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## How to work with researchers so they will work with you

Hugh Kearns knows a thing or two about working with researchers having been one himself, before moving into research management and training. Kearns explains how a change in perception makes a good start.

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### Top tips

- Try to empathise with researchers and research managers. They aren't the font of all evil
- Avoid mass emails: email directly if you must but follow up with a call or, better still, a visit
- Pick your moment, avoiding times when researchers are busiest
- Consider store researchers' track-record information so it doesn't have to be gathered from scratch in every grant application

After a degree in agricultural science, I moved into training and education. For the last 20 years I've been interested in the psychology of high-performing clever people, which is why I like working with researchers. They are very bright people who are very good at their research but not necessarily very effective in how they manage their time and themselves. My workshops in Australia and overseas encourage researchers to be more strategic about their work and how to use their time.

I used to run the staff development and training unit in a university, so I've seen it from both sides. Often these two groups don't communicate well together, sometimes even to the point of seeing the other group as deviant and impossible to work with.

### Seeing differently

What I try to do is get people to see the world from the other side. Many research managers have a very organisational view of the world and see deadlines and institutional requirements, which is understandable. Often researchers don't see the world that way. Their loyalty is to their discipline; that's what is important to them. They want to do their research and see the rest as bureaucracy they don't need.

Some researchers view themselves as self-employed and loosely affiliated to the university. They are a bit like small-business owners: they work really hard but are usually pretty independent and don't like people telling them what to do.

When researchers win grants they see it as their own money. They don't appreciate university people creaming off a portion or telling them how to spend it.

### Mutual (mis)understanding

It's important to get people to understand one another. Researchers are rewarded for getting papers published and winning grants, which makes the grants important but not the administrative process of getting them. Administrators, on the other hand, are rewarded by meeting deadlines, compliance, getting grants and ticking the right boxes.

Some researchers think their research and project is the only one in the world. They may not realise that research administrators will have 40 others to deal with at the same time. You can understand why academics might think like this, but it creates confusion, difficulty and frustration on both sides.

The research system in universities is often unhelpful too. Filling out certain basic information five times for each individual grant application is more than the ordinary human can bear. If university research offices collate track-record information, or list all publications, to avoid replicating it each and every time, that will make a huge difference. It is far easier to revise information than to have to start from scratch each time.

### Committing to communication

It's all about communication. Research officers need to get out, listening and talking to researchers to understand them and the pressures they are under. This will also help researchers realise that managers are not out there creating evil bureaucracy just to make life hard for them.

I call it the second person shift, or trying to understand the other person and why they see the world the way they do. For instance, understanding that researchers can't drop everything when they are in the middle of a field trip just because an email has come in. More successful managers have empathy for researchers and what they are going through.

Managers who are ex-researchers tend to have a better understanding of the need to build relationships. For example they know to avoid certain times of year when researchers are likely to be busy marking students' work or travelling.

It should be noted that email is a pretty poor communication tool. A blanket email is likely to be ignored as it is not seen as directly relevant. Research officers will often send emails routinely about what researchers need to do and then a blame game starts up when researchers put them off.

It's important to work out who should be getting emails and contact them directly. Emails with lots of detail will mostly not be read to the end. It's important to find out what's working for researchers and that means taking the time to go out and meet them.

### Time constraints

Early-career researchers are often eager and willing to hear about what the research office can do for them. Target people and go to faculty meetings or research days. Make an effort to physically meet and talk with them. They will want to discuss one issue and four other things will emerge. That personal touch will make all the difference.

Help early-career researchers to be more strategic in their efforts. Some will be applying for grants that they have no chance of getting. They are just wasting their time. The research office can point them in the direction of smaller grants to get started with building a track record, or encourage them to work collaboratively with those who have won big grants before.

It's a good idea to be aware of the other commitments that researchers have—teaching load or exam time or deadlines—if there is one big grant application in the works, it's not good to try to send another out at the same time. Be an early warning system. In Australia, the end of February is big grant season. Good research offices will have started running workshops three months earlier and building in milestones for researchers.

### Cooperative research

Everyone talks about the value of collaboration but it often doesn't happen. There is more to it than putting researchers from different universities or disciplines in a building and hoping they will collaborate. They need leadership. Technically they may know how to collaborate but it doesn't necessarily happen and most do it pretty averagely. It's like motherhood: everyone thinks it's a good thing but bad collaborations are worse than not doing it at all.

It's all about forming links with the right people: heads of faculty or department or opinion movers, putting that effort in will make researchers more likely to engage.

### CV: Hugh Kearns

**2006-present** Director of Thinkwell, a consultancy providing support to researchers and research students (Australia)

**2009-present** Senior lecturer and researcher, Flinders University, Adelaide (Australia)

**1994-2006** Head of staff development and training, Flinders University, Adelaide (Australia)

**Previous positions** Senior training consultant in the finance, chemical and rehabilitation industries

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