

FINDING THE BEST

For over a year now, the mission of Peter Haffke, Marion Cerri and Henning Hofmann has been to identify the best scientific talents worldwide. They are the three new Scouting Officers of the Max Planck Society and part of the MPG-2030 renewal process.

The Scouting Officers search for the Max Planck Directors of tomorrow. The challenge is to find outstanding researchers and promising talents worldwide, without losing sight of the development of former and existing group leaders. “In addition to groundbreaking publications and renowned research awards, the recognition of their work by their peers and their leadership qualities also play an important role for us,” says Marion Cerri, who is the Scouting Officer responsible for the Chemistry, Physics and Technology Section.

International competition is no longer limited to the most renowned universities and research institutions. Global commercial enterprises also offer attractive opportunities for scientists. “Since there is strong competition for the most exceptional talents in many disciplines in basic research, they can choose the best employer with the most attractive working environment,” says Peter Haffke, who supports the Human



PHOTO: AXEL GRIESCH/MPG

On the lookout for top scientists for the Max Planck Society, in Germany and abroad: Peter Haffke, Marion Cerri and Henning Hofmann (from left to right) have been working as Scouting Officers for 18 months now.

Sciences Section in the search process. “The results of the talent search, which is carried out across all sections, are entered into a database that will help the sections in their selection processes,” explains Henning Hofmann, who is in charge of the Biology and Medicine Section. The brightest minds often work on an interdisciplinary basis and can rarely be assigned to a specific field. This data collection is constantly growing. All three Scouting Offi-

cers have a research background at institutions outside the Max Planck Society, and are familiar with the structure of research institutions and application processes. This external perspective and their close collaboration between them can only be a benefit. “We are still in close contact with the scientific community,” Henning Hofmann says. “In this new position, we again have the freedom to experiment, and to extend our view across disciplines.”

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PRESTIGIOUS EARLY-CAREER AWARDS

In the most recent calls for proposals for the ERC Starting Grants, the Max Planck Society received a total of 13 grants. Only the French CNRS, with 20 grants, and the Helmholtz Association, with 15 grants, were more successful in securing the prestigious funding. Other successful German institutions are the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich (LMU) and the Leibniz Association (six grants each) as well as TUM, the Technical University of Munich (five grants). The ERC Starting Grants support promising early-career researchers who completed their doctorate between two and seven years ago. The grant enables them to set up their own research group and pursue their own research projects. The projects are evaluated in a two-stage peer review process by independent experts. As in the previous year, the most successful research organizations in Europe come from Germany, with 88 grants. They are followed by the United Kingdom (62 grants), the Netherlands (42 grants) and France (38 grants). Of a total of 3,272 applications submitted, 436 were approved throughout Europe. This represents a success rate of 13.32 percent.

THESE MAX PLANCK SCIENTISTS WERE AWARDED THIS YEAR'S ERC STARTING GRANTS

CHEMISTRY, PHYSICS & TECHNOLOGY

Richard Anderson, Max Planck Institute for Astronomy

Maria Bergemann, Max Planck Institute for Astronomy

Manuel van Gemmeren, Max Planck Institute for Chemical Energy Conversion

Stefan Truppe, Fritz Haber Institute

Steffen Rulands, Max Planck Institute for the Physics of Complex Systems

Manuel Gomez, Max Planck Institute for Software Systems

BIOLOGY & MEDICINE

Stefan Glöggler, Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry

Juliane Liepe, Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry

Erich Pascal Malkemper, Research Center caesar

Edda Schulz, Max Planck Institute for Molecular Genetics

Tatjana Tchumatchenko, Max Planck Institute for Brain Research

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Sebastian Grüneisen, Max Planck Institute for Human Development

Mathias Lerch, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research

COMMUNITY NEWS

STAYING CONNECTED IN TIMES OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

The Max Planck Symposium for Alumni and Early Career Researchers has provided a platform for these members of the Max Planck Community since 2016. Each year, the participants themselves proposed a topic, which they implemented and brought to life together with experts and invited guests. It has been a tradition to enable about 40 of the international and honorary alumnae and alumni to travel to the Harnack House conference venue with the help of travel grants. However, in 2020, long-distance travel has been unthinkable. A completely virtual concept was therefore introduced – a goal which had already been visualized by the participants and organizers before 2020. As Tina Persson, workshop chair, panelist and professional career coach, and Alumna of the MPI for Experimental Medicine argues, digital conferencing “offers the chance for a deeper level of connection to workshop participants who aren’t always heard as much in personal workshops as much as digital ones, such as the introverts.” From 09/17-09/19/2020, 4 hours every afternoon

(CET) were dedicated to “Smart Working”. In keynotes, workshops and a panel discussion, alumns from industry, science, organizational psychology, and coaching reported how their companies are adapting to the digital work culture. An important result was that Smart Working is not only technology-driven: using the hive mind of one’s own community in order to find solutions for collaboration even in times of crisis is fundamental during the corona pandemic. “Realizing that you need help and reaching out are the first crucial steps to becoming resilient,” emphasized workshop chair, panelist and resilience coach Ben Hartwig, Alumnus of the MPI for Plant Breeding Research, “when the corona pandemic started I decided to simply hire people who knew more about digital tools to help keep my coaching business going.”

“You definitely need conference tools that allow for spontaneity,” added start-up founder Natalie Tillack, who is an Alumna of the MPI für Eisenforschung. “The Max Planck Symposium managed really well to

pick up people where they are and engage them, while also leaving space to reflect.” To that aim, the Max Planck Symposium tested various formats that could be suitable for moving conference participants from a passive to an active role, consciously creating the interactive network atmosphere that is so characteristic for the symposium on site. In the end, “there is no difference between onsite and online workshops, there is only a difference between boring and interactive workshops. In both formats, you have to get people out of their comfort zone, both introverts and extroverts. The really cool stuff usually happens when I am silent as a coach, when they go to the breakout rooms. That’s when they shape their own learning experience,” summarized career coach Alexander Schiller in the panel discussion.

A total of 260 active Max Planck employees, doctoral researchers and postdocs, as well as alumnae and alumni of all MPIs, registered and contributed topics. Participants from 36 countries joined the conference platform designed for the MPG, which enabled live polls, direct communication via newsfeed and video chats, as well as a matching algorithm. As the Alumna of the MPI for Human Development, Imke Rajamani of Falling Walls Berlin, noted: “The new technology for this is already out there, but sometimes we just don’t know how to use it. I hope that after COVID-19 we keep up the conversation about which medium is right for which interaction, to make sure that everyone stays engaged and active.”

All lectures, the panel discussion, the opening speech by Vice President Asifa Akhtar and highlight videos are expected to be available on the MPG intranet MAX in mid-October.

A special studio was set up at the MPG Berlin office and served as a professional home base for conference hosts Ilka Schießler-Gäbler and Birgit Adam (left to right) of the MPG headquarters to guide participants through the event program via livestream.



PHOTO: DAVID AUSSERHOFER