The future of meetings

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In 1911 the first of a series of biennial physics conferences funded by Belgian industrialist Ernest Solvay took place in Brussels. Chaired by Hendrik Lorentz, the invitation-only gathering was devoted to the theory of radiation and quanta. World War I and the influenza pandemic of 1918–19 interrupted the conferences. They resumed in April 1921.

The Solvay conferences' prompt resumption portends the revival of scientific meetings once the current COVID pandemic abates. Even now, as the first vaccines are beginning to be deployed and administered, it's possible to travel. If this year's April meeting of the American Physical Society (APS) were still being held in Sacramento, California, I could choose from several round-trip flights from Washington, DC, where I live, all for a reasonable $300 or so.

But just because scientists will be able to attend meetings again doesn't mean they'll still want to in the same way. It's worth exploring whether our experiences of the pandemic will transform when, where, and how meetings are held and conducted.

Hints of what's to come appeared in December's issue of *Washingtonian* magazine, which included the results of a mostly light-hearted survey of behavior and attitudes in times of COVID. Two readers' answers to the question about the worst day at work pertained to meetings: "6-hour Zoom workshop!" and "Panic attack on a Zoom call." Scientists will likely relish returning to the warmth, spontaneity, and serendipity of in-person meetings.

The same survey also asked readers what COVID adaptations they'd like to keep. "Extra time with my family" scored a response of 52% behind "takeout cocktails" (72%), "streeteries" (66%), and "curbside pickup for just about everything" (64%).

What COVID adaptations might scientists want to keep? Twice a year, new astronomy and physics faculty members are invited to attend a workshop hosted by APS, the American Association of Physics Teachers, and the American Astronomical Society. Usually, the workshop is held at the American Center for Physics in College Park, Maryland. Last year's fall event was held virtually. To quote Leah Poffenberger's story in December's *APS News*, "Based on the success of this year's online workshop, more New Faculty Workshops will likely go online in the future, even when the option to meet in person is available again."

During the pandemic the editorial boards of scientific journals and the governing boards of scientific societies have been meeting remotely. Meetings that consist largely of listening to presentations will likely remain online. Flying across country to sit in a room for 1–2 days will become less compelling, I suspect.

The Farnborough International Airshow in the UK, the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, and the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas—to name three big international trade shows—will likely return to full, pre-pandemic intensity. It's too difficult to demonstrate new products except in the real, 3D world.

I'm less optimistic about the exhibits that accompany scientific meetings. Providing space for companies to display their wares to scientists is not the raison d'être of most scientific meetings. Attendees might wander the aisles of an exhibit floor to take a break from talks or to search for free refreshments. But in my experience, most booths have considerable amounts of visitor-less downtime.

Exhibitors who attend scientific meetings have pivoted to engaging potential customers through webinars and by upping their press release game. If those marketing efforts prove successful, I wonder if exhibitors will ever return to sending marketing staff, product samples, and portable booths to distant convention centers.

I also wonder about the continued viability of giant scientific meetings. The largest I've attended, the annual meeting of the American Chemical Society, was, it seemed to me, a collection of smaller meetings that happened to be in the same place at the same time. I like to think that inorganic chemists attended sessions on organic chemistry, but the scheduling of parallel sessions likely frustrated them.

Granted, giant meetings foster a sense of shared purpose through plenary talks and the presence of so many fellow professionals. But if the exhibit halls fizzle and if plenary talks are offered to members online, the days of the giant meeting could be numbered.

Indeed, when I look back at the meetings I've attended first as an astronomer and then as an editor, the small, focused ones stand out as the most worthwhile. Those, I predict, will survive and thrive. PT