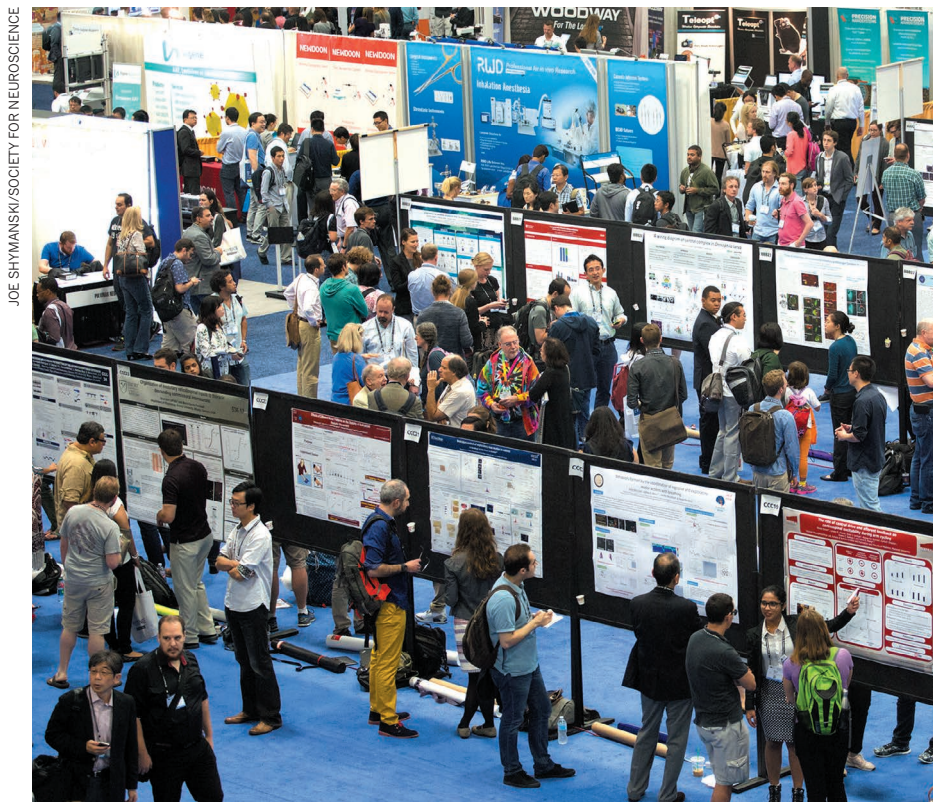


# CAREERS

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Large meetings can leave participants exhausted but exhilarated.

## NETWORKING

# High fliers

*Seven top tips for making the most of huge conferences.*

BY AMBER DANCE

Matthew Partridge spent a week in Vienna in April, but not for a holiday. The biochemist and physicist from Cranfield University, UK, joined about 14,500 scientists from 107 nations at the European Geosciences Union General Assembly. Together they immersed themselves in a programme that included 4,849 oral presentations, 11,312 posters and 88 short courses. Partridge didn't have new findings to present from his work on sensors, but says that the trip was worth it.

"I was there because I want new areas to work in," he says. "I want to find new applications that I haven't thought of, or new collaborations."

Such inspiration and associations are among the reasons that scientists travel, sometimes halfway around the world, to conferences in their speciality, or even in topics beyond their comfort zone. Meetings offer a central place to share research, learn about the latest findings, collect feedback about results and connect with far-flung colleagues and potential collaborators or employers. But those benefits don't come without effort. Many researchers find it challenging to navigate the networking aspect of a conference. Deciding which sessions to attend and which to skip can also be tricky. Still, even the largest conference need not leave a researcher feeling panicked or worn out. Careful planning, judicious use of digital technology and post-meeting follow-up can

help to maximize the value of meetings of all sizes for early-career scientists. We asked some seasoned veterans for their top tips for survival.

**Choose your goals in advance.** Shanna Jaggars, director of student success research in the Office of Distance Education and E-Learning at Ohio State University in Columbus, says that you should identify specific objectives, such as sharing data, bolstering public-speaking skills or seeking new collaborators. This can help you to prioritize activities and plan your agenda for each day of a conference.

**Allot time for networking.** This is especially important if you're on the job market. "For a lot of people, when they hear the word 'networking', the image that comes to mind is the used-car salesperson," says Allison McDonald, a biologist at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada. But, she says, making connections is crucial for advancing your career. For instance, Miriam Krause, now director of education and outreach for the Center for Sustainable Nanotechnology at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, didn't go to a single talk at a 2010 conference in her then-field of speech and hearing. Instead, she spent her days meeting up with people from institutions where she planned to apply for faculty positions. Among them were researchers from Bowling Green State University in Ohio. She got a job there the following year, and suspects that getting to know them made them more receptive to her application.

Alaina Levine, a science-career consultant in Tucson, Arizona, and author of *Networking for Nerds* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015) recommends that attendees e-mail people whom they would like to meet — new names as well as old — about a month before the conference. She finds that the most effective approach is to ask for a 15-minute coffee meeting and provide a set of times and dates or general availability. And if you want to practise your conversation skills first, a good start is to approach vendors in the conference exhibit hall, she says (see 'Conversation starters'). "It will calm your nerves and give you a boost of confidence because they're the ones running the conversation."

If you're attending with a mentor or members of your lab group, they may be able to introduce you to others. But don't spend the whole conference with them, because it will prevent you from engaging with both new and familiar faces on your own, say seasoned ►

► conference attendees. Other ways to make new connections include volunteering with meeting organizers — for example, at the check-in desk — and attending socials and workshops, especially at large meetings.

**Prepare ‘elevator pitches’.** Having several micro-presentations ready, ranging from 30 seconds to 10 minutes, could help you to catch people’s attention and even lead to collaborations or job offers.

**Take business cards.** It might seem old-school, says Joanne Kamens, executive director of Addgene in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but “there’s something psychological about exchanging cards with someone that makes a bit of a connection”. It has a greater impact and is more memorable than entering contact information into a phone. And researchers who are presenting posters would do well to print the place and time on a sticker and affixing it to the back of their business cards, Levine suggests. That way, they can easily invite others to check out their work.

**Use technology wisely.** Twitter and other technologies have become an integral part of the meeting circuit, and can certainly ease and enrich an attendee’s experience. Following

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

### *How to break the ice*

If you want to start a dialogue with someone — whether it’s the researcher giving the plenary talk or the person next to you on the conference shuttle bus — it helps to have something specific to start with, and it doesn’t have to be about science. Here are some ways to get the conversation started.

- Ask why they’re at the conference, or whether they’ll be giving a talk.
- If you’ve just read their paper or their research is relevant to your work, bring that up.
- Ask for advice on something you’re struggling with in your research.
- If you’re on the job market, quiz others about how they got to their current position.
- Buy a presenter a drink.
- Comment on the room you’re in or on the food you’re being served.
- Bring up something you might have in common. Steven Senger, a mathematician at Missouri State University in Springfield, once met a fellow rock climber because he suspected from the pattern of calluses on the man’s hands that they shared the hobby. **A.D.**



KEITH MORRIS/ALAMY

Social events such as this ‘speed networking’ forum can help to make new contacts.

the conference hashtag on Twitter can help in finding out about sessions and social events. But people who wish to tweet about presentations should do so with care, particularly if speakers are sharing unpublished results. They should make sure they are familiar with the meeting’s policy on live tweeting. The social-media policy might be described in conference materials, or speakers might state before their talk whether they’re OK with their work being tweeted. If the policy seems unclear, ask the speaker first. In general, social-media users should avoid posts or tweets that might be misconstrued or considered offensive.

And mobile devices can make researchers’ lives much easier. Partridge likes to take an iPad loaded with figures illustrating his experiments in sensor design so that he can carry it around with him to share his work with others and ask their opinion on the spot. Mobile devices also allow participants to access the meeting app, if there is one, and have access to the most up-to-date schedule and the slate of speakers without needing to lug around a heavy printed programme and abstract book. Levine particularly appreciates apps that allow the user to contact other attendees. She once sent a message to a fellow attendee who worked at a company in which she was interested, and the contact led directly to a job.

But researchers should make sure that they save their personal conference schedules to their devices, because WiFi can be spotty.

**Self-monitoring.** Conference attendees should nurture their body and brain. It’s easy to get overwhelmed, especially at large meetings where dozens of sessions running concurrently in a 12- or 14-hour daily schedule create hectic agendas. And jet lag can exacerbate the difficulties of travelling to far-flung sites. In that case, bright sunlight in the morning hours can help to reset the body clock, suggests sleep physician Neil Kline, spokesman for the American Sleep Association in Lititz, Pennsylvania. And

if possible, schedule key events around your circadian rhythms. Many people are most alert in the mid-morning and evening, says Raman Malhotra, a sleep physician at Saint Louis University in Missouri. And early afternoon is a good time for a power nap, he adds — but, he warns, don’t nap for more than 30 minutes because longer naps will lead to deeper sleep and you could wake up groggy.

Furthermore, researchers shouldn’t feel obliged to fill every minute with conference-related activities, says Jeremy Fox, an ecologist at the University of Calgary in Canada. “You should take time to recharge your batteries,” he says. He and his friends did just that at a conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, by taking an afternoon hike.

**Cement the bond.** Within a week or so of your return home, it’s a good idea to follow up with new contacts and with colleagues. “That’s the part that everybody forgets,” says McDonald. Writing e-mails or thank-you notes can help to bolster the connections. And Levine likes to take cards on the plane home so that she can write notes by hand, and post them once she gets back. A card that took her just five minutes to write led to additional correspondence and eventually to a job.

Participants can also connect with the people they met on social-media sites such as LinkedIn and ResearchGate. A good way to start is passing along a paper you think they’ll find interesting, Kamens suggests.

You can share what you learnt at the conference with others in your department or field, Partridge says, by writing a one-page report or blogpost to share with colleagues.

Then, it might be time to think about your next trip. Networking is a long game. You don’t have to accomplish all your goals at one conference, Jaggars says. ■

**Amber Dance** is a freelance writer in Los Angeles, California.