

Scientific Meetings: The New Normal?

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To cite this article: Gert Aarts (2022) Scientific Meetings: The New Normal?, Nuclear Physics News, 32:1, 3-3, DOI: [10.1080/10619127.2022.2029138](https://doi.org/10.1080/10619127.2022.2029138)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10619127.2022.2029138>



Published online: 05 Apr 2022.



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Scientific Meetings: The New Normal?

As the pandemic continues, we, as scientists, have now adjusted our way of working, in particular regarding conferences, workshops, and other scientific meetings. At ECT*, the European Centre for Theoretical Studies in Nuclear Physics and Related Areas in Trento, Italy, of which I am currently director, we have completed a full workshop and training program for 2021. This included 14 virtual workshops; 3 hybrid workshops during the last few months of the year, when quarantine and social distancing rules eased; and 2 virtual training programs. With this experience behind us, perhaps now it is a good time to reflect on this “new normal,” and distill some lessons learned.

Let me start with a clear positive: the reach of meetings has increased significantly. Whereas a pre-COVID workshop could only welcome a limited number of participants, due to capacity, funding, or travel arrangements, many virtual meetings are open to all who register, at practically no cost to the participant. In addition, recordings are easy to make and available almost immediately. This creates a wonderful opportunity for those who are less well funded, who would have to face long or awkward journeys, or who have obligations at home. Many organizers attempt to incorporate different time zones in their

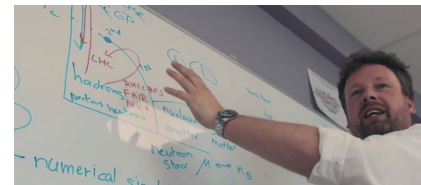
conference schedule, to cater for all. An extreme case was the virtual Lattice 2021 conference (superbly organized at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), which I attended in July. The daily program ran from 5 a.m. to 4 p.m. and then from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. the next day. Imagine how much sleep the organizers had during that week.

However, this immediately indicates a few negatives as well. Attendance requires much less of a commitment than before. It is easy to join a Zoom meeting, but also easy to drop out, multitask, or, shock horror!, attend a second meeting on a different device. This limits the creative week-long immersion in a scientific topic, and also, paradoxically, the exposure to presentations outside one’s own area of interest or by less well-known presenters, including early-career researchers.

As is often mentioned, talks at a scientific meeting only make up half of the program. The other half takes place during coffee breaks, lunches, dinners, or while enjoying an *aperitivo* on the Piazza del Duomo. Virtual meetings have not been able to replace this, despite best efforts from, for example, Gather. As a community we should continue to emphasize this important aspect of scientific meetings; many new ideas emerge from this second component.

The final 3 meetings at ECT* were run in hybrid mode, with up to 25 participants joining in person. The main observation here is that it is important to decide who the meeting is for: for those present in person or for those joining remotely. Attempting to satisfy all puts a strain on the organizers and support teams, since one is effectively organizing two meetings in parallel. Given the importance of the informal in-person interactions, my preference is currently to develop scientific meetings with the in-person group in mind, while virtual participation is encouraged for inclusivity and reach.

ECT* has scheduled again a full program for 2022 (www.ectstar.eu/activities/), with all workshops taking place in hybrid mode and the Doctoral Training Programme in person only. We are looking forward to a stimulating and interactive year!



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