Conference considerations

With the various impacts of conference attendance evermore on our minds, there are many things we can do to get more out of them.

The conference season is upon us. All around the world, researchers (and journal editors) are digging out their passports, consulting session lists, downloading conference apps, telling themselves they'll definitely use the gym or pool at the conference venue and so shouldn't forget their kit, packing their reusable water bottles and coffee cups, dusting off their poster tubes, checking where they left their passports (again) and updating their slides. While the #NoFly and #FlyLess campaigns are encouraging us all to think about the climate impact of conference attendance, it's useful to consider what we're trying to get out of going to academic meetings in the first place and how to make the most of them.

Until virtual reality and video conferencing can fully replicate the experience, probably the most critical element of any conference is the opportunity to interact face-to-face and in real time with others. Planning ahead can thus make a huge difference to your conference productivity. If you can, check out in advance not just who is speaking, but also who is attending. Think about who you'd like to talk to, but also what about and why. While small conferences make this less important, it can transform a large conference into a whole different experience.

This applies equally to networking with journal editors as well as academics. Nature journal editors travel regularly to keep up with our communities and we relish the opportunity to talk with researchers. It allows us to answer questions about policy and process on our journals, including what we look for in manuscripts, and to learn from you about the different challenges you face, which helps us think about how to better meet your needs.

Questions at the end of talks are another important form of real-time interaction. The culture of question and answer sessions varies wildly across disciplines: talks in some fields never seem to have enough time while others struggle to conjure up more than one question at all. This paucity of questions is a shame and can be a missed opportunity. Although it's easier said than done, try not to be shy or intimidated: the objective of asking questions isn't to demonstrate your cleverness or sudden profound insight into the field. Critiques that can improve a research study or line of reasoning are useful and always welcome, but often it's more valuable to ask simple questions of clarification; if you didn't understand something then chances are that others didn't either and you are probably doing everyone a favour by asking such questions.

Of course, if you're giving a talk, the aim is to avoid misunderstandings and to encourage questions that can help you further your research. When finalizing your slides, take a step back and think about the clarity of your presentation and whether it is giving enough space to the key concepts. Most people will remember only a couple of things about your talk, especially given the ever-growing distractions of laptops and smartphones in lecture theatres. Be clear about what you want the audience to go away with and make sure your talk reflects that. You also never have as much time as you think you do. Don't overburden your presentation. Remember to give people enough time to read your conclusions, even if you have to skip slides.

Adding attributions to those who did particular parts of the research you're presenting to your slides is also invaluable. If you're a group leader, it's unlikely anyone believes you did all the work yourself, but group members can often go unrecognized. Giving credit and identifying more junior researchers can help them a lot in their careers. And you never look bad doing it.

As much as technology may not yet enable us to fully forego travel to conferences, it can still play a critical role in widening participation in them. More conferences are starting to host remote speakers or to broadcast talks for those unable to attend in person. Streaming or recording even only some parts of a conference can expand access enormously and should be an increasingly important component, especially as travel becomes harder for some parts of the scientific community.

There are also a growing number of tools that can allow for better sourcing of audience participation. They can remove the perceived stigma or the anxiety of putting one's hand up and give the audience a chance to vote for questions they like, avoiding the potential for the oft-maligned 'more-of-a-comment-than-a-question' question.

For conference or session organizers, it's also worth reflecting on the meeting format. Presentation-plus-questions approaches are tried and true, but the energy community employs a wealth of other formats to engage researchers. Lightning talks can offer early-career researchers a chance to practice public speaking in a less formal environment or give them exposure to old hands who might otherwise not see them. Discussion panels can promote the debate and exchange of views outside the limited span of post-talk questions. Poster sessions level out the hierarchy and facilitate a more relaxed exchange.

Finally, it's important to remember that we don't have to attend everything at a single conference or attend as many conferences as possible. Time spent at conferences is time spent away from doing research or other duties like supervising or mentoring students; it's also time spent away from family and friends. On top of that, conferences are stressful and potentially unhealthy events. As much as we should make the most of conference attendance, we shouldn't forget to take care of our health and mental wellbeing. No amount of conference travel can compensate for that. ❐