work and research, you may select a conference that offers a wide range of applied and experimental presentations. Another method for selecting

a conference is to obtain advice from other professionals and mentors in the field who have attended that conference in the past. For example, you might inquire about the quality of the presentations, the availability of resources provided after the presentations, the scope of the content within the conference program, or the accessibility of the presenters throughout conference events. It may also be helpful to make the decision based on the journals associated with the conference association (Holstein, 2013). Journal descriptions, as well as the conference mission statement, can be located on the organization's conference website. The type of research publications accepted to journals and special-topic issues can reflect the quality of submissions accepted at the conference. You might base your selection on the fact that a given conference is the best venue to present your own work. Another consideration for selecting which conferences to attend is the opportunity for earning CEUs for your certification or licensure. If this is important, then you should at least confirm that a given conference offers relevant CEUs.

For those of you who have families or are breastfeeding, there are likely additional considerations when selecting which conferences to attend. Some conferences have begun to offer support for parents, such as on-site childcare and lactation rooms. Similarly, searching for conference organizations that provide accommodations for specific needs or disabilities may be important for ease of access to the conference content. It may be useful to learn more about the organization that hosts the conference to see if it offers policies and amenities to support your specific needs.

### Planning to Attend the Conference

The first step toward a successful experience is to begin planning for the conference well in advance. To assist readers with this process, we have included a resource to guide conference preparation (see the [Appendix](#)). Although planning will vary for different conferences, we recommend beginning to coordinate for a conference approximately six to nine months in advance. Remember to identify the degree to which you want to focus on refining current skills and knowledge, exploring new areas, and networking. As we mentioned previously, you will likely want to allocate behavior related to all three of these goals, but you should allot your responding purposefully to meet your most pressing needs—in other words, prioritize. It is also important to remain flexible in both your planning and your conference attendance. Reviewing your goals throughout the conference will help you make important decisions about the events you will attend. In addition, being flexible will allow you to behave with goal-oriented actions when something happens that threatens to disrupt your well-laid plans.

**Registration** Once you have decided on which conference(s) to attend, you will need to register for the conference, reserve

your hotel room (or other lodging), and purchase your airline ticket (or other transportation accommodations). Many conferences open up registration several months before the conference, so it is important to watch for the registration dates. Some conferences can cap the number of registrants, so avoid registering at the last minute. Many conferences offer discounted registration if you register early, and often you can also get discounted registration if you are already a member of the organization hosting the conference.

**Hotel accommodations** When it comes to booking a hotel room, you may need to plan up to nine months ahead to reserve your room before the hotels are full, especially if you plan to stay at the conference hotel. Most conferences will have a partnered “conference hotel,” either where the conference is held or near the conference. There are several things to consider when deciding whether to stay at the conference hotel or to book a room elsewhere. As stated by Sousa and Clark (2017), one perk of staying in the conference hotel is convenience. Conferences are often busy and invigorating; having a private space to go rest that is only a short walk away can allow you to maximize your conference time while also allowing you to take any necessary breaks. Additionally, the hotel restaurant and bar are common gathering places for conference attendees and can offer an excellent (and quick) way to spend time networking.

Most conferences will offer discounted room rates at the conference hotel. These discounted group room rates usually have a limited hold on them and thus must be reserved early. Additionally, these rooms tend to sell out quickly, so if you want to stay at the conference hotel, it is best to reserve your rooms as far in advance as possible. In the event that the conference hotel no longer has available rooms, conferences will also secure rooms in overflow hotels within the proximity of the conference hotel. Information about the conference hotel and overflow hotels is typically accessible on the conference website.

If these hotels fill up before you make a reservation, or if you decide that you do not want to stay at the conference hotel, there are almost always other lodging options (e.g., Airbnb, time-shares, nearby relatives). It is usually feasible (and perhaps less expensive) to book a room at a nearby hotel and commute to the conference. You can likely find a hotel that is within walking distance (maybe conveniently just next door to the conference hotel) or a short drive away. Either way, it is good to be thoughtful in booking your hotel to help you maximize your time and resources at the conference. It might not be the best idea to reserve a room that is a 20-min drive to the conference, even if the room is significantly less expensive than the hotels that are closer.

**Hotel roommates** Another consideration when booking your room is whether you will be rooming alone or have any



roommates. The pros and cons of sharing a room at a conference are fairly obvious. Rooming alone gives you more privacy, and you can book a room wherever you want, without having to worry about coordinating with colleagues. Sharing a room can be more economical, but you lose a bit of privacy along the way. If staying at the conference hotel is important to you, then sharing a room is a good way to make the cost more affordable. If you elect to room with colleagues, it would behoove you to select individuals with similar goals for the conference or to differentiate your goals upfront. A misalignment of roommate goals can cause conflict when one individual socializes late at night, whereas the other plans to attend early morning events.

**Schedule of activities** For planning your travel, the main advice that we have to offer focuses on planning the dates that you will attend the conference. As Robertson (2017) pointed out, “conference locations are chosen to provide opportunities for attendees to do a little sightseeing, so take advantage.” You might consider arriving a day early or staying a day late to give yourself time to go explore. Also, many conferences offer pre- or postconference workshops, so you might also plan an extra day to attend those as well.

As the conference nears, you should begin to plan what your days will actually look like once you are there. As mentioned in the networking section, you might begin to reach out to friends and colleagues to set up meetings a couple of weeks before the conference. Begin to research the city you are visiting and decide on what extracurricular activities you might want to do. For example, if a major sports team is located in that city, see if they will be having a game and purchase tickets. Attending local events might provide an occasion to invite old friends and new colleagues on a social outing away from the conference. Also, begin to look at the conference program to review what talks are offered in each time slot. For smaller conferences that are single track, this will be a simple matter of looking to see what is offered and deciding if you will stay for all talks or use some of that time to go do other meaningful activities.

**Conference program** For larger conferences, browsing the program can be a bit more confounding, which is why we recommend looking early. As we mentioned previously, it is important to keep your goals in mind when planning out your conference activities. This is especially important when you begin to look at the program and flag talks. Conferences are now beginning to offer a variety of program book formats, including hard copies, online searchable programs, or mobile apps. The mobile apps are particularly beneficial because attendees can search the full program, create a schedule of events, and sometimes contact other attendees (Sousa & Clark, 2017). Notifications are also sent if events you have indicated interest in are during overlapping time slots. During

the conference, the app will notify you of the subsequent event on your schedule, event start times, locations of events, and directions to those events.

You may find it helpful to write your goals down before diving into the program. A helpful strategy is to go through the program in stages. For example, in Stage 1, simply look through the titles of the symposia and other events to get a feel for what is being offered and make a note of anything that looks interesting. At this point, do not worry about flagging too many talks or whether there are talks at conflicting times. Stage 1 is simply to see what is being offered and what stimulates your interest. In Stage 2, keep your goals in mind and revisit all the talks and symposia that you flagged in Stage 1 for a closer look. Read the abstracts and descriptions and take a look at who is presenting. Use this information to help you decide whether you want to attend the symposia or not. Use Stage 2 to identify which symposia you can remove from the list and which ones you will consider attending, but do not be too concerned if you have flagged multiple symposia in each time slot. Use Stage 3 to finally narrow down exactly which talks you will attend. You might do this before arriving at the conference, the morning of the conference, or routinely throughout the conference. The authors of this article usually flag multiple possible symposia per time slot and decide on which ones to actually attend throughout the conference day. In the likely event that there are two conflicting symposia, consider asking a friend or colleague to attend one while you attend the other. Each of you can then take notes for the other.

Another tip to improve successful planning is to utilize the features of the conference program to help you make informed decisions. For example, most conference programs will include titles, general content areas (e.g., autism, organizational behavior management, experimental analysis of behavior), and intended audience level (beginner, intermediate, advanced). When you are armed with this information, it is easy to build a conference schedule that maximizes attending events that are most aligned with your specific area of interest, as well as your skill or knowledge level. Other features to attend to include clues in the title or abstract that can be helpful. Language such as “best practice,” “applications of,” or “advances in” can indicate that the event is perfect for someone who wants to ensure that skills and knowledge remain relevant or who wants to continue to refine and advance skills and knowledge.

## Professional Etiquette

Given the multitude of conference events you can attend with other professionals, it is important for you to represent yourself, your organization, and your field tactfully. Be prepared to meet professionals in any setting before, during, and after the conference events. Occasions to see other professionals (and

be seen by other professionals) can take place at the conference location, around the city, or during transportation (e.g., boarding similar flights). Therefore, we have included some professional etiquette suggestions to practice beginning the moment you leave your home until you return home from the conference events.

Begin by planning your conference wardrobe after checking the weather for the location of the conference. The clothing items you select should be clean, pressed, and appropriate for the events you plan to attend. For most conferences, you will be expected to wear either business formal or business casual attire. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of your clothing, you can ask colleagues who have attended the conference or review the conference organization's website for pictures of previous conference events. Choose clothes that are formal and comfortable, so that you can travel quickly to the next event location. Packing clothes that you can wear in layers is a proactive strategy for times when the conference room temperatures may be unpredictable. Sometimes, hotel and convention rooms are colder than the outside temperature for which you planned.

During conference events, be respectful of the speakers and other attendees by arriving on time and staying for the entire event. Arriving early may also provide you with an opportunity to introduce yourself to the speakers. However, be mindful that before and after the event, presenters may need the time to prepare, clean up, or transition to their next talk. Additionally, some event rooms quickly meet capacity, and you may be tempted to leave the previous talk early. If leaving an event early is unavoidable, then plan to sit in an aisle seat or toward the back of the room to limit any distractions. Additionally, be mindful of extraneous noises you may produce (e.g., ruffling personal items, loud typing, taking pictures, snacking, phone alerts). One benefit of attending conferences is asking speakers questions publicly. Ask your question when the presenter indicates; typically this is toward the end of the presentation. When delivering the question to the presenter, keep your statements polite, neutral, and concise.

Endurance to perform well throughout the conference's events depends on preparation and self-care. It may be easy to lose sight of self-care because of busy schedules; however, it is important to prioritize your well-being. During the day, stay hydrated by bringing a reusable water bottle and locating refill stations. Keep your energy high by bringing healthy snacks to consume between talks. Avoid paying higher hotel prices for snacks by searching for nearby stores. This can also be helpful for obtaining last-minute items that you forgot to pack. At night, prioritize sleep to obtain the necessary amount to be attentive during the following day's events. Additionally, although your days will be busy with attending professional events, it is possible to maintain your exercise routines by visiting the hotel gym or bringing shoes for a quick run around the city. One final concern for maintaining self-care is avoiding overeating and

excessive drinking. Not only does mindful eating and drinking help limit expenses, but it can also prevent inadvertent and unproductive interactions with other professionals.

Finally, "dance like nobody is watching" does not apply when you attend conferences. From the beginning to the end of your conference experience, expect that future colleagues, employers, supervisors, or mentees will observe your professionalism at all times. Avoid engaging in behaviors that can be perceived as unprofessional, such as gossiping, complaining, stealing, interrupting, or similar discourteous actions. The intended or unintended impression you leave on others is lasting, especially within the growing field of behavior analysis. Conference events should be viewed as opportunities for professional development across learning and networking activities. Therefore, we encourage readers to invest in their future and their relationships within the field by using the suggestions we provided.

### Concluding Conference Activities

Surviving the full conference—packed with new information, socialization, and restaurant food (and drinks)—is an accomplishment! As we have indicated previously, conferences are marathons that require planning to maintain energy for successful behaviors. However, simply because the last scheduled talk has been completed and the closing social has ended does not mean the last task of the conference has concluded.

Before closing the book on the conference event, make it a priority to verify that CEUs are organized and fully submitted. Take a picture, make a copy, or take a screenshot of whatever documentation you are required to submit prior to submitting so you can have a record of how many CEUs you earned (Robertson, 2017). Additionally, if you have attended the conference with funding from an organization, sort any receipts for reimbursement (Goldman & Schmalz, 2010; Robertson, 2017). Even if you are funding your own conference experience, take time to organize receipts for tax deductions (Robertson, 2017).

One task that is easy to forget after the conference has ended is organizing all notes recorded throughout the conference at talks, panels, dinners, or drinks at the hotel bar (Belsky, 2011). Although many individuals may be ready to take a long break from all the scholarly content they recently learned at the conference, it is important to review and organize notes before the relevance of this information is lost. An organizational system to categorize the clinical implications, research ideas, and possible future collaborations can help determine next steps to follow up on each note. If the notes that were taken at the conference are automatically filed the next day and never reviewed, then you may be less likely to apply the knowledge gained from attending the conference.

Organizing notes is also important for disseminating what you learned to other colleagues who could not attend. Some conference goers are required to present key ideas for how newly learned information and techniques can be used to

improve practice in their workplace. If your organization supported you, it is appropriate that you discuss the ideas you learned in order to extend the resources of your colleagues and supervisors (Stone & Rossiter, 2014). If you are not required to share presentation content or resources with others,

consider organizing your notes to share this information anyway. This gesture not only builds stronger professional connections but also increases retention by continuing your contact with the new materials through the explanation of the concepts to novel audiences (Nestojko, Bui, Kornell, &

**Table 2** Timeline Checklist for Professional Conference Tasks

Date Completed	Task	Notes
<i>Before the Conference</i>		
	Review and select a professional conference to attend approximately six to nine months in advance.	
	Register for the conference, volunteer positions, and CEUs. Book hotel, travel, and transportation.	
	Organize goals for conference attendance.	
	Review the conference program for speakers, events, meetings, and special interest groups.	
	Identify the degree to which you want to focus on refining current skills, discover new areas, and network with other professionals.	
	Write down a schedule for events you plan to attend (and conflicting events).	
	Review the literature for presenters and events.	
	Initiate contact with anyone you would like to meet at the conference.	
	Coordinate with any colleagues who will, or will not, attend the conference.	
	Search tourist locations and events.	
	Check the weather conditions to plan transportation and attire.	
	Pack supplies for the conference trip (e.g., Band-Aids, pain relievers, electronic chargers, business cards, professional clothes, casual clothes).	
	Other:	
	Other:	
<i>During the Conference</i>		
	Review your goals throughout the conference to assist with your goal-oriented plans.	
	Arrive on time to each talk.	
	Take notes about content or follow-up items.	
	Network with other attendees.	
	Search nearby stores to obtain last-minute necessary items (e.g., snacks, medicine).	
	Stay hydrated and nourished.	
	Obtain necessary sleep.	
	Sightsee the conference location.	
	Other:	
	Other:	
<i>After the Conference</i>		
	Submit all CEU documentation.	
	Complete reimbursement requests.	
	E-mail speakers for resources and materials.	
	Locate articles that you noted during the conference.	
	Organize and review resources (e.g., notes, articles, business cards) you collected during the conference into categories (e.g., clinical applications, research ideas, collaborations, follow-up).	
	Send thank-you notes.	
	Note anything you would do the same or differently at the next conference you attend.	
	Share information and resources with colleagues who did not attend the conference.	
	Other:	
	Other:	

Bjork, 2014). Your colleagues will appreciate it if you send them details of a talk or the contact information for a person in their area of interest (Stone & Rossiter, 2014).

As you review your notes, determine if any commitments need to be followed up with further action (Robertson, 2017). For example, you may have met a contact to whom you promised you would send a research article. Creating a contact list of those individuals you met at the conference, relevant details about your interactions with them, and any follow-up tasks will help you remember your conversations with them. This will make it easier to contact them at a later time and prompt them to remember your interaction. These contacts are helpful for future networking or resource requests (Goldman & Schmalz, 2010). While reviewing your contact list, you may decide that you want to ask for a copy of the presentation or materials used in the research or presentation. Although not all presenters will share this information, those who do share these resources are important contacts to make. If you are interested in learning more about an individual's work or are seeking a mentorship opportunity, you can use the contact information to reintroduce yourself and coordinate a meeting in the future.

One last task before wrapping up the conference is to send any thank-you notes for special events, honors, or meetings (Goldman & Schmalz, 2010). Showing appreciation for the extra services organized at the event is another effective way of demonstrating thoughtful professional behavior. This is also a moment to establish your relationship with the individuals who organized the event or provided you with a specific opportunity (e.g., asking you to serve on a panel, discussant roles). Thank-you cards help you to emerge from a sea of faces encountered across a vast conference experience.

Given the amount of work you have just put into attending a conference event, consider whether you will elect to attend it in the future. Reflecting on the benefits of attending in temporal proximity to the event should allow for a more accurate evaluation than thinking back after several months or years. If you enjoyed the conference, then plan for the following year by checking the conference website for next year's dates and location (Robertson, 2017). There are clearly many opportunities at conferences that span learning new content to socializing and building strong networks in the field. Thriving at conference events requires planning before the conference begins and a thorough review of all events after the conference ends. However, if you review these strategies, you are more likely to feel accomplished, rather than overwhelmed, when returning home from this experience.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The first author previously sat on the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) executive council. The second and third authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

## Appendix

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