

Conference Report

A Perspective on Virtual Events during the Corona Pandemic Exemplified by the CareerTrack with IBM Research Europe – Zurich

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Stephanie Linker studied Biochemistry and Biophysics and is a PhD student in the Computational Chemistry group at ETH Zurich. She is responsible for international relations on the youngSCS board.



Chemtogether and youngSCS jointly organized the CareerTrack-Event Chemistry at IBM Research Europe – Zurich. Chemtogether is a non-profit organization led by students of the chemical sciences and pharmaceutical sciences at ETH Zurich. The focus of Chemtogether is the organization of an annual career fair held on the ETH Hönggerberg campus in

November. It is joined by 18 leading chemical companies and about 1000 visitors over the course of two days. The youngSCS is a network of SCS that represents young scientists of SCS from all over Switzerland. CareerTrack is a series of events initiated by the youngSCS to provide an information platform about job opportunities and different employers in Switzerland. A substantial part of both our missions is to connect students with companies of the Swiss chemical industry and raise awareness about the different professional opportunities in- and outside academia. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the CareerTrack series evolved to an entirely new virtual format, posing new challenges to the organizers. This short report summarizes the event and analyzes the challenges and advantages posed by holding such online career events.

The Event

The event was held as a Zoom Webinar and joined by 145 participants from inside (83%) and outside (17%) of Switzerland. The program included a short introduction of Chemtogether and youngSCS followed by an overview of the company IBM Research Europe – Zurich, including a perspective on possible career paths at the site. Next, different groups of the research and development department introduced their projects, providing firsthand experience and giving short virtual lab-tours. The topics presented to the participants were precision diagnostics, quantum technology and computing, nanofabrication, as well as artificial intelligence used in automatic organic synthesis setups, covering the entire spectrum of chemical research at the company. The group presentations were followed by a mock interview with subsequent feedback and reasoning from the interviewers, thereby providing a glance at the application process at IBM Research Europe – Zurich. Besides, several master and PhD students at the company shared their stories and experiences working at the campus in Rüschlikon with the audience. The visit at IBM

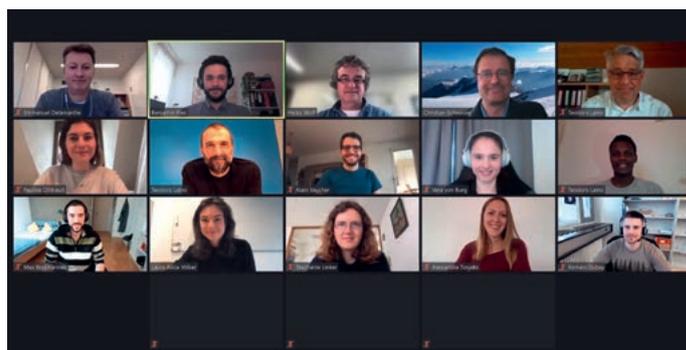


Fig. 1. Panelists of the event.

Research Europe – Zurich ended with an extended Q&A session moderated by Chemtogether and youngSCS, during which participants could ask any question to the IBM professionals.

Challenges and Chances of Online Formats

Over the past months, the majority of in-person career events could not take place due to governmental regulations, e.g. the Chemtogether CareerFair 2020 had to be canceled. Therefore, the orientation toward online events seemed the only way to counteract the complete interruption of the dialogue between young scientists and industry. Nevertheless, it initially remained unclear whether events held online are able to provide the same quality as live events did in the past. Apart from technical issues, the main concerns included a possible lack of social interaction between the participants and panelists, resulting in a rather anonymous atmosphere and a superficial exchange. Another potential challenge, which we anticipated, is the absence of a relaxed and informal exchange between the students and company representatives which is usually provided during an apéro following the event.

Thanks to careful planning, our event turned into a very positive experience for all participants. A rich and diverse discussion developed quickly during the Q&A session; young researchers were not afraid to ask their questions directly *via* their microphones to the IBM professionals. As a result, the discussion could take a much more personal and dynamic character than expected. Moreover, the online-format helped us to significantly enlarge our outreach, since participants could join from anywhere. Finally, we would like to underline the clear advantage that the online-format did not pose logistic restrictions on the number of participants. With a live event, we would most likely have had to restrict the number of participants significantly.

Conclusion

In retrospect, we are highly satisfied with the chosen format and are convinced that we were able to offer the participants a unique chance of getting precious insights into IBM Research

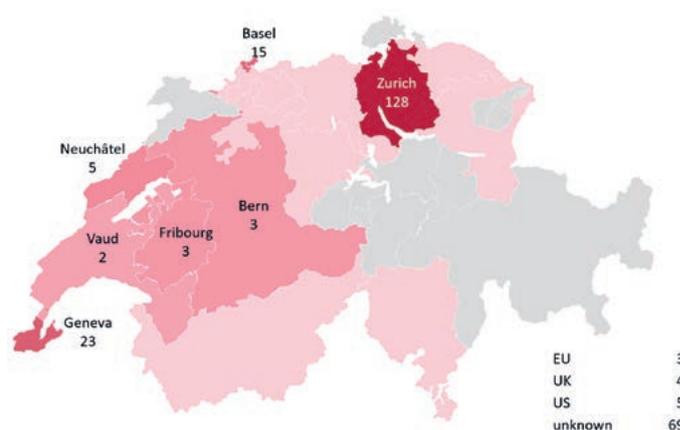


Fig. 2. The event reached young scientists from all over Switzerland (total registrations 257 / participants 145).

Europe – Zurich. The event facilitated contacts between young scientists and IBM Research Europe – Zurich in a manner that did not differ substantially from a traditional live event. We were delighted by the straightforward process of organizing the event and convinced that the cost-benefit balance was very positive for all participants. Therefore we intend to use this format again in the future, as both our members and the participating companies are benefiting from such events, thereby fulfilling our core mission of creating connections and impart a raised awareness about the diversity and wealth of opportunities in the Swiss chemical industry.

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