

You can sit next to the Giants on whose shoulders you stand

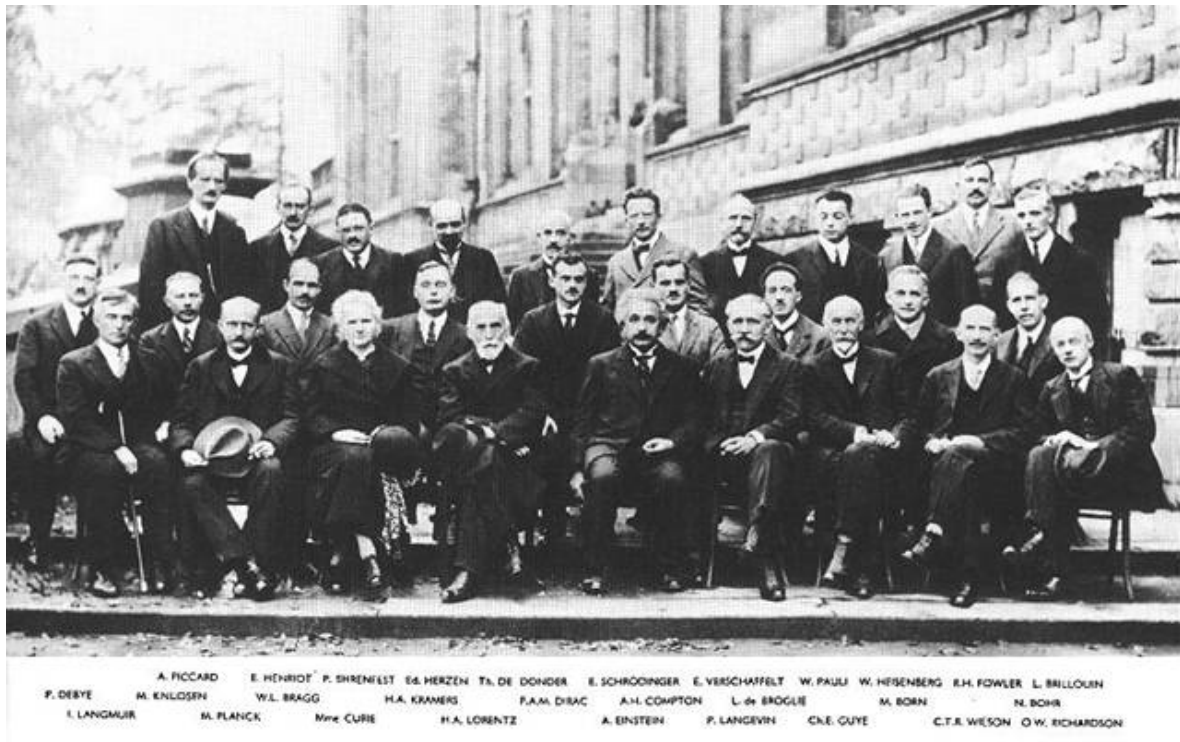
Derek Page is famous, above all else for his truism –“you must read the literature”.

He is certainly not alone in this sentiment, but perhaps the first and most famous person to make this observation was another Cambridge alumnus, none other than Isaac Newton. He presented the same statement using slightly different words, he said. “If I have seen farther than others, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.” Indeed this is his most famous quotation, though he was possibly taking a side swipe at his diminutive rival, Robert Hooke.

The sentiment is also famous for being used once again in connection with the Solvay conference, this time the quotation was Albert Einstein. Here he modified the quote to “The Solvay Conference is one place where you can have the honour of sitting next to the giants on whose shoulders you stand.”

These conferences were truly remarkable; the first took place in 1911 and was chaired by Lorentz. The most famous was the fifth which took place in 1927. The photograph of attendees is given below; for those who are not physicists perhaps I should say that among the 29 attendees, no less than 17 were either Nobel Laureates or later became so.

This conference was also famous for some other quotations. Again Einstein – this time less than impressed by Heisenberg's ideas of Uncertainty – said “God does not play dice” to which Nils Bohr nicely retorted “Einstein, stop telling God what to do.”



These Solvay conferences have two things in common with the FRC: firstly they happen only once every four years, and secondly they are the only place where you can truly sit next to the giant on whose shoulders you stand. Thus I claim that FRC Symposia are to Paper Science what the Solvay Conferences are to modern Physics.

Peter Herdman, February 2007.