

# The More We Get Together

BY JOHN MULLIN

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted work patterns across many occupations, and the economics profession has been no exception. In particular, many in-person gatherings of economists have been reconfigured as online meetings or canceled altogether. At first glance, this may not seem like too large an inconvenience in the age of webinars and Zoom meetings. But it appears that economists still see a great deal of value in physically gathering to exchange ideas.

Before the crisis, economists regularly got together at large conferences, such as the annual meeting of the American Economic Association (AEA), which drew more than 10,000 attendees in January. AEA meetings offer hundreds of panels covering the latest research across many disciplines. Economists also gathered frequently at smaller-scale workshops and seminars. Workshops often involve a small number of economists presenting research on a single topic, while seminars often focus on the latest research paper of a single economist.

One of the main motivations for attending conferences, workshops, and seminars is the opportunity to present research. “You get to share your work, and you get feedback about things in your paper. As a result of attending the conference, you end up with a better paper,” says Richmond Fed economist Pierre-Daniel Sarte.

In the academic world of “publish or perish,” there is some evidence that presenting at premier conferences may confer an advantage. In a 2019 National Bureau of Economic Research working paper, Yuriy Gorodnichenko of the University of California, Berkeley, Tho Pham of the University of Reading, and Oleksandr Talavera of the University of Birmingham found a “significantly positive association between conference presentation (especially at AEA conferences) and the probability of being published in a high-quality journal.”

Conferences also offer the opportunity to network and to meet potential research collaborators. “I have met some of my co-authors at conferences,” says Sarte. “Sometimes you come as a discussant, and you begin a dialogue with the person whose paper you are discussing. You talk about areas of agreement and areas where you think differently. You may meet later between sessions or at dinner and have a more in-depth discussion about each other’s work and how it can be advanced.”

But some economists have observed that their fondness for the big conferences has diminished over time. “I don’t get a huge amount of value out of the big conferences. The more focused ones are a lot more valuable,”

says Richmond Fed economist John Jones. “At a lot of the big ones, like the Econometrics Society, you may only have 15 to 20 minutes to present. The more focused, really topical ones, will give you 45 to 60 minutes.”

The shorter time that is sometimes allotted to presenters at the big conferences may call for a different mindset. “What are your expectations when you have 20 minutes on a panel where you are presenting with four other papers?” says Richmond Fed economist Santiago Pinto. “You can mostly cover questions like: What is your topic? How did you do it? You cannot get into the details. So it is mostly about signaling. You are trying to encourage people to go home and read it.”

Economists often use a series of small seminars to get feedback so that they can improve a working paper prior to submitting it to a journal for publication. “I have seen people give the same paper at different seminars and how they have incorporated comments into their paper,” says Pinto. “And I have seen cases where that has made the paper better and has helped their chances of getting published.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected economic gatherings in a variety of ways. Some of this year’s big conferences scheduled for the spring or early summer have been canceled or rescheduled, including the annual meeting of the Midwest Economics Association, the annual conference of the Royal Economic Society, and the annual meeting of the Society of Economic Dynamics.

In career terms, these missed opportunities come as bad news to the participants, based on recent research by Fernanda Leite Lopez de Leon of the University of Kent and Ben McQuillin of the University of East Anglia. Analyzing the effects of the cancellation of a large academic conference in 2012 due to Hurricane Isaac, they found that the lost chance to present a paper decreased the likelihood of the paper being subsequently cited in the academic literature — a key measure of professional success.

Some smaller conferences have been held remotely but perhaps with mixed results. “I’ve been on a couple of Zoom conferences,” says Sarte. “You get to give or hear a presentation. But you miss the discussions during break or when you go to coffee or dinner with someone. All this informal interaction is missing from Zoom.”

This sentiment is shared by others. “A lot of what is of value is in the unstructured part of a conference or seminar,” says Jones. “Maybe things will change with time if we are forced to meet in a remote fashion, but I am skeptical.”

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