

Press release

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Swiss-Swedish Nanotechnology Workshop at the Empa Academy

‘Science speed-dating’ gives rise to new project partnerships

The first ever ‘science speed-dating’ session took place on February 2nd and 3rd at the Empa Academy. This was the first time this method, which was originally intended to forge relationships between people, had been diverted from its intended purpose in order to initiate scientific projects. Over the course of two days at the ‘Swiss-Swedish Nanotechnology Workshop,’ representatives from science and industry identified potential, bilateral alliances and formulated initial project ideas for collaboration in the field of nanotechnology.

Speed-dating is a method used by people to flirt with others or to find a partner in the most ‘efficient’ way. At a speed-dating event, the rate at which people meet each other is regulated by a stopwatch and each meeting has to follow certain rules. “We thought that the principle of the speed-dating method would also almost certainly work for initiating scientific projects,” explains Magnus Ahlström, Director Business Development at SAAB, who jointly hosted the two-day nano workshop with Gabriele Dobenecker, Head of the ‘Marketing, Knowledge and Technology Transfer’ section at Empa. “It was our aim to provide the workshop participants with as great a variety of opportunities as possible to identify Swiss-Swedish alliances, and to encourage them to generate ideas for collaboration in the field of nanotechnology.”

More research cooperation

Indeed, the Swedish ambassador to Switzerland, Per Thöresson, did think there was room for developing bilateral research cooperation. “Although our economic structures and cultures are really very similar,” he commented on the first day of the workshop, “and although the Swedes and the Swiss are perhaps obvious partners, the reality is that there is still insufficient cooperation between us with regard to research and development.” It was the ambassador’s hope that the workshop would change this situation “in addition to generating as many real projects as possible, even at this early stage.” Research funding institutions present at the event were able to provide researchers and industry representatives interested in cooperation with valuable information about financing projects such as these.

And this is how it went: Six groups of researchers from Swedish universities, as well as representatives from research institutes and companies, had to sit down with a team of Swiss researchers and briefly explain their work to each other. “It’s a good thing we’ve got more than a minute to say our piece in science speed-dating,” said one of the participants. “But the fact that we know the bell is going to ring at some point really focuses us on the point of the exercise.” Sure enough, the bell did ring after 45 minutes, and the researchers from the universities of Lund, Linköping and Uppsala, the Chalmers University in Gothenburg, the Royal

Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm, The Swerea and FOI research institutes, SAAB and Volvo Aero hurried to the next table. There they found the next Swiss group, with representatives from Empa, ETH Zurich, the University of Basel, the University of Freiburg's Adolphe Merkle Institute and the IBM research laboratory in Zurich. "So, what were the other lot trying to 'sell' you?" joked one of the participants. In this relaxed atmosphere, it wasn't long before the conversation turned to thin film layers for photovoltaics, hybrid solar cells, carbon nanotubes, potential graphene applications, molecular electronics, nanowires etc.

"Science Speed-Dating" a success

"Some groups were practically inseparable," observed Gabriele Dobenecker. "There's obviously a lot of potential there just waiting to be unlocked." She could not have guessed just how close to the mark she was until the final session, during which the most important ideas were presented to all participants. Magnus Ahlström added, "In the six different discussion sessions, all groups identified synergies with at least four groups of the other nationality and have jointly developed project ideas."

In an additional step, the project proposals were arranged according to their respective subject areas. Empa Director Louis Schlapbach went on to say, "This event proved that there is good chemistry between Switzerland and Sweden, we share numerous interests in the field of nanosciences and their practical application." Schlapbach concluded by saying that framework agreements would have to be set out between both countries in order to bring the projects devised at the Empa Academy "under one umbrella".

Further Information

Gabriele Dobenecker, Marketing, Knowledge and Technology Transfer, +41 44 823 44 21, gabriele.dobenecker@empa.ch



Per Thöresson, Swedish ambassador to Switzerland, in conversation with Empa Director Louis Schlapbach.



Swiss and Swedish researchers in one of the six 'science speed-dating' sessions.



The aim was to identify definite areas for project collaboration in the field of nanotechnology.