



But I'm Not a Conference Person

Skills and Professional Development



Every year, my church holds an annual weekend retreat for women. It provides women in all walks of life (single, newlywed, married, mother, grandmother etc.) with an opportunity to support and encourage one another. Attendees can choose between participating in inspirational talks and recreational activities, and are given opportunities to share meals and stories. Unfortunately, I have one friend who refuses to go. She tells me, “I’m just not a retreat person.” She maintains this preconceived notion of what retreats are like. I really can’t blame her. I harbored the same misconceptions before I attended my first retreat many years ago. I was fresh out of law school and single with no children. I thought to myself, “What could I possibly have in common with all these wives, mothers, and grandmothers?” As it turned out, the answer to my question was: “Quite a lot!”

Before I attended my first retreat, I made the mistake of labeling other women based on their current roles in life. However, as I started to meet and engage with them, I realized what a diverse and interesting background each one had. Meeting them opened up a whole new community for me. I met photographers, authors, entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, and even a former Olympic contender. By taking a weekend away from my frenzied daily routine to commiserate with other women, I felt less alone and came away inspired and reinvigorated.

Professional conferences provide all in-house counsel with the same invaluable opportunity. To those of you who may be thinking, “But I’m not a conference person,” I would pose the following questions:

- Have you ever felt lost in your job?
- Do you feel like you don’t have the support of management?
- Do you feel misunderstood by the staff?
- Is your department understaffed?

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- Are you the legal department?
 - Are you the first in-house counsel in your company ever?
 - Are you working in-house for the first time?
 - Are you worried about losing your job?
 - Are you wondering if you should stay at your job?
 - Are you struggling with burnout?
 - Are you in need of advice, resources, or information in a new or unfamiliar area of law?
 - Most importantly, do you feel alone?

If you answered “Yes,” then you are a conference person. Professional conferences provide much more than just an avenue to gain training or get updates in areas of business and law; they give you the chance to make invaluable contacts. You meet people from a variety of organizations and in all stages of their careers. I have been attending the ACC Annual Meeting for nine years, and have made lifelong friends in the process. We have seen each other through career transitions, marriage, divorce, and even family loss. I can pick up the phone and reach out to any number of my ACC colleagues to discuss an IP contract clause, an export issue, or compliance question (just to name a few). And it all started with simply saying “hello” to someone on a bus ride to an ACC function, at the morning breakfast buffet line, or with a brief introduction to someone sitting next to me in a CLE session.

I recently attended a conference for government contracting professionals. By being willing to offer a handshake and introduce myself, I was able to pick up business cards from high-level directors in multiple government agencies and provided input into a legislative implementation panel.

You never know where “Hello, my name is _” can take you. Accept the invitations to breakfast and dinners at the event. We are all subject-matter experts and we all have something to offer and gain from that first handshake. A connection that you make today could be the job opportunity you need tomorrow. “Networking” is really just a fancy word for “start with hello.”

Come to the ACC Annual Meeting in Washington, DC this October. I would love to meet you!

The question shouldn’t be, “Can I afford to attend a conference?” The question is, “Can I afford not to?”

[Maryrose Delahunty](#)



Vice President and General Counsel

Invocon Inc.