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naturejobs

Meeting pay-offs

Going to a meeting means spending time away from the lab, often involves expensive travel costs and, occasionally, can see scientists having to overcome problematic security or visa issues. But is this hassle really worthwhile?

The scientific community in general seems to think so: despite the advent of e-mail and video conferencing researchers still flock to meetings around the world. But until recently hard data showing the value of such events have been hard to find. A recent survey by Keystone Symposia, a non-profit meetings organizer in Silverthorne, Colorado, which admittedly looked only at its own meetings, has gone some way to address this lack of information. It suggests that scientists going to meetings can save six weeks of research time and US\$6,000 in funding (see *Nature* **438**, 264-265; 2005).

The survey is useful because it might help researchers justify the expense of a proposed trip. The data could be especially helpful in the present climate of tight budgets and tighter restrictions. For example, researchers working for the US National Institutes of Health now

have to make a very strong case to attend conferences.

But one thing the survey doesn't look at is how scientists can make the most of their time at a conference. The benefits of meetings — building fresh collaborations, gaining new insight — do not arise automatically; they require work. Few scientists receive formal training in setting goals and drawing up strategies for maximizing their time at a conference. Earlier in the year, *Naturejobs* listed a few ideas that we hope will make meetings more productive (see *Nature* **436**, 1060-1061; 2005).

Perhaps one New Year's resolution should be to apply these strategies to 2006 meetings, including those listed in *Nature's* annual events directory. After all, coming home from a conference with concrete accomplishments is the best justification for going in the first place.



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