

5.1 Networks – supportive and strategic

Slide 1

The need to be part of a supportive network to stay resilient probably doesn't need much justification. Engaging with our networks has obvious benefits – we feel less isolated, we feel part of something, we feel accountable to others, we can get new perspectives and solutions and for many of us, it's just much more fun to spend time with others.

Slide 2

In this presentations we will look at the elements of a healthy and strategic network – it will give you the opportunity to think about whether you are making the most of your network, and whether there are particular types of people missing from your network that could help you to be more resilient and effective.

It's worth doing a quick review occasionally as it might just prompt you to re-connect with some great people or look for ways to expand your networks and meet more people where there may be mutual benefit from your connection.

Slide 3

We're going to think of different types of people that will add value to your network. As we go to each type in turn, try to think of some names against each of them. Preferably specific people that you know, and they know you. Don't worry if you can't think of names for every category – this exercise is to identify where there are gaps – so that then you can be on the lookout for people to connect with.

1. Firstly, it's important to have people in your network who can provide you with opportunities – these might be people who are more senior to you, who are looking to delegate opportunities that they no longer get value from, or that they don't have time to do – the kinds of opportunities that would help you in your career goals – for example, to join a collaboration, to be on a review panel, or to do some public engagement or outreach activities – whatever you are looking to develop or do more of.
2. The next group is people who are network hubs – simply they are people who know lots of other people – they might be members of professional services in the university, who can quickly connect you to many other people, or they might be at funding bodies or learned societies – these people always know someone to connect you with, who can help you with any queries or requests you have.
3. People who know the funding or political landscape – they might sit on a funding panel, or on a university research committee – these are people who have a broader and perhaps longer-term view of the landscape than you – they can forewarn you of opportunities and challenges on the horizon and help you to be more strategic
4. People who offer you a different perspective – either because they work in a different sector, country or discipline area – these people can help you to think of the most impactful research questions, they can help you to view yourself and your research from different perspectives and offer you new avenues and ideas. Often the most exciting research comes from the interface of different sectors and disciplines – so working with these people could really increase your motivation levels.
5. People who have influence – this might be people in your department who have an influence on administrative processes or teaching loads, or might be on policy committees or in lobby groups

– they can help you with lobbying for change and understanding how to have more influence yourself.

6. People who can mentor you – either formally (with regular meetings) or informally in an ad-hoc way when you have something to discuss. A mentor is someone who can reflect back on their career and give you advice from their own experience. They can act as a sounding board, help you to process difficult situations, help you to think more strategically and connect you to other people you want to add into your network.
7. Finally – and possibly one of the most important – your allies – people that feel the same as you and have similar opinions and needs as you – so you can act as a united force together. These are the people you can relax with, let off some steam and know you are not alone.

Perhaps pause the video at this point and make your list of names. In the following slides, you can then answer some reflective questions.

Slide 4

Now that you have a list of names. Spend a few moments reflecting on the following questions:

1. Are there any gaps? If so, how might they affect your longer-term career plans? Could you make better progress by having some new people to connect with? You could speak to a mentor or well-networked colleague to get some suggestions for people you could be introduced to, or places you could find new contacts.
2. For the people you DO have on your list, how well connected are you? Are you just aware of them, or do you have an active relationship? Would they know who you were if you bumped into them on the street? Think of a conversation starter and get in touch with them to strengthen your connection. A good way to make contact might be to share a useful article or ask them for some advice. If you do know each other well, when did you last have contact with them? If it was more than six months ago, it's time to get in touch.
3. Would they know what you are doing now, and the kinds of opportunities you might be interested in? Or is their view of you out of date, so they wouldn't know to connect you to useful opportunities or information? This works the other way too – would you know what might help them? After all, building networks is all about reciprocity – helping others, and they help you.
4. What is the biggest priority for you? What will you do to boost the health of your networks?

If you're unsure how to meet new people or how to make initial contact, take a look at the online guide to networking for researchers that is listed in the resources section.