



PSDI

PHYSICAL SCIENCES
DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

Electronic Lab Notebooks and Beyond! The evolution of process recording tools for scientific research

RSC Historical Group

13th March 2024

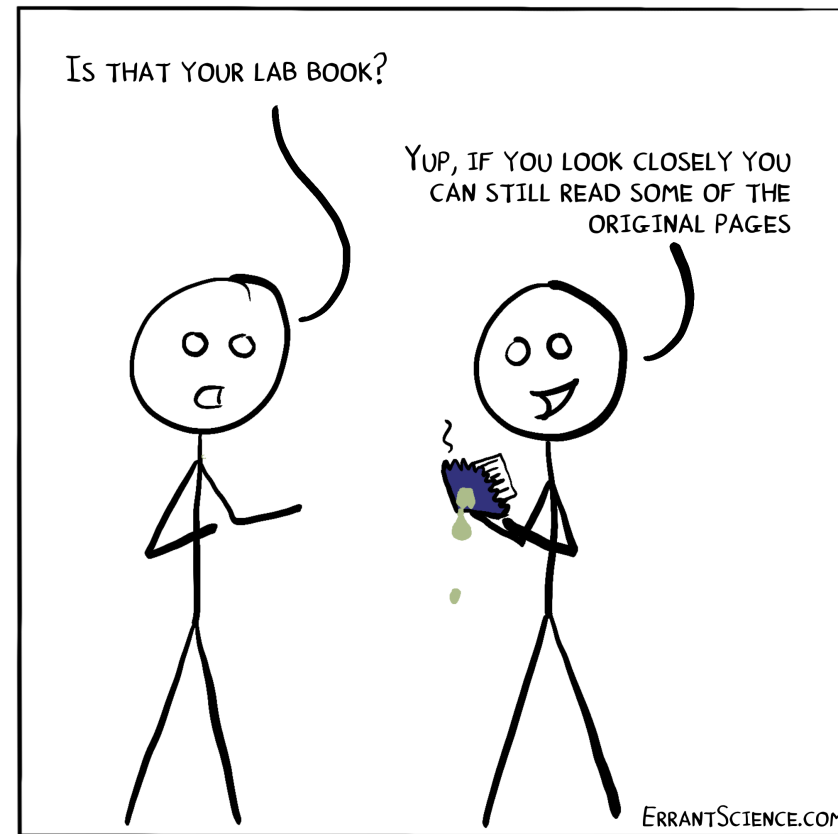
Dr Samantha Pearman-Kanza

University of Southampton

<https://www.psdi.ac.uk/>

Presentation Outline

- ▶ About Me
- ▶ Scientific Record Keeping & Electronic Lab Notebooks (ELNs)
- ▶ Barriers to ELNs
- ▶ The ELN Landscape and where ELNs fit into the wider Digital Landscape for Scientific Research
- ▶ Why does this matter? FAIR & Supplementary Information
- ▶ Examples of successful implementations
- ▶ Thoughts for the future
- ▶ PSDI Services & Research



About Me



- ▶ Senior Enterprise Fellow at University of Southampton
- ▶ Pathfinder Lead & Researcher for PSDI on Process Recording
- ▶ Researcher for AIChemistry Hub on Process Recording
- ▶ Research Interests: Semantic Web Technologies, IoT, Research Data Management, Digitisation, Lab of the Future, Paperless Labs, Re-use of Technology
- ▶ @SamiKanza

How did I end up here?

BMC Part of Springer Nature Search Menu

Journal of Cheminformatics

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Research article | [Open Access](#) | [Published: 24 May 2017](#)

Electronic lab notebooks: can they replace paper?

[Samantha Kanza](#) ✉, [Cerys Willoughby](#), [Nicholas Gibbins](#), [Richard Whitby](#), [Jeremy Graham Frey](#), [Jana Erjavec](#), [Klemen Zupančič](#), [Matjaž Hren](#) & [Katarina Kovač](#)

Journal of Cheminformatics **9**, Article number: 31 (2017) | [Cite this article](#)

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Abstract

Despite the increasingly digital nature of society there are some areas of research that remain firmly rooted in the past; in this case the laboratory notebook, the last remaining paper component of an experiment. Countless electronic laboratory notebooks (ELNs) have been created in an attempt to digitise record keeping processes in the lab, but none of them have become a 'key player' in the ELN market, due to the many adoption barriers that have been identified in previous research and further explored in the user studies presented here. The main issues identified are the cost of the current available ELNs, their ease of use (or lack of it) and their accessibility issues across different devices and operating systems. Evidence suggests that whilst scientists willingly make use of generic notebooking software, spreadsheets and other general office and scientific tools to aid their work, current ELNs are lacking in the required functionality to meet the needs of the researchers. In this paper we present our extensive research and user study results to propose an ELN built upon a pre-existing

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nature > toolbox > article

TOOLBOX | 06 August 2018

How to pick an electronic laboratory notebook

Choosing wisely from a burgeoning array of digital tools can help researchers to record experiments with ease.

[Roberta Kwok](#)

[Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Email](#)



Illustration by The Project Twins

Since at least the 1990s, articles on technology have predicted the imminent, widespread adoption of electronic laboratory notebooks (ELNs) by researchers. It has yet to happen – but more and more scientists are taking the plunge.

One barrier to uptake is the wide range of products available. ELNs comprise software that helps researchers to document experiments, and that often has features such as protocol templates, collaboration tools, support for electronic signatures and the ability to manage the lab inventory. But the ELN market encompasses considerable variety; a study conducted in 2016 by the University of Southampton, UK, identified 72 active products (S. Kanza *et al.*, *Cheminformatics* **9**, 31, 2017). "It's just insane," says Sian Jones, a petroleum engineer at the Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. "It does become very confusing." And many researchers simply lack the time or motivation to make the move to ELNs.

Access this article via University of Southampton

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Subjects

[Lab life](#) [Research management](#) [Research data](#)

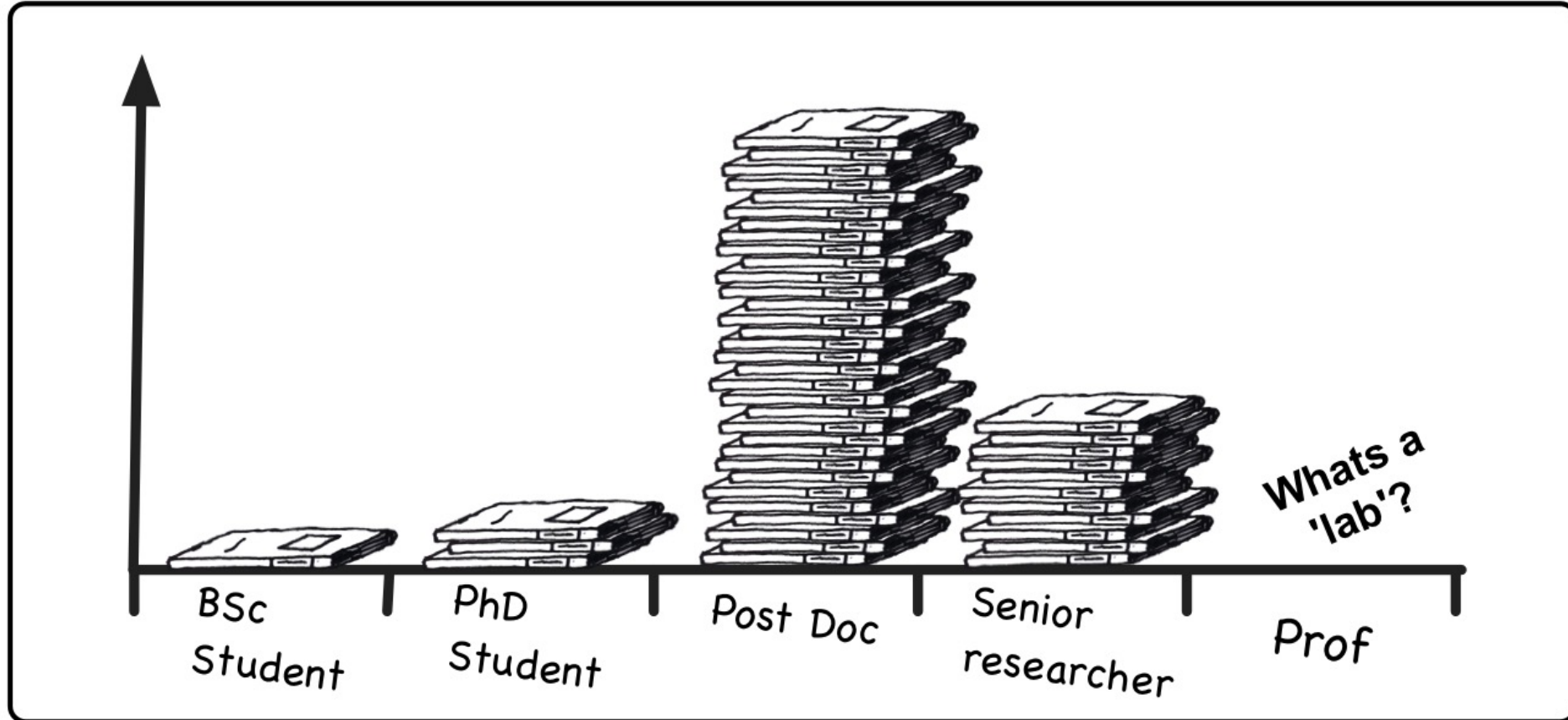
[Technology](#)



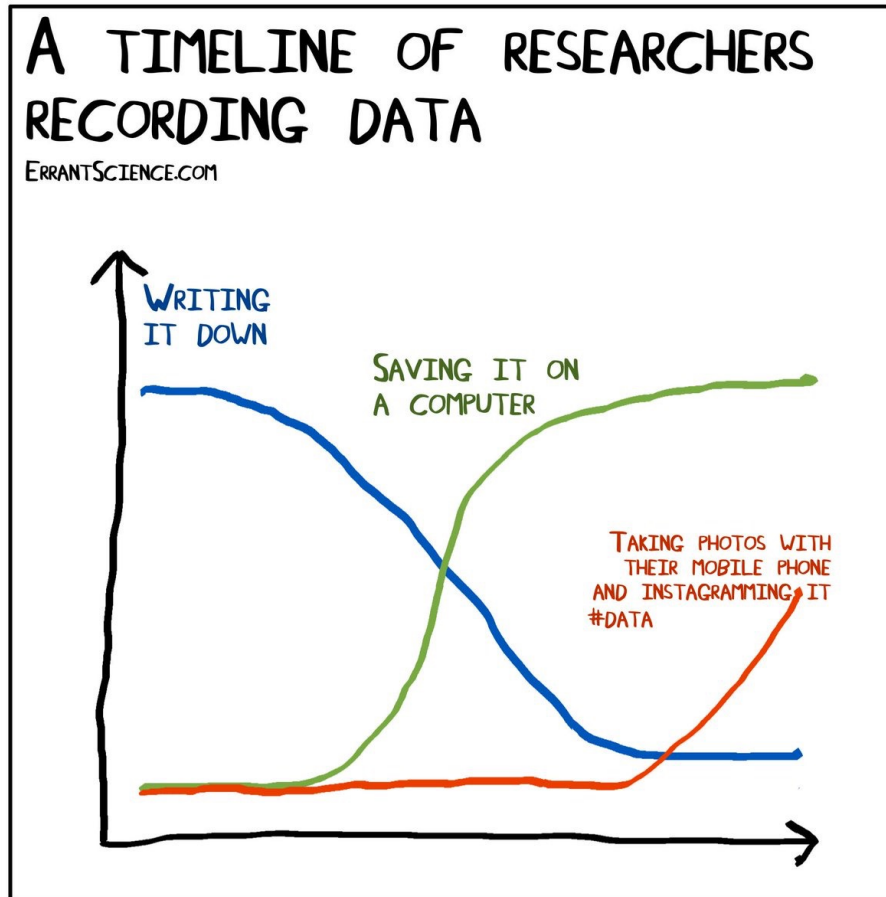
Personal Photograph of Dr Samantha Pearman-Kanza

Scientific Record Keeping & Electronic Lab Notebooks (ELNs)

Lab book use at various levels of academia



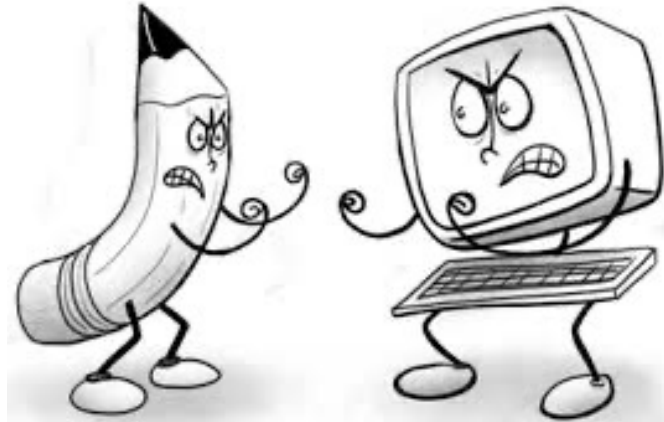
Scientific Record Keeping



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- ▶ Scientists keep records of their work.
- ▶ Typically using a paper lab notebook.
- ▶ This tradition that still holds strong in many labs today!

Paper vs Electronic



["It Was A Normal Day Of Office When A Sweet Voice Break - Computer Vs Paper"](#) - free download from SeekPNG

Advantages

- ▶ Cheap
- ▶ Portable
- ▶ Robust
- ▶ Can be securely stored
- ▶ Ease/Flexibility of Data Entry
- ▶ Doesn't require a power supply (or access to power)

Disadvantages

- ▶ Easy to lose/destroy
- ▶ Harder to search
- ▶ Harder to backup
- ▶ Harder to share
- ▶ Frequently gets forgotten
- ▶ Harder to readily access from multiple locations

Consequences of paper (or poor electronic sharing...)



The Electronic Lab Notebook

- ▶ ELNs were originally created to serve as a direct replacement for the paper lab notebook....Which sounds like a simple endeavour at first....!



“[Electronic Lab Notebooks are great, but not on vacation](#)” Cartoon by Phil Johnson for MIT.

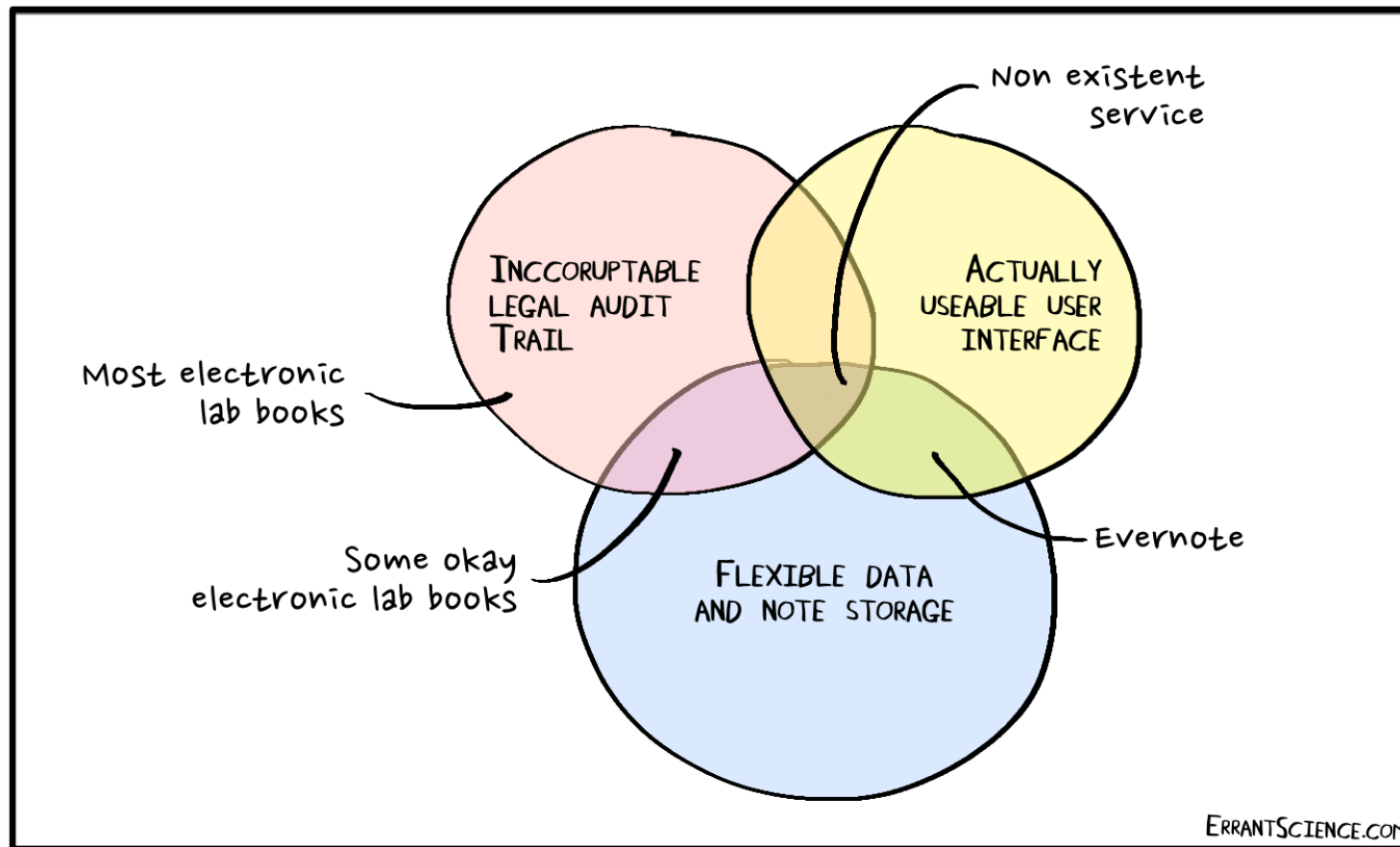
Advantages

- ▶ Accessible from multiple locations
- ▶ Searchable
- ▶ Easy to backup
- ▶ Easy to share data
- ▶ Data is quickly retrievable
- ▶ Can be used by multiple people at once

Disadvantages

- ▶ Expensive potentially
- ▶ Slower/inflexible data entry
- ▶ Requires power supply/power
- ▶ May require internet
- ▶ Concerns about tech in labs
- ▶ Harder to create diagrams

Barriers to ELNs



A venn diagram guide to electronic lab books

Choice Barriers

There are now over 80 active ELNs on the market!

- ▶ AI4Green
- ▶ ACAS
- ▶ Active LN
- ▶ AgiLab ELN
- ▶ Agilent SLIMS
- ▶ Alchemy ELN
- ▶ Arxspan ELN
- ▶ Benchling ELN
- ▶ BioChemLab Solutions ELN
- ▶ BioRails
- ▶ Biovia Notebook
- ▶ Bookitlab
- ▶ CBIS E-Notebook
- ▶ CDD Vault ELN
- ▶ CERF 5.0
- ▶ ChemCart ELN
- ▶ Chemia
- ▶ Chemotion
- ▶ Colabra ELN
- ▶ CompuDrug ELN
- ▶ Dotmatics ELN
- ▶ eJournal
- ▶ eLabFTW
- ▶ eLabJournal
- ▶ eLabNotes
- ▶ EmsoChemLab
- ▶ Espresso ELN
- ▶ eStudy
- ▶ eSystems
- ▶ E-WorkBook
- ▶ Formulator
- ▶ Gene Inspector
- ▶ GenoFAB
- ▶ GOLims
- ▶ Herbie
- ▶ InELN
- ▶ iLES Platform
- ▶ iQ
- ▶ Kadi4Mat
- ▶ LabArchives
- ▶ LabCloud
- ▶ LabCollector ELN
- ▶ LabFolder
- ▶ Labguru ELN
- ▶ Labii
- ▶ LabKey ELN
- ▶ LabLog
- ▶ LabsForm
- ▶ LabSpace
- ▶ LabStep
- ▶ LabTrack ELN
- ▶ LabTrove
- ▶ LabVantage
- ▶ LabWare ELN
- ▶ Laby
- ▶ Limsophy LIMS
- ▶ LogBook
- ▶ Logilab
- ▶ LOGS-ELN
- ▶ Mbook
- ▶ MyLabBook
- ▶ NotebookMaker
- ▶ Online ELN Worksheet
- ▶ Open Inventory
- ▶ openBIS
- ▶ OpenText ELN
- ▶ PatentSafe ELN
- ▶ quattro/LJ
- ▶ RedFox
- ▶ Rspace
- ▶ SampleDB
- ▶ Sapio Seamless ELN
- ▶ SciCord ELN/LIMS
- ▶ Sciformation ELN
- ▶ Scilligence ELN
- ▶ SciNote
- ▶ Signals ELN
- ▶ Stackwave ELN
- ▶ STARLIMS ELN
- ▶ Studylog
- ▶ Sun Bio ELN
- ▶ Thermo Scientific Core ELN
- ▶ Waters NuGenesis

Requirements Barriers

- ▶ There is no one “ELN to rule them all”
- ▶ How can you expect an ELN to cater to the diverse needs of an entire university, across the whole range of scientific disciplines and stages of education?
- ▶ What works for one group/lab almost certainly work for another

Semantic Layer

- Tag / classify notes & experiments
- Advanced Semantic Search (Filtered Search)
- Inferences for the same molecules of reactions*
- Link related notebooks
- Inferences for similar projects
- Automatic chemical recognition*
- Link to ontologies
- Store metadata

Domain Layer

- Facilitate different experiments
- Range of experiment templates
- Advanced searches by Chemical Structures
- Searches include reaction schemes
- Automatically link to external chemistry resources
- Calculations / Formulas / Equations
- Scientific sketches / drawing
- Risk assessment inclusion
- Flag dangerous chemicals
- Index of COSHH materials
- Global database of chemical values
- Link to measurement vocabularies
- Usable in the lab like a paper notebook
- Standard list of instruments and reagents

Notebook Layer

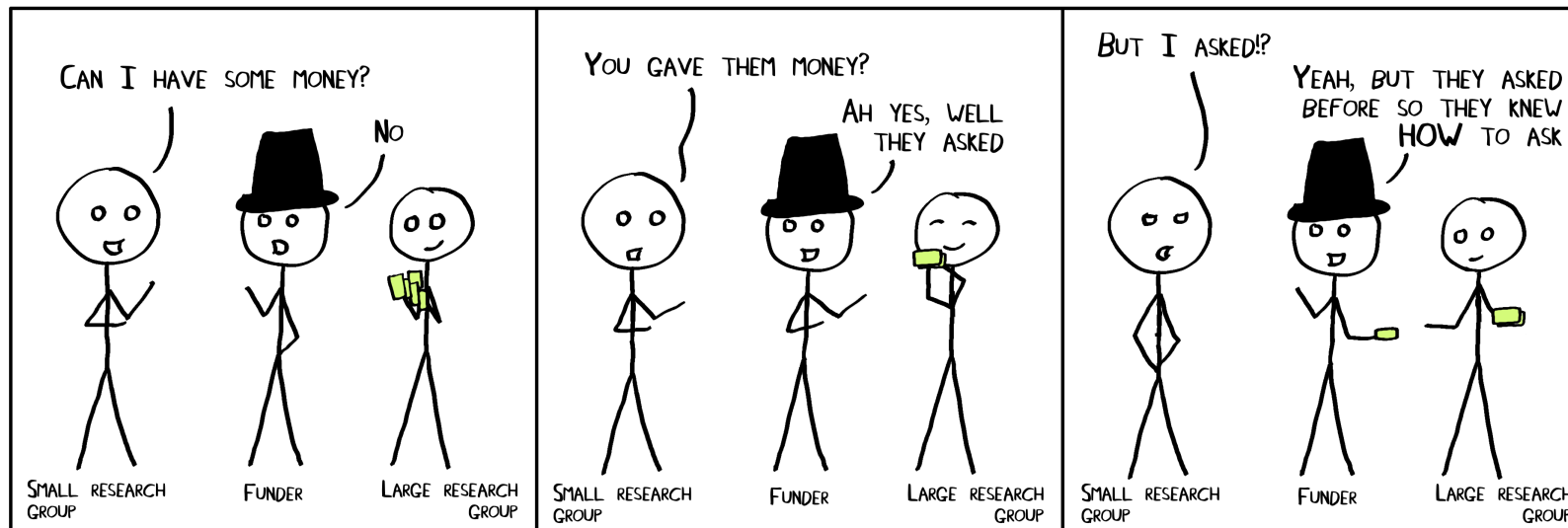
- Contents Table / Overview Screen
- Indexable / Highlightable
- Dropbox-esque features (automatic data update)
- Integrate / store: Excel, Word, PDFs, Pictures & Handwritten notes
- Upload/link files / images / data
- Web based/Platform Independent
- Tablet/Smartphone compliant
- Secure storage, backup and archives
- Different access levels for different users
- Shared files / notebooks
- Recent activity feed
- TODO Lists
- Postit notes
- As easy to write in as a paper notebook
- Digital pen integration
- Page statistics
- Create default values
- Notifications for approvals
- Simple to install
- Personalisable
- Spell Checker
- Keyword Search
- Link to reference managers
- Copy sketches into notebook
- Migration tools
- Export functionality
- Diagrams
- Voice Capture
- Text recognition
- Downloads/Printing
- Secure access
- Moderated comments
- Built in language
- Bulletin boards
- Timelines
- Generate report button
- Sign off entries

Cost Barriers

- ▶ ELN Licensing costs
- ▶ Hardware costs - Replacing legacy equipment, Providing devices to use ELN on
- ▶ Lab renovation costs - Installing more power sockets/ethernet sockets / WIFI boosters
- ▶ Maintenance costs
- ▶ Potential future development costs

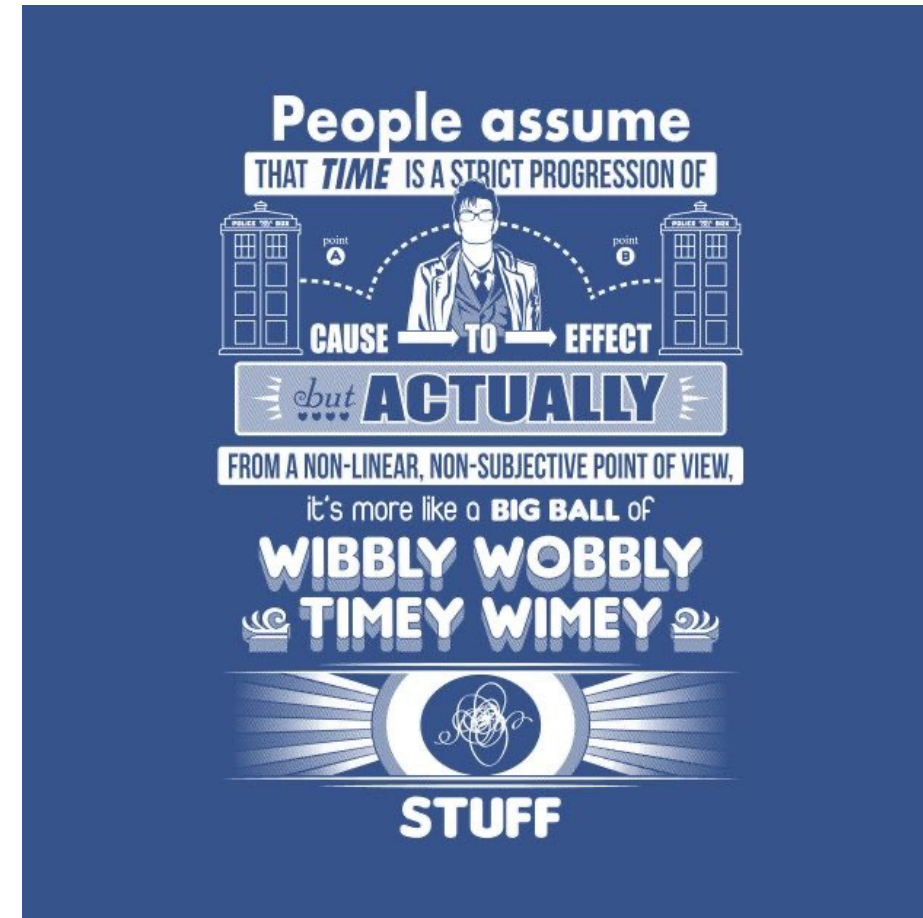
UNIVERSITY FUNDING IN A NUTSHELL

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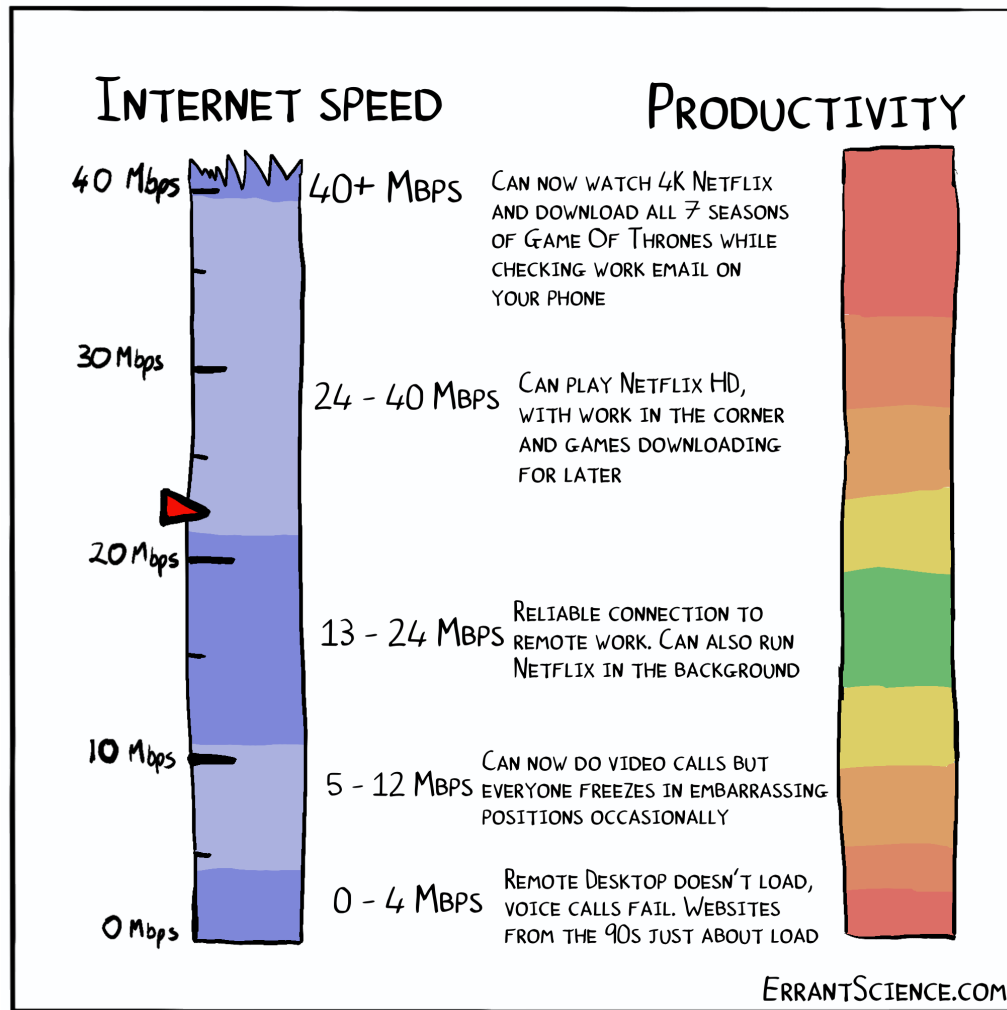


Time Barriers

- ▶ You can't implement any new system overnight
- ▶ You need to consider
 - ▶ Implementation time
 - ▶ Training time
 - ▶ How moving systems may impact researchers and how that can be accounted for
 - ▶ Potential duplication of data entry depending on setup



Hardware Barriers



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Hardware Devices

- ▶ What electronic devices are going to be used?
- ▶ Space to use/store electronic devices
- ▶ Internet/WIFI connection required

Hostile Environment for Hardware

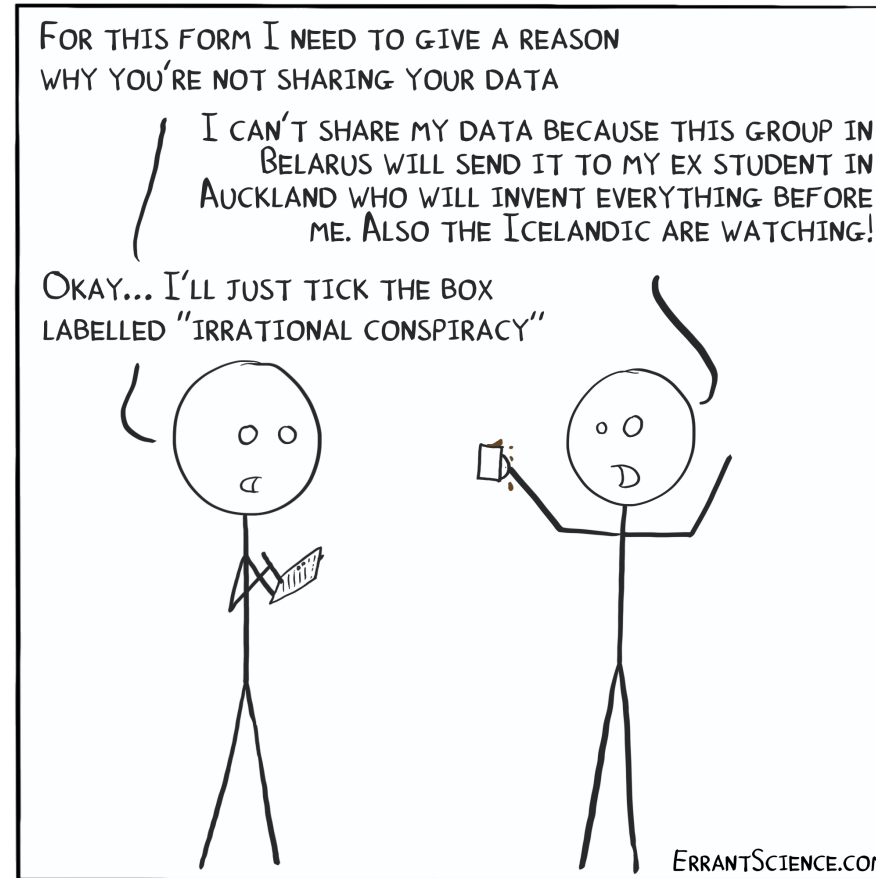
- ▶ Chemical spills on keyboards/computers
- ▶ Magnetised equipment that destroys electronic devices
- ▶ Cross contamination moving devices in and out of the lab

Compatibility Concerns

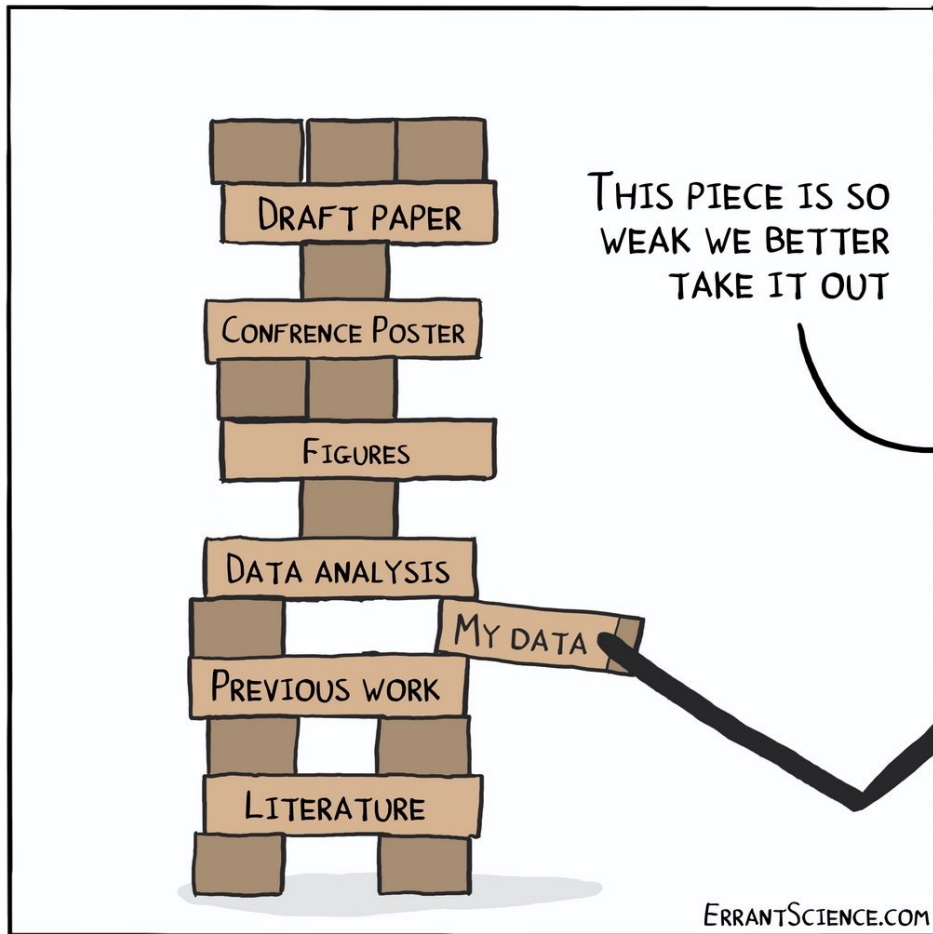
- ▶ Will an ELN be interoperable with legacy hardware equipment?

Trust Barriers

- ▶ Many researchers do not trust ELNs
- ▶ There are many concerns to consider:
 - ▶ Data privacy (Sharing/Hacking)
 - ▶ ELNs using proprietary formats
 - ▶ Lack of cohesive data exit strategy

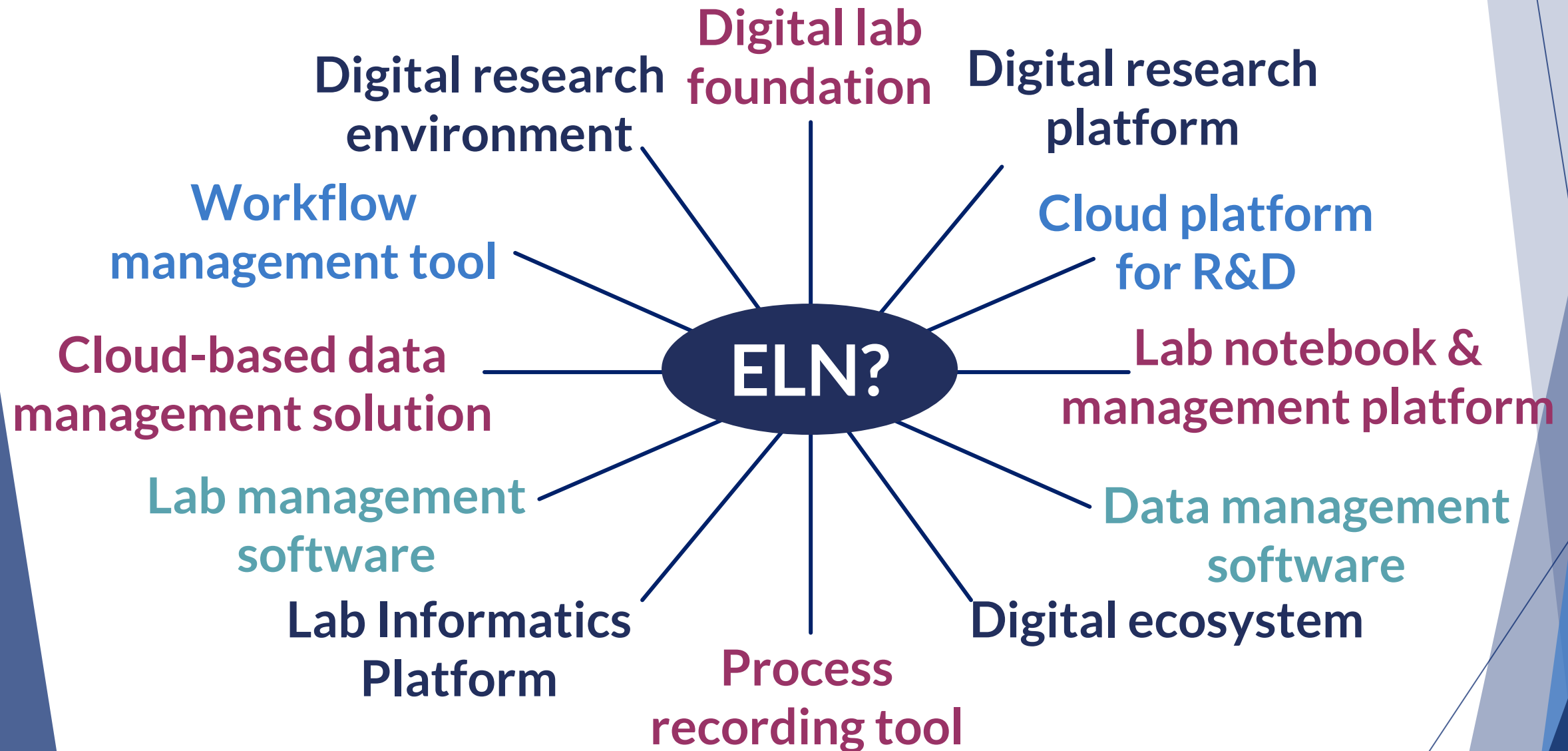


People/Adoption Barriers



- ▶ People are arguably one of the biggest barriers
- ▶ Top down influence can make or break this
- ▶ Need to get the whole group on board
- ▶ Concerns about changing processes
- ▶ Hard to persuade people to embark on a journey with a lot of front-loaded work, unless they really understand the benefits

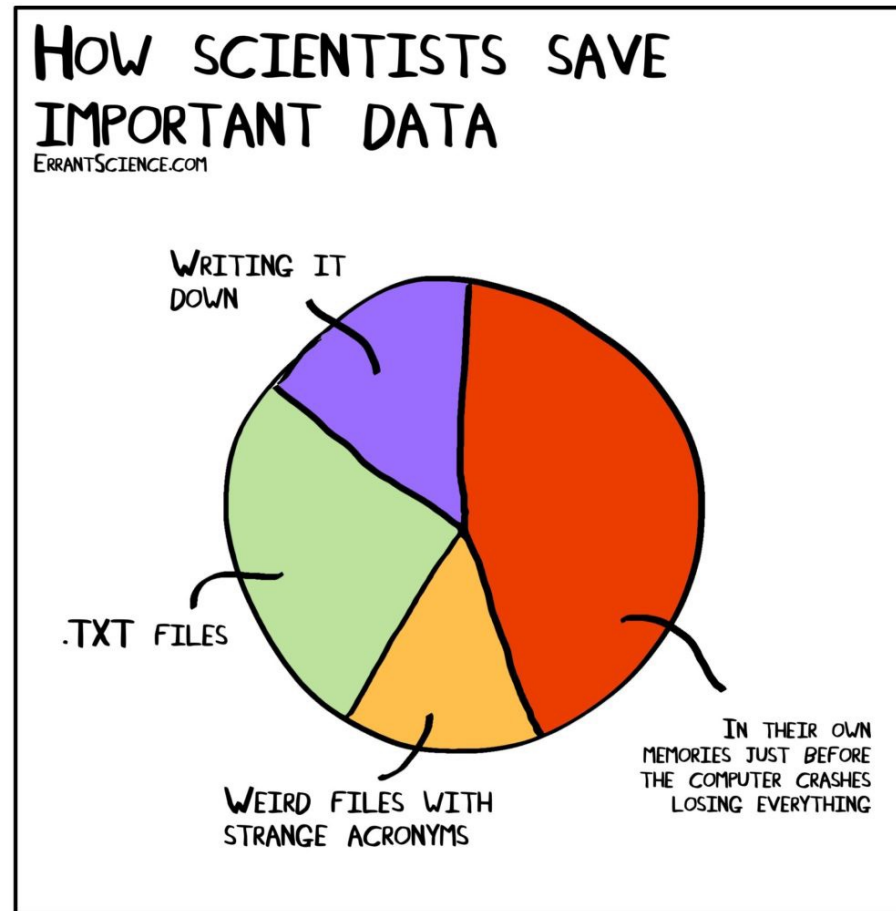
The ELN Landscape and where ELNs fit into the wider Digital Landscape for Scientific Research



Evolution of Tools

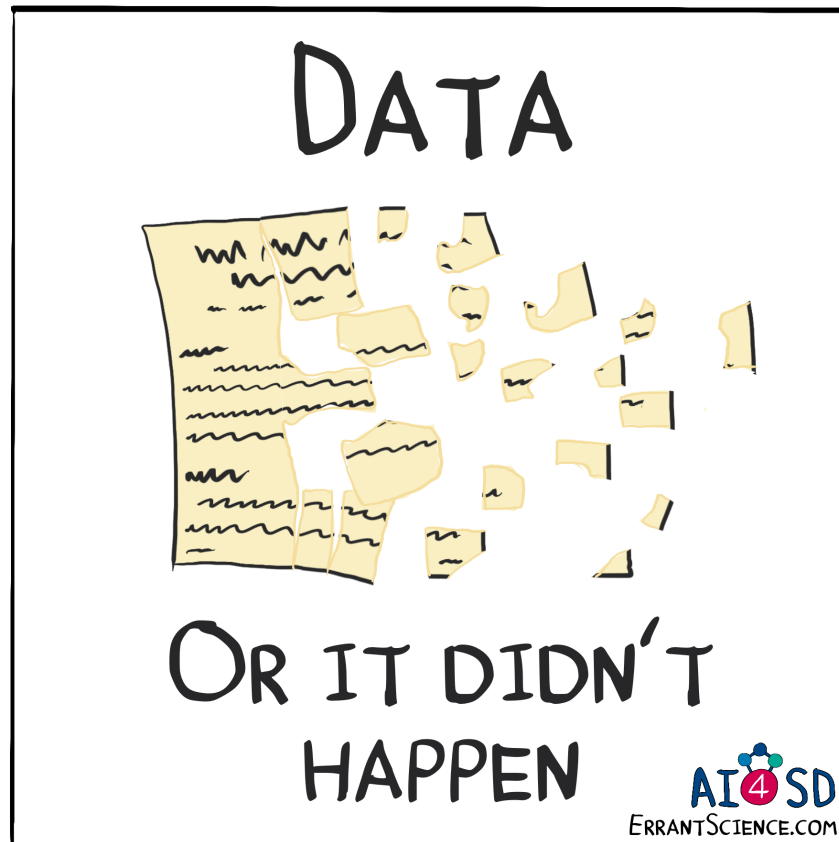
- ▶ Frequently these platforms encompass one of many of:
 - ▶ ELNs (Electronic Lab Notebooks)
 - ▶ LIMS (Laboratory Information Management System)
 - ▶ SDMS (Scientific Data Management System)
 - ▶ Inventory / Sample Management
 - ▶ Registry

They are no longer
JUST A REPLACEMENT



Research & Surveying our community

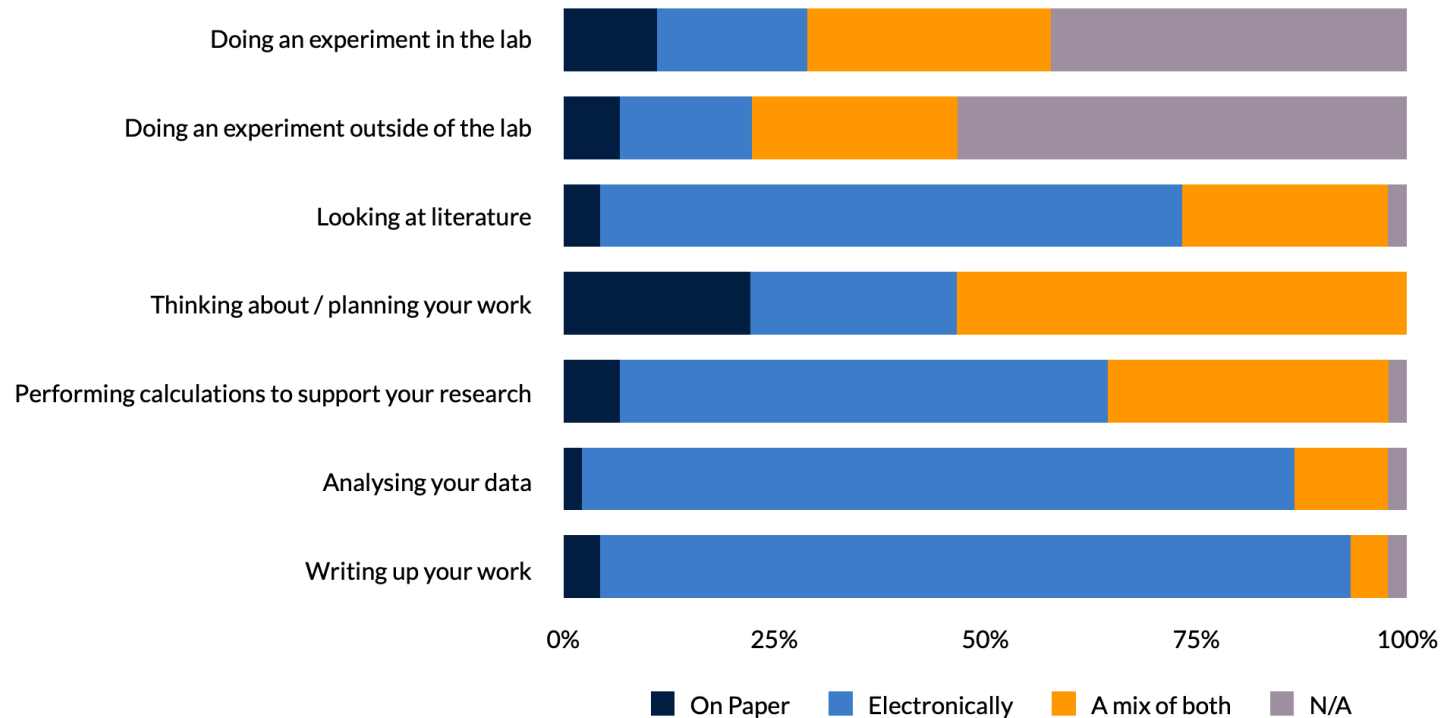
- ▶ Two surveys
 - ▶ Digital Requirements Survey
 - ▶ Process Recording Survey
- ▶ Extensive ELN Market Research
 - ▶ Discussions with Vendors
 - ▶ Discussions with Universities



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Use of Paper & Electronic

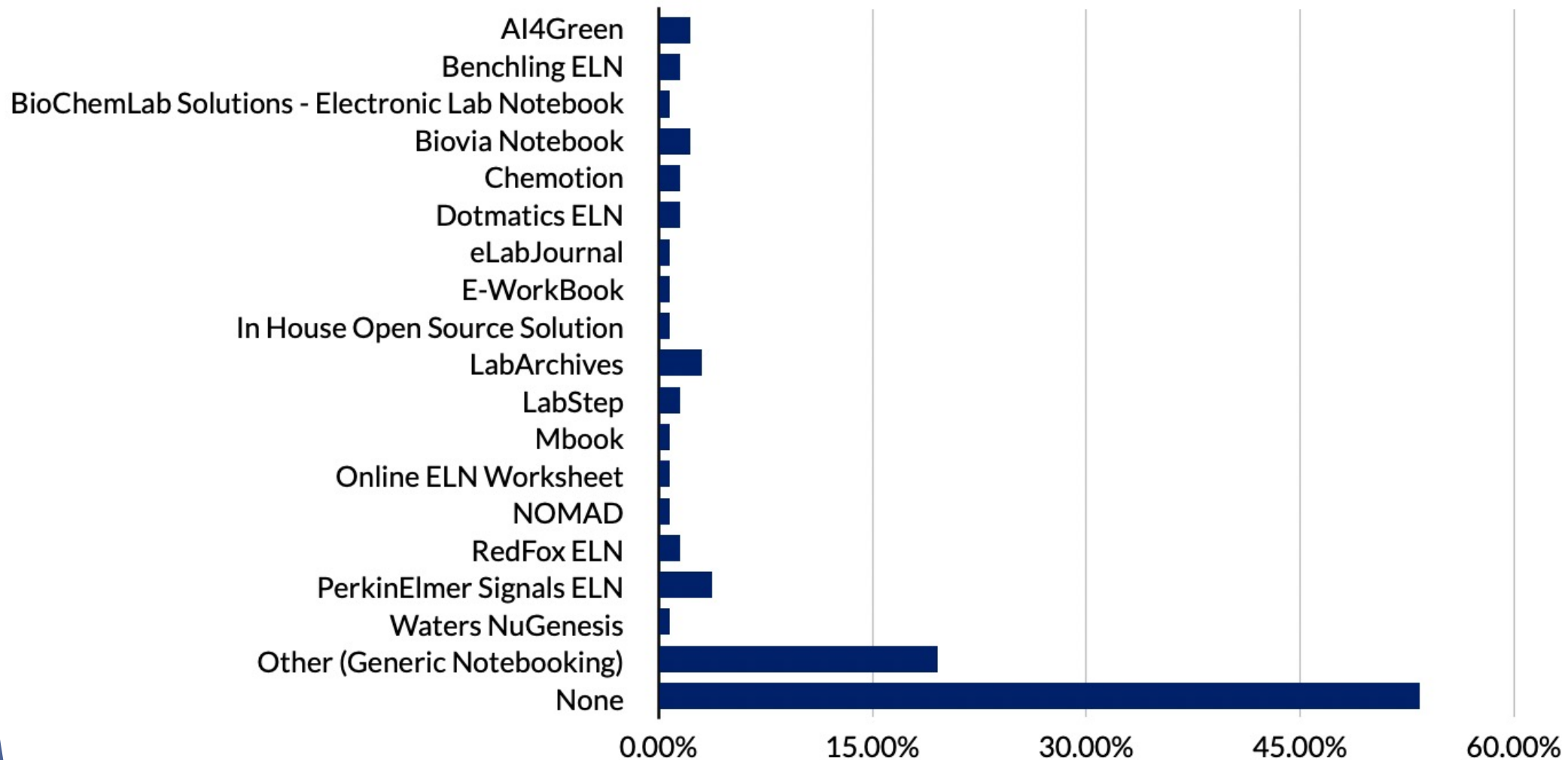
For each of the following types of work, how do you currently record it?



Researchers work in different ways using a mix of paper/electronic methods

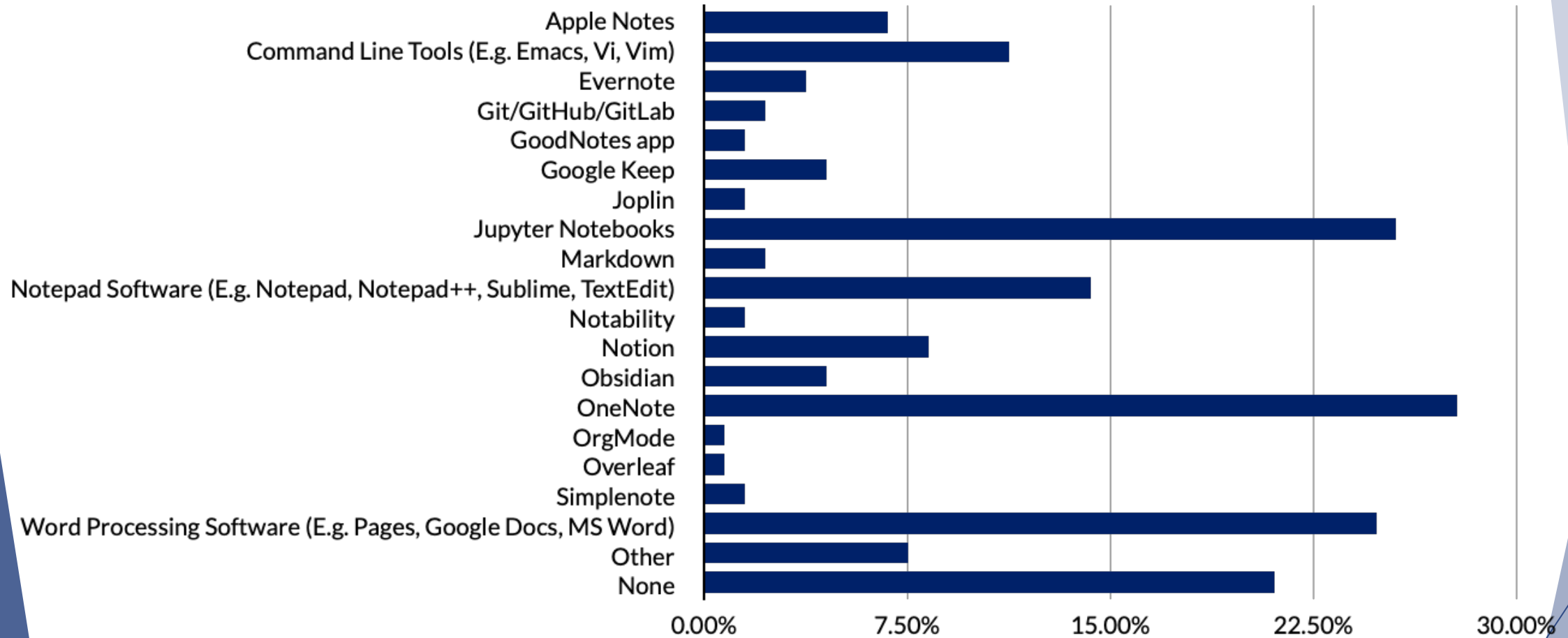
Paper is used more for planning, with a heavy reliance on digital methods for analysis and writeup

What ELNs do you use?





What Generic Notebooking Tools do you use?



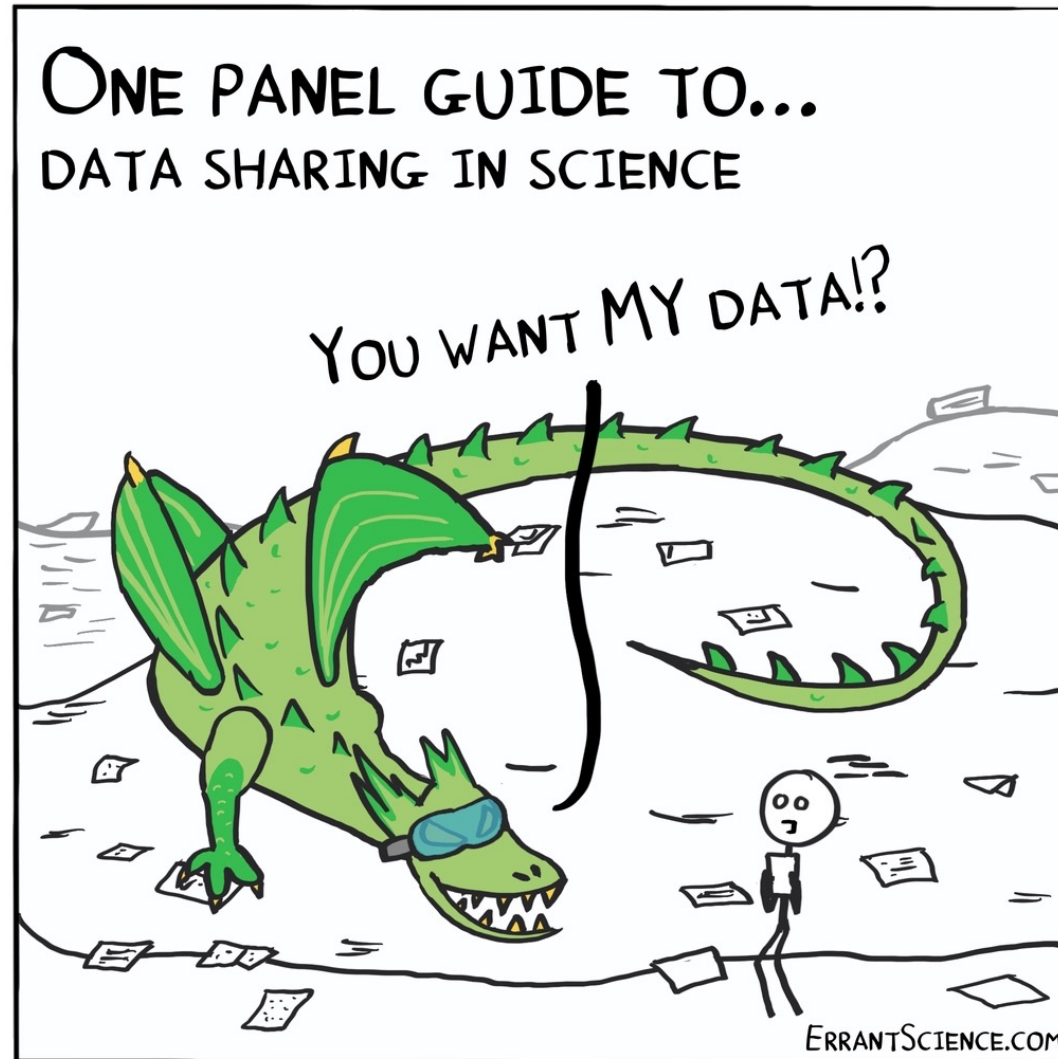
What other software do you use?

| Category | Totals (/206) | Percentage |
|--|---------------|------------|
| Crystallographic Software | 26 | 12.44% |
| Coding Software | 22 | 10.53% |
| Molecular Modelling & Simulation Software | 22 | 10.53% |
| Quantum Chemistry and Solid State Physics Software | 21 | 10.05% |
| Data Visualisation & Analysis | 19 | 9.09% |
| General document processing | 18 | 8.61% |
| Other | 13 | 6.22% |
| Spectroscopic Software | 10 | 4.78% |
| Image processing Software | 9 | 4.31% |
| Chemical Database & Informatics Software | 8 | 3.83% |
| Organisational Software | 7 | 3.35% |
| Chemistry Bibliographic Databases | 5 | 2.39% |
| Database Software | 5 | 2.39% |
| Instrument Control | 5 | 2.39% |
| Simulation (non-chemical) | 5 | 2.39% |
| Communication Software | 4 | 1.91% |
| Molecular Editor Software | 3 | 1.44% |
| Nanostructures Modelling Software | 2 | 0.96% |
| Machine Learning | 2 | 0.96% |
| CAD Software | 2 | 0.96% |
| Workflow software | 1 | 0.48% |

What other software do you use in your work?

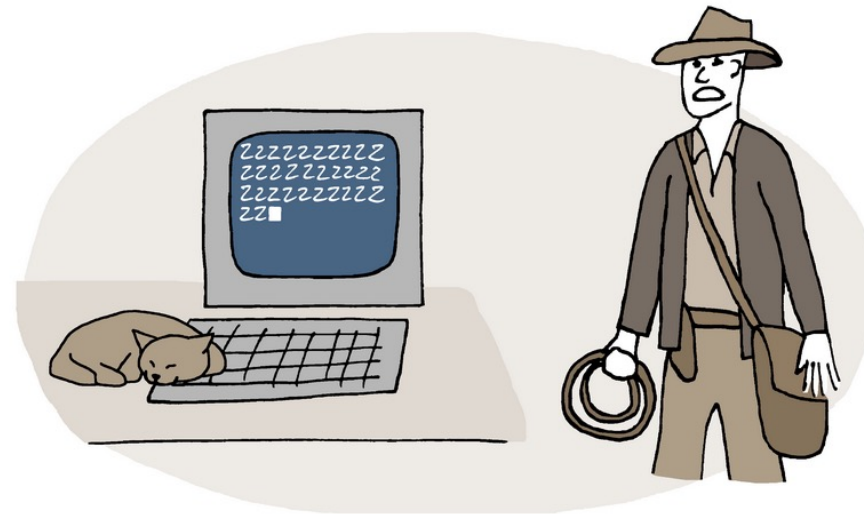
- ▶ >200 different software packages identified
- ▶ Categorised using categories from PhD research and identified additional categories
- ▶ Demonstrates the wide ranging need for generic and specialist software in the physical sciences

Why does this matter? FAIR & Supplementary Information



What is this all for?

- ▶ We should be recording our data and methods for:
 - ▶ Our future selves to access
 - ▶ To share with the wider scientific community and to add to the greater body of knowledge
 - ▶ To make our data/methods FAIR



FINALLY! AFTER ALL THOSE YEARS
I FINALLY FOUND
THE SOURCE OF THE DATA!

What does FAIR mean?

From 'The FAIR Guiding Principles for scientific data management and stewardship'¹

- ▶ F – Findable
- ▶ A – Accessible
- ▶ I – Interoperable
- ▶ R – Reusable

"ALL RESEARCH SHOULD AIM TO BE F.A.I.R." #FIGSHAREFEST

| | GOOD | BAD |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| F INDABLE | ONLINE DATABASE | FILING CABINET IN A BATH IN THE BASEMENT UNDER A LEAKING PIPE |
| A CCESSIBLE | OPEN ACCESS FOR EVERYONE (NO LOGIN) | THE FILING CABINET ALSO IS HOME TO A NEST OF WILD BADGERS |
| I NTEROPERABLE | ALL DATA IS IN OPEN FORMATS | ALL DOCUMENTS ARE PRINTED IN COMIC SANS AND WRITTEN IN ESPERANTO |
| R EUSEABLE | GOOD META DATA AND SECURELY STORED FOR 10 YEARS | THE PAPER EXPLODES IF IT'S READ |

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¹ Wilkinson, M., Dumontier, M., Aalbersberg, I. *et al.* The FAIR Guiding Principles for scientific data management and stewardship. *Sci Data* 3, 160018 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1038/sdata.2016.18>

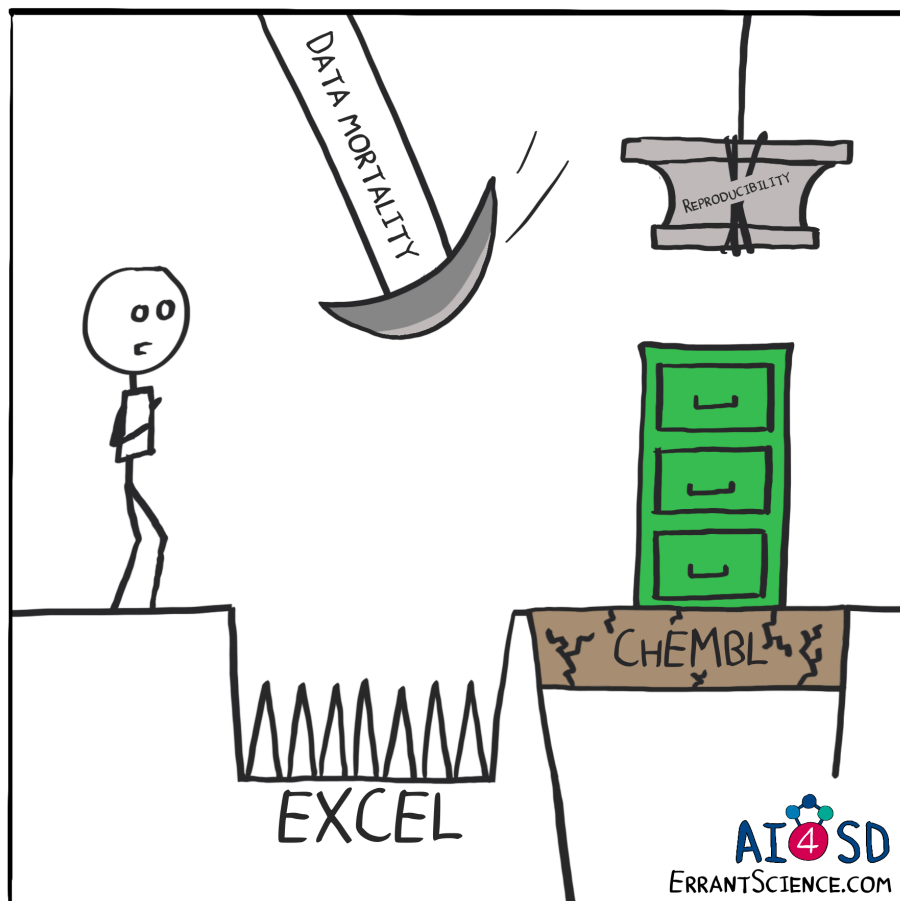
FAIR Considerations

- ▶ This isn't JUST about the data
- ▶ You need to consider:
 - ▶ Data, Tools, Code, Methods, Context
 - ▶ How could/would your work be re-used, replicated, reproduced or repurposed
 - ▶ Re-use – re-use the data (or run the software) in the same manner
 - ▶ Replicate – repeat entire research from scratch including data collection and analysis
 - ▶ Reproduce – reanalyse the existing data in the same manner
 - ▶ Repurpose – use existing data or software for a new purpose

| DATA PUBLISHING | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| GOOD | BAD |
| DATA REPOSITORY | STICKY NOTE ON YOUR DOOR |
| INSTITUTIONAL ARCHIVE | SUPPLEMENTARY DATA |
| | BOTTOM OF A WELL |


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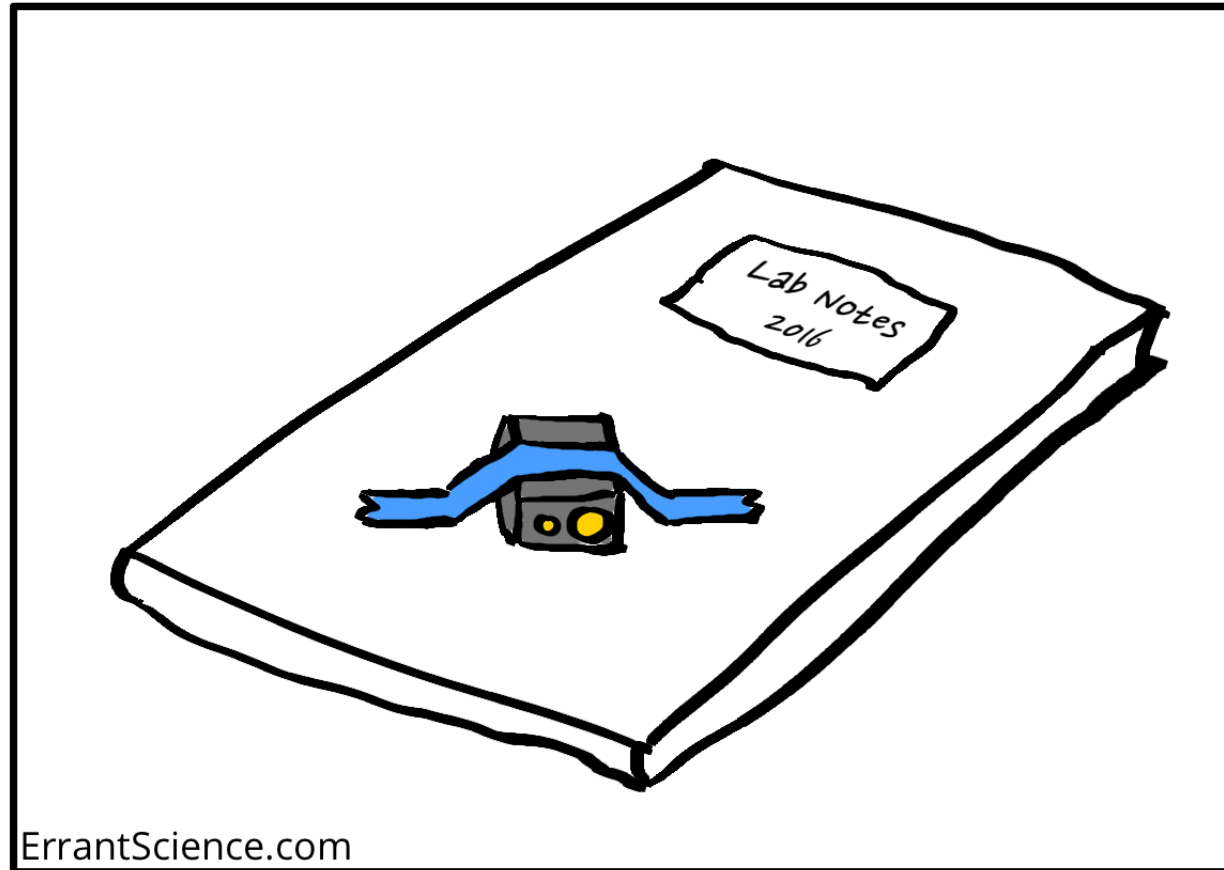
Digital Tool Considerations



Cartoon created by ErrantScience.com for AI4SD: licensed under [CC-BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

- ▶ Different situations merit different tools
- ▶ Researchers should be using the tools required to produce FAIR data and methods
- ▶ Students may be better served with different tools – as the main purpose here is learning
- ▶ How can we best prepare our students to go onto be good researchers?

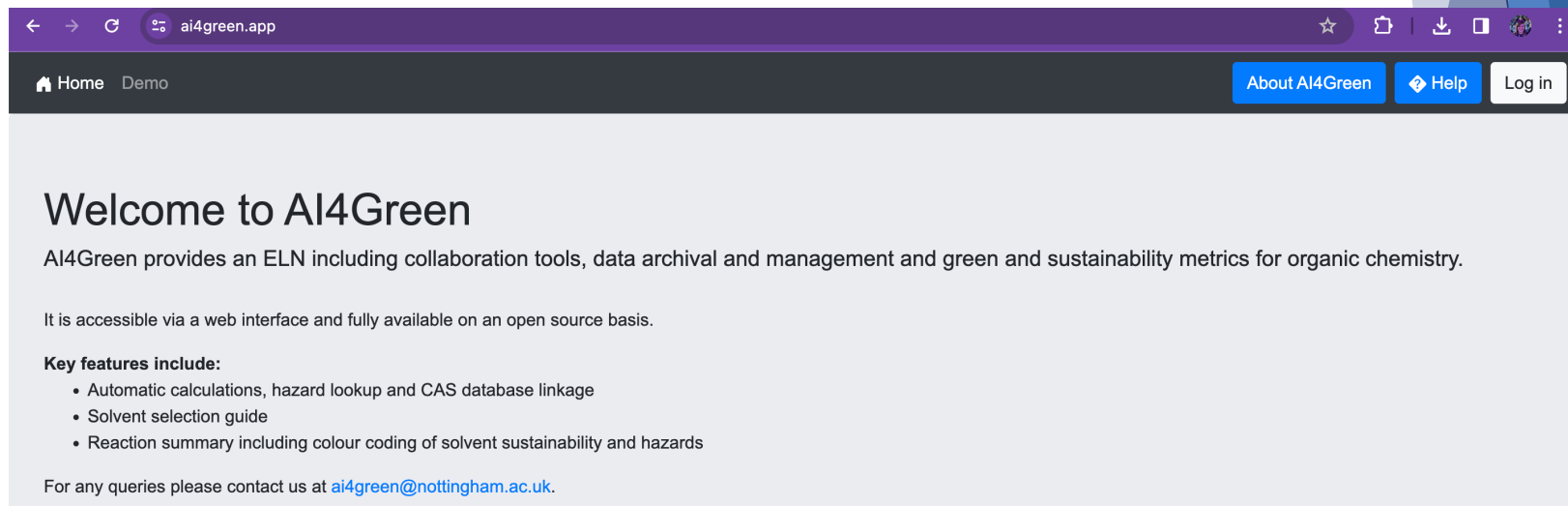
Examples of Successful Implementations



If your electronic lab book looks like this,
you're doing it wrong

Example I – University of Nottingham

- ▶ Undergraduate Labs
 - ▶ Tablets for all students
 - ▶ All students recording Labs in OneNote
 - ▶ Trialing AI4Green Student edition currently
- ▶ Postgraduate Labs
 - ▶ Computers specifically installed for AI4Green ELN – with well placed monitors
 - ▶ Hardwired connections
 - ▶ 1 computer per Fumehood
 - ▶ No cross contamination of technology



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL `ai4green.app`. The browser's address bar includes navigation icons and a star icon. The page has a dark header with a home icon, the text "Home Demo", and three buttons: "About AI4Green", "Help", and "Log in". The main content area is light gray and contains the following text:

Welcome to AI4Green

AI4Green provides an ELN including collaboration tools, data archival and management and green and sustainability metrics for organic chemistry.

It is accessible via a web interface and fully available on an open source basis.

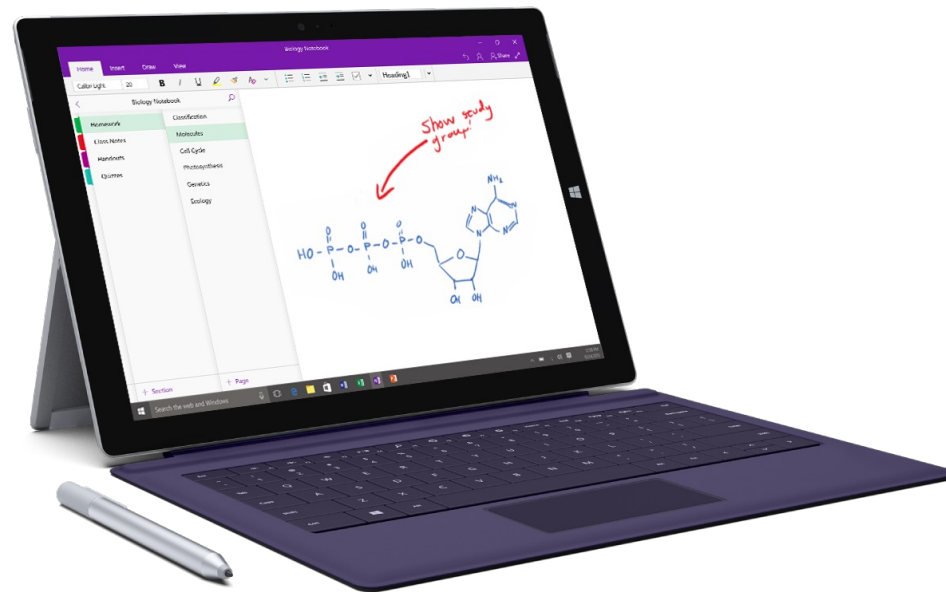
Key features include:

- Automatic calculations, hazard lookup and CAS database linkage
- Solvent selection guide
- Reaction summary including colour coding of solvent sustainability and hazards

For any queries please contact us at ai4green@nottingham.ac.uk.

Example II – Wellington College

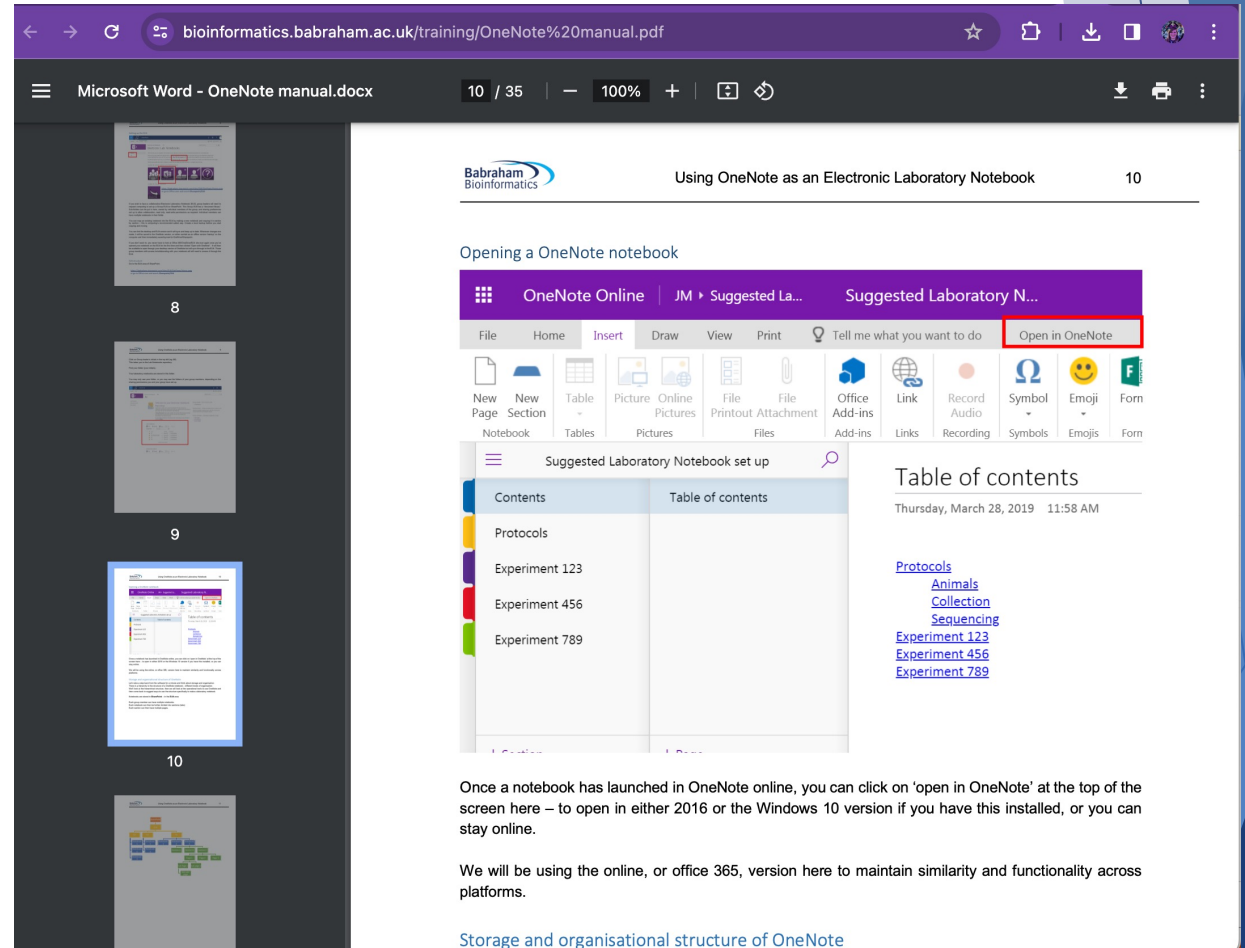
- ▶ Fully paperless scientific labs
 - ▶ Every student must have an MS Surface
 - ▶ All students use OneNote
 - ▶ Master OneNote for the Teacher
 - ▶ Lab benches fully kitted out with power sockets
 - ▶ Classroom benches – power sockets installed underneath



<https://www.onenote.com/classnotebook>

Thoughts for the future

- ▶ Money & People are the biggest players
- ▶ There is never going to be an “ELN to rule them all”
 - ▶ But we could implement OneNote for undergraduates (with or without specific ELNs for certain labs)
 - ▶ Train them to use digital tools to record their work and instill best practices
 - ▶ And implement specific ELNs at Postgraduate/Postdoc level depending on budget/subject



bioinformatics.babraham.ac.uk/training/OneNote%20manual.pdf

Microsoft Word - OneNote manual.docx 10 / 35 100%

Babraham Bioinformatics Using OneNote as an Electronic Laboratory Notebook 10

Opening a OneNote notebook

OneNote Online JM Suggested La... Suggested Laboratory N...

File Home Insert Draw View Print Tell me what you want to do **Open in OneNote**

New Page New Section Table Picture Online File File Office Link Record Symbol Emoji Form
Notebook Tables Pictures Printout Attachment Add-ins Links Recording Symbols Emojis Form

Suggested Laboratory Notebook set up

| Contents | Table of contents |
|----------------|-------------------|
| Contents | Table of contents |
| Protocols | |
| Experiment 123 | |
| Experiment 456 | |
| Experiment 789 | |

Table of contents

Thursday, March 28, 2019 11:58 AM

Protocols
[Animals Collection Sequencing](#)
[Experiment 123](#)
[Experiment 456](#)
[Experiment 789](#)

Once a notebook has launched in OneNote online, you can click on 'open in OneNote' at the top of the screen here – to open in either 2016 or the Windows 10 version if you have this installed, or you can stay online.

We will be using the online, or office 365, version here to maintain similarity and functionality across platforms.

Storage and organisational structure of OneNote

PSDI Services & Research

▶ Process Recording Service

- ▶ Guidelines on selecting Tools
- ▶ Links to ELNFinder
- ▶ NotebookFinder
- ▶ Guidance on using OneNote as an ELN

▶ Data Conversion Service

- ▶ Convert between different data formats to enable interoperability

▶ Metadata Service

- ▶ Generate semantically rich metadata records
- ▶ Generate template READ-ME's
- ▶ Generate license files

▶ Data Revival Service

- ▶ Scan in paper lab books and get data back in a machine-readable form

▶ FAIR/Data Sharing Guidelines

- ▶ Guidelines on how to be truly FAIR
- ▶ Exemplars of metadata, supplementary information and data management plans

▶ Case Studies

- ▶ Different implementations of ELNs
- ▶ Investigating OneNote as a generic ELN
- ▶ Investigating adding semantic/domain knowledge to OneNote

Relevant Publications

- ▶ Kanza, S., Willoughby, C., Gibbins, N., Whitby, R., Frey, J.G., Erjavec, J., Zupančič, K., Hren, M. and Kovač, K., 2017. Electronic lab notebooks: can they replace paper?. *Journal of cheminformatics*, 9(1), p.31. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13321-017-0221-3>
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Acknowledgements



PSDI Team: Simon Coles, Jeremy Frey, Nicola Knight, Cerys Willoughby, Colin Bird, Ray Whorley, Mark Anderson, Stephen Gow, Samuel Munday, Thomas Allam, Hannah Gittins (*University of Southampton*), Juan Bicarregui, Barbara Montanari, Brian Matthews, Vasily Bunakov (*Science & Technologies Facilities Council*)

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