

Break the hiking habit

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Social activities are common in many research groups, often based around outdoor activities such as hiking. We argue that there are more inclusive ways to bring a team together.

Despite the tired cliché of the shy physicists scribbling equations or fiddling with experiments in isolation, research is a group effort, and most physicists are quite sociable and keen to interact with other scientists. To switch things up from chatting over a cup of coffee, most research groups organize group socials, as do many conferences and summer or winter schools. Hiking and similar outdoor pursuits are perennial favourites, but they are more problematic than their ubiquity suggests.

It is understandable that physicists, who typically spend their working life indoors, often in windowless labs, would enjoy some time in the great outdoors. A few hours in the fresh air on a sunny day is a sure way to lift moods, and exercise is healthy. Hiking also allows for easy interactions with different members of a group rather than limiting conversation to the same few neighbours around the dinner table. It's a low-cost activity because it only requires participants to get to a local nature spot, and these spots frequently offer a choice of prepared walking trails, which helps keep organizational overhead low.

Sounds great – unless you have a disability or underlying health condition or are among the quarter of the population who menstruate. Hopefully, group leaders whose teams include people who use mobility aids already shy away from organizing group hikes, but there are many less visible reasons to make a several-hour trek through uneven and hilly terrain without access to toilet facilities distressing, painful or plain impossible. Nobody wants to slow down the group because their health restricts strenuous exercise, to require a comfort break every half an hour because their medication has diuretic effects, or to change a tampon behind a tree.

As hiking and similar activities are long-running traditions in many groups, it can be



easy to dismiss these concerns as irrelevant. After all, nobody has ever complained. It is important to remember that there is no legal requirement to disclose disabilities and health conditions (or one's menstrual cycle) to an employer. Affected group members may instead choose to stay silent and stay away. Even if individuals have made themselves known, it is not acceptable to put the responsibility of devising alternatives on them, as they often already carry a large administrative burden to manage their health.

More inclusive activities might revolve around food, foster creativity, involve light physical exercise, friendly competition, or indeed a mixture of these.

Instead of a hike through the woods, why not go for a shorter walk in a local park or a botanical garden? The terrain is more accessible, the facilities are never too far, and to make a day of it, the walk can be combined with a scavenger hunt or a picnic. Instead of climbing, consider bowling, or a boat tour rather than kayaking. Some people love a bit of competition, but maybe the 5-a-side football tournament could make way for a quiz night or an evening of board games and bingo.

Scientists may also enjoy an opportunity to pour their creativity into something other than their research. Escape rooms can be a fun group activity, but community gardening sessions, improv theatre workshops or pottery classes are examples of less obvious alternatives.

Group meals and conference dinners are already common socials with only a small physical component, but they tend to limit interaction to a few people. Yet, they can be made more dynamic and fun. As a research

group, organize a potluck for which everyone brings a dish and consider giving people themes around which to base their offerings, such as countries or colours. Depending on the location of a group or conference, a wine or cheese tasting at a local producer can also be an alternative to a simple meal. With food-based socials it is, however, important to cater for various dietary restrictions and bear in mind that alcohol can be problematic; also avoid organizing them during common religious fasting periods.

Whatever activity you choose for your next group or conference social, the important thing is to consider accessibility while planning. Assuming that all is well because nobody complains is social exclusion through negligence.

It can be useful to have several options and discuss those in the research group or within the organizing committee of a conference or summer school. Phrasing the question as “What accessibility problems could this activity present?” rather than “Does anyone have a problem with this?” can foster an open dialogue and gives allies without accessibility needs the opportunity to speak up freely.

At this stage it is best to take soundings rather than a vote to inform decision-making. Blindly yielding to the majority is one way to create and reinforce minoritization. Instead, organizers ought to balance arguments. The voice of someone who is unable to walk up a hill must be heard above the voice of someone who just doesn't care much for looking at flowers.

Although it may well be impossible to find an activity that appeals to everyone, it's worth breaking the habit of the hike and considering alternatives. After all, the point of a group or conference social is to bring people together, not to exclude – least of all based on needs over which one has no control.

Next time you organize a social, try to make it more inclusive. As a rule of thumb, follow the three c's: come up with options, consider limitations and remember that *can't* trumps *won't*.

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