Multicultural Relationships: Working Across Cultures and Countries

Like travel writers and diplomats, scientists have tremendous opportunities for international interactions. Researchers can train abroad and attend conferences all over the world. The academic sabbatical is a chance to experience a foreign land while maintaining domestic roots. Hosting a guest scientist from another country can bring fresh perspectives to a research group. Cross-border professional relationships require cultivation, though. This feature offers advice from experienced scientists on the whys and hows of international collaborations. By Chris Tachibana

Can a single activity revitalize your scientific approach, provide valuable resources for your research, and make a positive contribution to international relations? Scientists often say they receive all these payoffs from global collaborations. The benefits come with the cost of cultural adjustment, however. Although researchers everywhere share a love of science, different countries have distinct work styles, according to world-traveling scientists. Their descriptions of these styles sound like commentators during an international sports event: Germany is precise, America is confident, Japan is deliberate. Internationally experienced researchers say that overcoming differences in professional norms, expectations, and approaches takes effort, but they overwhelmingly recommend working abroad and hosting international colleagues. Below, six scientists discuss the advantages of global collaborations and offer advice on building productive multicultural relationships.

Three reasons to go global

“The experience of living in a different country and learning different approaches to scientific problems broadens your mind for research,” says Nick Luscombe, a computational biologist who found that moving from the United Kingdom to the United States for a postdoc was “an eye-opener.” The American work culture was “faster, brasher, and more ambitious,” he says. “People assumed everything they were working on was a potential Science or Nature paper.” The experience raised his own confidence, but also reinforced his appreciation of time to think through problems. Luscombe now draws on his multicultural experience to lead research groups at University College London, where he will join the new Francis Crick Institute, and the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (OIST).

“Nowadays, you have to do complex research to publish,” says Svetlana Dedysh, head of the Laboratory of Wetland Microbiology, Winogradsky Institute of Microbiology, Russian Academy of Sciences. Dedysh attributes a substantial portion of her professional success to international connections, saying, “My field requires collaboration.” Besides microbial ecology, fields that rely on global sharing of samples, data, and methods include climate science, geophysics, and health and science policy. Dedysh was a visiting researcher at Michigan State University in the 1990s and the Max Planck Institute in Marburg, Germany in the 2000s and noticed the detail-oriented and analytic atmosphere in the German laboratories. Like Luscombe, she found the American attitude to be “sparkling enthusiasm, full confidence that everything you are doing is right.” She applies both approaches now, for example using enthusiasm to motivate students, although she deploys the American style sparingly, she says, because it takes so much energy. She strongly recommends international collaborations, though. They show people in her group how their work contributes to a broader scientific community.

“Science is a human enterprise that transcends many differences,” says Mónica Feliú-Mójer, manager of outreach programs for the University of Washington biostatistics department and vice-director of Ciencia Puerto Rico, an organization to advance science in Puerto Rico. Multicultural collaborations unite people from disparate backgrounds and convey positive messages about research, says Feliú-Mójer, including why science should be publicly supported. She encourages her fellow scientists to make continued>

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connections with Hispanic researchers. This promotes science among a growing demographic, she says: “Scientific collaborations can be a bridge to countries in Latin America where we want to have economic and political ties.” Feliz-Möjer went through a professional cultural adaptation herself when she moved from Puerto Rico to Boston after college. In addition to the language and weather, she had to adjust to the scale of U.S. research. “The laboratory where I worked at MIT was the size of the entire department at my university in Puerto Rico,” she says. Researchers with collaborators in countries with limited scientific infrastructure and support, where overnight delivery is a luxury and not standard practice, should be mindful of the bureaucracy and wait times faced by their colleagues, she advises.

Successful global partnerships acknowledge and celebrate cultural differences and anticipate rough spots. A common model says that people encountering a new culture go through highs and lows, with a honeymoon period in which differences are exciting, followed by phases of culture shock and adjustment before mastering the new culture (Black et al., The Academy of Management Review 16, 291 (1991); bit.ly/19TfRtw). Below, Luscombe, Dedysh, Feliz-Möjer, and other scientists discuss strategies for quickly getting a multinational team to the mastery phrase.

The big barrier: communication

“It’s so easy to feel frustrated by miscommunication,” says Luscombe. “People get personally offended even when they know the problem is just language.” English is the common language of science but the native tongue of only 7% of the world’s population. Non-native speakers often feel that working in a new language flattens their personality and stifles their sense of humor. They can’t make the small talk that builds a relationship. Visiting scientists whose main experience with English has been research articles and other written documents say they struggle with conversations. Aijie Wang, distinguished professor and Yangtze River Scholar, Ministry of Education, Harbin Institute of Technology, China, encountered this barrier on a professional development visit to Australia in 2002. “Australians have a strong accent,” she says, “so for the first month I felt like an idiot. I really had to focus, even to understand seminars and workshops.” Attending international meetings and inviting collaborators from other countries is a good way to hone communication skills and usually, “it’s not hard to exchange ideas about science.”

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Achieving mastery: being a good host

The Luscombe group is the academic version of Evolva, with sites 10,000 km apart in London and Okinawa. Luscombe is the ideal leader for this arrangement. He grew up in Japan, attending an English-speaking school and taking Japanese language classes, an extra task in childhood that, as his parents predicted, he now appreciates. He and his sister went to boarding school in the United Kingdom because their parents wanted them to be comfortable in two cultures.

Both the London and Okinawan groups are a mix of people from multiple countries and Luscombe says that under the right circumstances, this type of group creates its own work culture. Luscombe is committed to teams with a flat structure and well-distributed interactions, so in the larger London group, he tries not to have too many people of one nationality at once to keep subgroups from forming. For this reason, some multinational laboratories have an English-only policy, so people who share another language don’t start speaking in their common tongue, excluding coworkers.

Luscombe’s group in Okinawa is small enough that no single nationality dominates. However, the team needed time to create a common culture that accommodates different work styles. A simple example, says Luscombe, is that non-Japanese scientists might brainstorm out loud while Japanese scientists prefer thinking through ideas before talking. Whether the differences are cultural or personal, “It takes time to adjust and build trusting, working relationships,” says Luscombe. He maintains a productive research environment by holding videoconferenced meetings in both English and Japanese with the Okinawan group when he is not in Japan. The OIST team also came together around their unique project of studying developmental pathways using marine organisms, says Luscombe. “Now—and I’m not sure [my team will] like this comparison—it’s like a pirate ship. We have people from different exotic backgrounds who left their original countries to be part of this scientific adventure on an island.”

The Center for Microbial Ecology at Michigan State University also has a distinct, global work culture, thanks to director Jim Tiedje, who has hosted more than one hundred international students, postdocs, and visiting scientists. “I don’t think there are any cons,” says Tiedje about hosting guest researchers, “although it’s good to have clear goals.” Find mutually beneficial projects that can be achieved in a realistic timeline, he says. Be clear about expectations and if possible, arrange for multiple visits. Wang visited the Tiedje lab in 2006 and agrees that straightforward discussions at the start of a partnership prevent surprises later. For example, she says, international collaborations taught her continued>
Communication across cultures and languages is easier when you’re in the same room, says Neil Goldsmith.

Achieving mastery: being a good guest

Researchers working with collaborators from different backgrounds might be nervous about making a cultural gaffe or saying something unintentionally offensive. Don’t let that hold you back from the tremendous opportunity of making cross-cultural connections, says Felíu-Mójer. If you are unsure about what is culturally appropriate, she says, “Just ask.” Particularly if your host seems receptive, your genuine curiosity can spark fun and mutually informative conversations. For example, Felíu-Mójer understands that many people don’t know how to use terms like Hispanic, Latino, and Latina. She is an U.S. citizen but identifies first as Puerto Rican, then as Latina, meaning someone from Latin America. She doesn’t mind being called Hispanic, indicating a Spanish-speaking person, but understands that people assign different meanings to this term. If it all seems complicated, says Felíu-Mójer, relax, take cues from your hosts, and delight in new customs. And don’t be surprised if your Latin American colleague greets you with a kiss.

From her international visits, Dedysh offers two pieces of advice to visiting scientists. At the outset, she says, think about what you can contribute to the collaboration, even if you come from a laboratory with fewer resources. Then, says Dedysh, “be a good, welcome guest.” Contribute to the group, but not necessarily as an expert. In fact, Dedysh advises humility, even as a senior scientist working with students. “Don’t criticize the lab,” she says, “and don’t behave as if you are the boss. That will never be helpful.” Instead, help out, clean up messes, and be a good lab citizen. Share your expertise if asked and you’ll be rewarded with coworkers and friends who want to help you succeed.

To smooth over the inevitable miscommunications, acknowledge and appreciate the extra effort everyone is making. And go in with the right attitude. For positive collaborations across languages and cultures, Goldsmith endorses a principle attributed to Yang Yuanqing, chief executive officer of the computer company Lenovo: “In all situations, assume good intentions.”