SHOULD I AIM FOR CO-AUTHORSHIPS ON HIGH IMPACT PAPERS?

By Sven Hendrix

It is often tempting for young scientists to aim for co-authorships on papers published in journals with a high impact factor. But is it a clever career move?

Are high impact factors still a useful parameter for a successful career in science?

To address this question a few basic assumptions have to be discussed:

1. What is the value of high impact factors in general?
2. When are high co-authorships with impact factors really appreciated – and when not?
3. What is the price to get them?

Impact factors are heavily debated in science – unfortunately there is still **no convincing alternative on the horizon and committees who evaluate grant proposals or select postdocs or professors still strongly base their decisions on impact factors as a proxy for scientific quality**.

Read more about impact factors here: **10 simple strategies to increase the impact factor of your publication** and **Do I need Nature or Science papers for a successful career in science?**

Whether high impact factors are relevant for you depends largely on you career plans

- If you want to **pursue a career as a professor you must aim for an 'excellent' publication list**. Read more here: **How to become a professor** and **What is the best publication strategy in science?**
- If you want a job in the industry sector, your publication list may be useful to show your commitment and technical expertise.
- For many jobs outside academia and industry an impressive publication list is irrelevant.

To learn more about which skills are needed in the sector you wish to work in, this article may be useful: **How to find your dream job in science.**

Co-authorships can be very valuable – but also costly

In the companion post to this article (**Should I aim for multiple co-authorships to extend my publication?**) I have argued that one of the best reasons to become a co-author on a paper are fruitful scientific collaborations which broaden your horizon and may give you access to knowledge, strategies, infrastructure and manpower. However, co-authorships can be very costly. **You may have to invest a lot of time, energy and money to deliver your contribution.**

Make sure that your input and your probable author position is clearly defined in the beginning to avoid disappointments and unpleasant discussions. It is always useful to document the agreements at least in an email.

Do co-authorships on high impact papers promote your career?

This question is difficult to answer. I had heated discussion with my colleagues on this point. My personal opinion is that one or two co-authorships on high impact papers are nice but do not help a lot because committees will always evaluate the big picture which means the entire publication list. If the "rest is rubbish" a nice co-author paper has no value. My colleagues argue that high impact co-authorships show your connection to an excellent lab and may also help to promote further productive collaborations. Let us look at these points in more detail:

Multiple high impact co-authorships do not help when the average impact factor of the first/last author papers is low.

Committee who evaluate grant proposals or select postdocs or professors will always evaluate the entire publication list. Typical questions are: How many first and last author papers has this person published? What is the MEDIAN of the impact factors? Is there a regular production of papers or are there years without a publication?

Based on my very personal experience in multiple commissions/committees I would dare to state: If most first/last author publications have a rather low impact factor this will define the evaluation of your publication list, high impact factor co-authorships will be recognized but the impact on the general judgement will be small.

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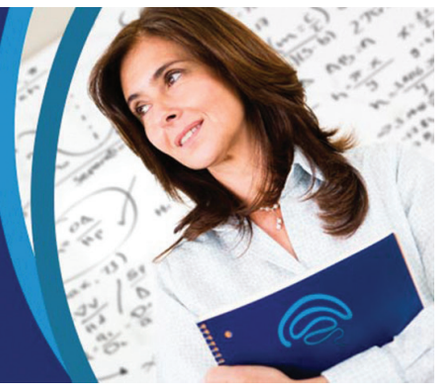

Do not become the famous third author! Focus on first and last authorships.

When a person has a several co-authorships on high impact papers but only a few first/last author papers there will be severe doubts about the person's scientific independence. The advice is very clear: **Focus on first and last authorships.**

For PhD students, first authorships are the most relevant because at this career stage, last authorships are rather difficult to get. For postdocs, last authorships are the most relevant because they have to demonstrate scientific independence. Read more here: **What is the best publication strategy in science?** and **Scientific independence – how to develop and demonstrate it?**

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would suggest not to waste your time with high impact co-authorships when the impact factors of your first/last authorship publications are substantially lower. Focus on excellent first and last authorships.

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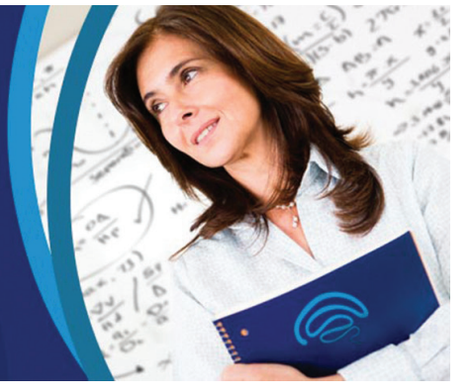
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