

Online conferences: an alternative to on-site conference attendance? How does it affect our networking potential?

As a collective body of graduate students and postdocs, we can all agree that conference registration fees are expensive and there are no signs of a paradigm shift. I am still asking myself, why is this the case and will it ever change? So far, we have yet to mention the additional costs associated with attending a conference in person such as accommodation, flights, food, and ground transportation. The conference experience can be challenging and funding travel for trainees is often dictated by the training environment or situation. From a trainee perspective, traditional avenues for travel e.g. hotels or taxis are often expensive with hotel costs being as high as \$250 for a single night that you may only spend 8 hours in. Often, trainees look for alternative and cost reducing approaches such as Airbnb and Uber/Lyft to name a few popular options (other alternatives may exist). All the above is trying to highlight that conference travel cost does not stop at registration. Yet, trainees appreciate the importance of gaining conference experience as it is critical for their career development. However, it comes at a financial cost.

Therefore, in the coming years, I will not be surprised to see more graduate students and postdocs opt for attending conferences online through a live stream channel, instead of a traditional on-site attendance. Similar to webinars, live streaming only requires a computer and can be done from the comforts of your own desk, sofa, or, city. Therefore, this

approach can be convenient in term of cost. Registration expenses is often cheaper, and this excludes any additional discount costs for being a trainee. However, despite the apparent cost saving benefits, are we sacrificing an essential part of conferences – networking? How may attending conferences via live streaming affect our ability to meet our peers or future collaborators? Below are a few next steps on how to get started in the online world of conferences, followed by a few tips to help tailor your networking approach to an online platform.

Step 1: Check your availability to attend.

If yes, ask the organizers to confirm that the relevant sessions to your interests and research are available as a live stream option.

Step 2: Plan the conference.

Upon registering, make sure you reserve sufficient time on your calendar to attend your preferred sessions. With the flexibility of where we choose to attend the conference from, completing lab tasks between sessions maybe convenient, however; it is still important to engage in the conference. I believe many of us do well at prioritizing lab tasks as these are often checkable and defined goals, but when attending an online conference, it may be worth considering having an accountability system setup to make sure we keep to our conference goals.

How can we network from these type of events?

Networking tip 1: Identify several presenters with whom you would like to interact and network.

Networking tip 2: Engage conversation with peers and colleagues: do not hesitate to ask questions virtually. If this does not exist in real time, follow up with the presenter shortly afterwards (24 h maximum) by emailing the presenter

and ask them about a specific question. Referencing the session you attended virtually may help initiate the conversation, followed by your question to engage conversation.

Networking tip 3: Leverage the physical attendance of other individuals from your institution to gain a different perspective and help initiate a discussion on topics you both have learned from the conference.

Networking tip 4: Engage on the conference social media platform. This may help you connect and interact with other attendees. Twitter often has a large social media presence during conferences therefore, it can be a useful tool to keep up to speed with conference activities and connect with other professional. Physical location does not prevent you from interacting with the virtual world. Consider designating calendar time at the end of the day, maybe 30 – 60 minutes to cover all the potential social activities you might have missed. Following the societies twitter feed on social media can be an easy way to catch up with all the important information.