ADAPTED FROM GETTY

Kentucky in Lexington, who co-organized the gathering. "The meeting was fantastic, as we had very active participation from everyone involved."

For the organismality workshop, Strassmann invited biologists with expertise in a variety of fields ranging from fungi, plants and invertebrates to cancer. That meant inviting people she hadn't previously known, and identifying them takes a lot of time, she says. She starts with a Google Scholar search, and reads all the papers by people she doesn't know. She also asks other scientists to suggest names.

Given the intimate, collaborative nature of the organismality workshop, Strassmann knew it was important to invite scientists who work well with others. She tries to determine whether researchers have this quality by perusing their web pages for studies that they've co-authored with other groups, or asking mutual acquaintances for information on good collaborators.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The site of a conference can affect its success. Furlong recommends an isolated location to encourage speakers and attendees to interact at long breaks and meals. For example, she says, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York is a bit too far from Manhattan (almost 27 miles by road) for people to head there for sightseeing. Although it is important for a conference site to be relatively close to an airport or transport centre, the main attraction, says Furlong, should be the sessions, speakers and attendees — not museums or shops beyond the site. "If you select the topic carefully, then people will come to the meeting even if it's at the North Pole," she says.

Burnett agrees. "Ease of transport is a factor, so being close to an airport is useful, but that doesn't mean it has to be a major city," he says. "We always prefer a slightly more secluded venue, where people will be less likely to be interrupted."

Yet it may be helpful to leave the venue behind, at least for a short time. Amy Shen, a chemical engineer at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate University in Japan, likes to organize an excursion and lab tours between presentations. For a recent microfluidics conference, she had planned an outing to a beach and a local castle. Rainy weather prompted her to change her plans and take the group instead to a museum that celebrates traditional Okinawan lifestyles through tours and performances. "It's a good opportunity for people to mingle, get to know each other and discuss research in a more relaxed setting," says Shen. ■

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CONTINUING EDUCATION

Societies reconsider conference plans

Organizers are starting to drop meetings, thanks to falling attendance and budget squeezes.

BY CHRIS WOOLSTON

Citing flagging attendance and falling revenue, two scientific organizations are scaling back their conference rosters.

The American Society for Microbiology (ASM) in Washington DC has cut most of its small specialized conferences, and the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) in Heidelberg, Germany, has dropped its large annual meeting in favour of speciality events.

Every year since 2014, the ASM has sponsored seven to ten specialized conferences that each drew several hundred attendees. But attendance has dropped by 5–10% since then, says David Hooper, head of the Infection Control Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and chair of the ASM's meetings board, probably because of tightened purse strings and a growing need for cross-discipline collaborations, which are more easily fostered at larger meetings.

The society will now host just one or two small conferences each year, including one on next-generation sequencing and one on cell communication in bacteria. It has also committed to keeping a meeting on biofilms that it has scheduled for next October in Washington DC.

Hooper says that the society will not trim its medium-sized or larger conferences, which continue to draw thousands of attendees. Those include the popular Biothreats conference, slated for February in Baltimore, Maryland. ASM Microbe, the society's largest conference, draws more than 10,000 attendees for posters and presentations, and is scheduled for next June in Atlanta, Georgia.

DIFFERENT TACK

EMBO, by contrast, decided to drop the annual EMBO Meeting after a sharp decline in attendance in 2015 and 2016, says programme manager Gerlind Wallon. In 2009 and 2010, the first years of its existence, the meeting drew close to 1,500 participants. But by 2016, attendance had halved. "Scientists, particularly the younger ones, are economizing to go to more specialist conferences," she says.

Small meetings seem to be more successful for EMBO, which has hosted more than 60 meetings this year and has not seen a comparable decline in the number of attendees or presenters. Although some had lower attendance than expected, others had higher, Wallon says. Since 2009, she adds, EMBO has seen a 50% increase in the number of scientists applying for grants to organize meetings.

Attendance at the some of the world's largest science conferences has stayed relatively steady in recent years. The Society for Neuroscience in Washington DC reported that more than 24,300 scientists attended its annual meeting last year in San Diego, California, just slightly below the average for the previous five years. And the European Society of Cardiology Congress brought more than 32,800 delegates to Rome in 2016, matching its 10-year high.

Hooper notes that the ASM may change its line-up and the content of smaller conferences according to input from its advisory panel. He also says that it is unclear why attendance has fallen at smaller ASM conferences, but notes that researchers have had to make hard choices. "One can't go to multiple conferences every year," he says. ■

CORRECTION

The Careers feature 'Hidden in the past' (*Nature* **549,** 419–421; 2017) gave the wrong details for reference 7. It should have read Pagnotta, A., Schaefer, B. E., Xiao, L., Collazzi, A. C. & Kroll, P. *Astron. J.* **138,** 1230–1234 (2009).

The Careers feature 'Data domination' (*Nature* **548,** 613–614; 2017) erroneously described Amelia Taylor as a former tenure-track mathematician. In fact, she was a tenured associate professor.