WHICH SCIENTIFIC MEETINGS SHOULD I ATTEND?
By Sven Hendrix

Attending a scientific meeting can be very inspiring. It may broaden your network and help you to make yourself and your research visible to a broad audience. But it is also often time-consuming and expensive. How do you choose the right meetings to attend?

Why attending scientific conferences/congress/meetings?

Meeting is expensive

Many meetings are pretty expensive. Even PhD students and postdocs have to pay hundreds of EUR or $$$ to submit an abstract and attend the meeting. Besides, transportation and housing (hotel or Airbnb) have to be financed. Finally, you spend your working time elsewhere, and you are not working in the lab to generate lots and lots of data.

Attending a congress costs time

Every meeting costs a lot of time. You may spend considerable time to apply for travel grants. You have to book transportation and hotels, you have to travel to the conference location and back, and you may spend up to a week.

Return of investment

Thus, attending a scientific meeting is expensive and costs quite some time. Is it worth it? At the start of your scientific career, attending a conference is exciting. It may feel like a great adventure to travel to and stay in a foreign country, to see the
big science stars life, to breathe the excitement of a big conference with hundreds or thousands of participants. Some young researchers may find it frightening because they do not know anybody, and maybe they have to present their data for the first time publicly. After having attended many meetings, your attitude may change. You may start to see it as a considerable investment of time and money. You go to meetings to meet friends and colleagues. Conferences are a great opportunity to make yourself and your research visible, to develop scientific independence, to make new connections for potential joint projects or grant proposals and to connect with potential future employers.

In later stages of your career, you either delegate all the preparation to secretaries or postdocs, you let your PhD students and postdocs present posters and give talks. Or you are an invited speaker (costs will be paid, and travel and hotel will be organized for you). Many senior scientists travel a lot to give presentations, seminars or workshops, to organize meetings, consortia, or joint projects. Therefore, they become more and more selective in which meetings they attend to reduce the travel time and their time away from home.

Thus, due to the time investment and costs, it is good advice to choose your conferences wisely.

Choosing the best scientific conferences/congresses/meetings

There are many different types of meetings, and all have their advantages and disadvantages. A huge scientific meeting with 10,000 participants gives you many options to choose from, exposes you to world-class speakers and world-class science. But you also may feel lost between all these thousands of participants. You may be overwhelmed by the excessive number of talks, posters, and events. Smaller meetings may either focus on connecting the international, national or regional science community such as the “Annual meeting of the national society of XYZ research” or focus on specialized themes for a very selected group of experts such as “Macrophage phenotypes in the striatum”.

The Annual meetings help you to connect to future employers and make you visible in the field. The specialized meetings are great for gaining deeper knowledge in your research topic and connect with the experts to learn and to collaborate.
Five easy questions to choose the right meetings

Depending on your goals, the following questions make it easy to decide whether a congress is relevant for you. A well-prepared answer to each of these question will make it much easier to convince a supervisor to pay.

1. Will I get exposed to enough relevant information?
2. Will I get visibility for myself and my research?
3. Will I grow my network? Will I establish new collaborations (grant proposals, joint projects)?
4. Will I connect with future employers?
5. Will I have a great touristic experience?

Will I get exposed to enough relevant information?

The keyword is *relevant*. You should select conferences which are relevant for you and your research right now. I would love to attend every meeting, really every meeting in the world to learn more. However, “variations of thoracic surgery” are less relevant for me than “microglia subtypes in the hippocampus”. For you, it may be the opposite. Do not attend meetings because the themes may become relevant in the future. “Just in case learning” is less effective than “Just-in-time-learning”. What you need right now will stick in your memory and improve. If you learn about the newest developments and see great lectures about subjects, you always wanted to know better – great. If you find only a few interesting speakers, no relevant workshops and entire afternoons which are irrelevant for you – do not go and find a better meeting.

Will I get visibility for myself and my research?

Conferences are a great opportunity to make yourself and your research visible, to position yourself as an expert in a specific field and to develop scientific independence. Presenting your data as a talk or a poster may expose you to interesting questions and different perspectives. Thus, presenting your data is a great way to get feedback. However, people may also get inspired to publish similar research projects *before* you or steal your idea. Thus, present only data which are close to publication to avoid getting scooped. Anyway, if you can present your data and your methods to a relevant group of colleagues, potential future collaborators or employers you should definitely attend.

Will I grow my network? Will I establish new collaborations (grant proposals, joint projects)?

Closely linked to the visibility questions is the question about your network. Developing your national and international network is important to develop your career in science. read more here: How to become a professor? and Am I doing enough for my scientific career?

Connecting with experts in the field is easier during small meetings with a lower number of participants. You may ask questions you ever wanted to ask, can show interest in their favorite subjects and may start joint projects and grant proposals. If you want to meet a lot of the speakers or if all major players in your field are present – you should definitely attend.

Will I connect with future employers?

If you are in the late phase of your PhD, postdoc, or tenure track period you may be interested in letting potential future employers know about your qualifications and your interest in a postdoc or faculty position. This is easily done when talking during a reception or a networking event. If a lot of potential future employers in your field are present – you should definitely attend.
Will I have a great touristic experience?

Many meeting organizers do a good job to select an attractive location. This normally leads to a higher number of participants, including more potential collaboration partners and future employers. Should you feel bad about selecting a meeting based on touristic attractiveness? Of course not. If you can combine a strong learning experience and a great touristic experience, great! In the context of scientific meetings, I have visited many European and US cities and enjoyed the culture, the food, and nature. However, I handle the first four questions always as priorities and the touristic attractiveness as a bonus.

Good answers to these four questions should help you to make a decision and to convince a supervisor to pay.

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