

» The Importance of Personal Connections

The ISSUES Project

“WHAT EMERGES FROM STUDIES OF THE FIELD IS THAT, ABOVE ALL, PERSONAL CONTACTS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT RESEARCH”

(NUTLEY ET AL., 2007)

WHY?

A 2010 study of the construction industry by the ISSUES group revealed that ‘talking to colleagues’ was practitioners’ principal method of acquiring new knowledge. By using their personal connections researchers can access and become part of these informal networks of colleagues, and disseminate their knowledge amongst them. The role of individuals was highlighted by respondents in the ISSUES study as fundamental in knowledge exchange: “My experience is that knowledge is most commonly held in the heads of individuals and so direct contact is the best method of sharing information” (Moncaster et al., 2010).

Personal connections between researchers and professionals in industry and policy-making, that is the relationships between individuals above and beyond formal working obligations, promote reciprocal awareness which can be beneficial for both parties. Researchers can get a better idea of what end-users value, and give themselves the option of tailoring their research accordingly. End-users can get a clearer picture of what researchers are striving for, and thus have the opportunity to shape their professional activities according to evidence. Informal communication can reveal areas of shared interest, and thus throw up opportunities for fruitful collaboration, and it can help ensure that all sides of a collaboration are aware of others’ expectations, skills and limitations.

Person-to-person sources of information are as important to policymakers as they are to private practitioners. The relationship between research and policy has been described as “frequently ad hoc and informal,” so knowledge passed on through personal contacts can prove to be very influential (Percy-Smith et al., 2002). Government spending is being cut in virtually all departments at the moment, and as a result departments will have fewer resources to devote to research. In such a climate, knowledge that is disseminated through informal channels can be particularly significant.

Policymakers often need to access information quickly and therefore regularly fall back on their informal connections. This is one of the reasons why the Natural Environment Research Council state that informal interactions are, “arguably the most effective science-to-policy route and enhance all other mechanisms” (Clayton and Culshaw, 2009).



HOW?

As the *Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration* noted “the best form of knowledge transfer involves human interaction” (HM Treasury, 2003). Therefore it is important that researchers give themselves opportunities for this human interaction to take place. Involvement in steering groups and forums, as well as internships and secondments obviously have value in themselves, but they also increase the likelihood of having the kind of “chance meetings” that the Lambert Review concludes are vital for instigating academia-business collaborations. Similar benefits can be accrued by inviting policymakers or their aides to be part of existing groups.

It's also important to ensure that you keep communication channels with policy makers and practitioners open and maintain relationships through regular contact. Policy makers and industry practitioners can often be very busy so proactivity is key here. It is worthwhile for a researcher to keep potential end-users informed of the subjects they are focusing on, in the event that they need information on that topic. Key to this is using opportunities for informal interaction effectively; researchers should be prepared to deliver a snappy summary of their research and findings whenever the chance arises.

While it's important to make use of existing contacts, it's also beneficial to have as wide a network as possible. It can be useful to have more than one contact in an organisation – this can avoid connections going cold if a key individual moves on. Having more than one contact in an organisation can also help with promoting work within the organisation and having it directed to the appropriate decision makers there.

Researchers should also bear in mind that building relationships can take time, and that the benefits of these relationships may not arise immediately. A degree of trust between contacts is crucial for mutually beneficial relationships, and this can be built up by offering assistance with other matters where possible.

REFERENCES

- CLAYTON, H. & CULSHAW, F. (2009) *Science into policy: Taking part in the process*. NERC (National Environment Research Council)
- HM TREASURY (2003) *Lambert review of business-university collaboration*. London; HMSO
- MONCASTER, A., HINDS, D., CRUICKSHANK, H., GUTHRIE, P. M., CRISHNA, N., BAKER, K., BECKMANN, K. & JOWITT, P. W. (2010) Knowledge exchange between academia and industry. *Engineering Sustainability*, 163, 167-174.
- NUTLEY, S. M., WALTER, I. & DAVIES, H. T. O. (2007) *Using evidence : how research can inform public services*, Bristol, U.K., Policy Press.
- PERCY-SMITH, J., BURDEN, T., DARLOW, A., DOWSON, L., HAWTIN, M. & LADI, S. (2002) *Promoting change through research: The impact of research in local government*. York; Joseph Rowntree Foundation

RESOURCES

DISTILLATE research project:
www.distillate.ac.uk

» Stories from SUE

Personal connections have played an important part in the dissemination successes of the SUE consortia. There are many instances of this, but one notable example comes from the DISTILLATE consortium. They instigated contact with Murray Grant, at that time the chief policy officer at MerseyTravel, by requesting the company's input into their steering committee. Mr Grant was keen to be involved in the steering committee and took an active interest in the consortium's research.

He later moved on to a different company, becoming head of the Merseyside Travel Partnership's Planning Unit. Some time later, when the partnership was starting to put together their 3rd Local Transport Plan, he steered the group towards using DISTILLATE guidance tools. Mr Grant was no longer involved with DISTILLATE in any official capacity, however his previous personal involvement encouraged him to direct his new employers towards their work. Thus, an organisation with no links to the DISTILLATE group came to use their products as a direct result of Mr Grant's personal connections to researchers.