

Knowledge Brokers: Who are they and what do they do?

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Knowledge brokers
(KBs) effectively
construct a bridge
between the
research and
communities

(Nutley et al. 2007)



Context

- Recent apparent increase in number of people employed as KE professionals / KBs in the social sciences
- Driven by increased importance placed on academic research impact



Part One

- Literature review
- Self-reflection (auto-ethnography)
- Published as a 'practice' piece in *Evidence and Policy*
- http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1735332

But is this the experience of others...

- Small research study
- University of Edinburgh (UoE)
- Moray Endowment Fund, UoE
- Recruited via membership of knowledge exchange network / subsequent snowball technique

What we did

- 13 interviews
- March – May 2011
- Knowledge brokers in Humanities and Social Science (CHSS)
- University of Edinburgh
- Questions: a combination of HR issues, effectiveness, career aspirations, challenges of the role, identifying enjoyable things about the job, etc

Profile of knowledge brokers

- 11 female interviewees, 2 male
- Generally at early stage in career
- No common career pathways – experience in public, private and third sectors
- Only 1 interviewee had not worked outside the higher education setting

Who are these knowledge brokers

- Often more than one career interest: eg, science and communication; software development and training; engineering and arts; etc
- Often with some background in research, research administration or communications

*“many of my roles have been part time
and juggling this and the next thing”*

Unprompted...

- 6 specifically mentioned experience of working in the private sector
- 6 in the public sector (outside higher education)
- 3 in the voluntary sector

Our interviewees are boundary spanners!

Backgrounds

- Health educator
- Civil servant
- Software engineer
- Retail
- Information management
- Design
- Local authority
- Third sector
- Engineering
- Genetics and
- Pharmacology
- University administration
- Banking

Knowledge Broker Role

- Research/Business Manager (university administration) – 2 posts
- Training – 1 post
- Press and Communications – 2 posts
- Public Engagement – 1 post
- Knowledge Exchange Coordinator/Officer – 3 posts
- Knowledge Exchange Associates – 2 posts
- Dissemination (linked to individual study) – 1 post

Length of time in post

- Interviewees in post for between 2 months and 6 years
- Only 4 of our interviewees had been in post longer than 3 years (2 of these were the university administration posts)
- Generally, new posts – and new people to the posts
- Temporary posts

What do knowledge brokers do?

training, websites, event organisation, event facilitation, publications, press, demonstrations, networking, arranging art/theatre/etc, commercialise products, newsletters, support funding applications, funding bids, new social media, research, PhDs, administration/contact databases/room booking, meetings, impact statements, reflecting, supporting...

What do knowledge brokers do?

- Event design, organisation and delivery
- Writing
- Stakeholder engagement
- Administration
- Grant applications
- Research
- Supporting others to undertake knowledge exchange
- Knowledge exchange monitoring
- Developing evidenced based products
- Strategic thinking

Types of knowledge exchange roles

- Communications specialist (5 interviewees)
- Research producer and KE hybrid (3 interviewees)
- Administration professional (3 interviewees)
- Training expert (2 interviewees)

“I find it very hard to say what my job is”

Communications Specialist

Perception of job purpose:

- “I am responsible for the translation of knowledge to various public bodies”
- “To communicate as clearly as possible to as many people as possible the issues of concern of the forum and the network”
- “Not everybody’s a good communicator. And I don’t think everyone should be a good communicator. And that's why I think roles like this one, like mine are, are essential”
- “... just trying to make it easier for people to get the ... information that they want ... as easily as possible”

Research producer and KE hybrid

Perception of job purpose:

- “I want to be an academic. It’s just that I [would] like to redefine what to be an academic is”
- “It’s all about applying academic knowledge in projects”
- “Improving the relationships between industry and universities and facilitating that knowledge exchange”

Administration professional

“... my role has morphed to have a growing emphasis on knowledge exchange, because I think, you know that’s partly driven by the impact case studies and stuff”

“the lady that was here before who did the same job obviously didn’t have knowledge exchange in her job. And they’ve kind of thrown it into mine, if you like, because people realise that it’s something that needs to be looked at ... but [they’ve] not really considered what kind of resource it’ll need”

Training Expert

Similar to communications specialist

Specific training role as core purpose

Definable group?

What do KBs think is effective for improving research use?

Answers tell us much about how they think about their role...

Improving the “push”

- Free public talks most effective mechanism for improving research use
- Importance of writing in plain English
- Using video was highlighted as another valuable way to reach out

Increasing demand

“I think it is about promoting that it doesn’t have to be scary. And I think the way that we do that, which I think works quite well is when we run our knowledge exchange events ... they are about a substantive area that will interest people ... We do it by showing people what you could be doing ... if you had these skills ... Then once [they have an] appetite ... offering training on how to do it”

People Exchange

- Knowledge exchange associates undertaking secondments within companies
- They benefit from learning from their host organisation
- Organisations rewarded with vouchers to be exchanged for knowledge exchange associate's time
- “... to develop solutions based on the knowledge that we have gained through the initial stages of the project”

People Exchange

- “... the thing I believe should be having the difference is the, for example, the residencies that we have. So we have fellows that come [into the university] ... for a short period of time to do a specific piece of work. And that seems to have an energy increase”
- Important element: Working on something together

Issue 1: Fitting in with wider university structures

Personally and KE wide:

“We might be running an event in Stirling so for our university press office, one it is not a sexy title, it is not running at Edinburgh and it is not someone from Edinburgh who is presenting”

“I think they managed, within the records, to put me as support [staff] to get me off the REF ... But then it’s kinda weird because ... I do a lot more than what an administrator does. ... Having to do all the evaluation and analysis and everything. So that is a very very hairy subject”

“It is difficult to look at the university and know where I fit”

“[I’m in] part of one bit of the university because the PI is based in that bit”

Issue 2: Sustainability

- Personally or for the research centres:

“I haven’t had a permanent contract since I left uni.”

“The post is funded by RCUK and they have confirmed there will be no future funding in this form”

Sustainability

“I look at my friends who have more structured careers ... They are coached, they have got all these types of development opportunities ... and I am like ‘maybe I should have done that’”

Why sustainability matters

“I’ve spent the year demonstrating what could be done”

Piloting, trying new things, innovation

But what about: Sustaining, embedding, sharing this knowledge?

Issue 3: Promotion

Hitting the promotion ceiling

“You are pushed aside as being support staff so that is frustrating ... You are like ‘I’d like to have a career as well’”

PhDs - “If I had a PhD then they might take seriously what I am saying”

Issue 4: Success heavily dependent on others

“Because I don’t have the background knowledge ... I am relying on other people”

“We are not only doing our job, we are chasing them [our partners]. And a lot of the time we just do it for them”

Issue 5: Management

“I don’t have anyone telling me to do this or that”

“You are kind of left to get on with it really which is good”

When it works...

“My manager’s a great critical friend ... Good at telling me when and how to say no”

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- “There wasn’t someone managing me who had a background in communications and that was really difficult just in terms of having someone to learn from”
 - “I had to change my mindset from asking permission to telling that this was the best way” (CAREER STAGE...)

Issue 6: High levels of motivation and commitment

“I came out of the private sector because I was fed up with it being all about money”

“I’m ideologically committed to the idea of getting [researchers] to leave the offices and ... do things in the real world”

The future for our knowledge brokers

Many would like to continue as a KB but many don't see it as possible (no sustainability or no promotion options)

Particularly the communications and training group/s.

General desire to be hybrid!

Next steps: The future for us

- Writing up
- Lessons for University of Edinburgh, higher education sector, academia
- Scotland / UK wide study?

Discuss!