

More than lucky: Exploring how post-doc professional networks are activated in gaining research fellowship awards (0106)

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Introduction

For researchers in the post-doctoral, pre-tenure, period of their career an important way forward towards securing a permanent academic post is *via* a funded research fellowship award. Securing a fellowship is a highly competitive process in which applicants must demonstrate their independence and their potential to become a future research leader. Achieving independent status within the academic environment, by securing fellowship funding can be viewed as a significant career transition (in line with Bazeley, 2003), and is viewed as a key aspiration by many in the post-doctoral period (Akerlind, 2005). A portion of fellowship award success is often attributed to luck, both by the award holders themselves, and by aspiring fellows, and for some is a barrier to making an application. Although it is suggested that due to high numbers of excellent quality funding applications there is a luck component to gaining funding (van Arensburg & van den Besselaar, 2012; Porter, 2005), this paper explores the components of gaining a fellowship award that were attributable to the abilities, attitudes and actions of the research fellows themselves. In particular, garnering social capital *via* the ability to form productive, collaborative and interdisciplinary networks is an element of academic career development worthy of particular focus. Recent social models of academic career and leadership development (McAlpine, 2014; Bolden *et al* 2012) position this ability as important. By examining how researchers build and activate their professional social networks for fellowship applications, this paper evidences a challenge to a sometimes-encountered notion of what it means to 'be independent'. Specifically it demonstrates how success in gaining research fellowship awards is enabled via networks, and characterises some key relationships. This paper shares researchers' lived perceptions of the key decisions and actions that helped them gain their award and maps the professional networks of fellows, highlighting critical associations in fellowship award success.

Methodology, Participants, and Data

Methodology: Given the primary focus of identifying examples of agency, practice, and positive action toward gaining the research fellowship a Critical Appreciative Inquiry approach (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012) was developed to facilitate discussion and understanding of enablers and disablers of Fellowship success, though a social, network-based viewpoint. Twenty-five fellowship stories were collected from current research fellows (13F/12M) across eight Higher Education Institutions (STEM and non-STEM discipline areas). All participants were funded by an external grant awarding body (research councils and charities) with the exception of one fellow funded via an internal scheme.

Data: Data collection involved in-depth interviews that were preceded by a preparatory step in which the participant was invited to reflect on the (up to 5) people who had been influential or helpful in gaining the research fellowship. A 'network form' collected information on the 'helpfulness' of each contact; the nature of the support they offered; specific actions or behaviours; and details of who initiated the request/offer of support. These

data were used to determine each contact's role in supporting the fellow through their application. Thematic analyses were utilised to compare the data across participants, and to draw out commonalities.

Findings

Themes common across all research fellows' networks were:

1. Aspiring fellows seek new contacts to support or enhance their applications; they also activate existing contacts to take on various supporting roles.
2. All fellows described the necessity of asking for help from others to support their application.
3. Within a fellow's network there were two role types always apparent, described here as the 'Tour Guide' and the 'Career Champion'.

1 & 2. Research fellows seek to build and activate their networks: All fellows reported that at the stage of contemplating and developing a fellowship application they had sought to actively build contacts to support or enhance their applications. Social networks matter in career development processes (e.g. Podolny & Baron, 1997) and the effectiveness of a network depends on the occupations of the contacts (McDonald, 2011). Fellows' network building was achieved either directly (e.g. with peers, current collaborators, their PhD supervisor, or academic support services staff); or by asking for an introduction from a colleague, usually the current principle investigator (PI). The current PI was a key conduit in linking the aspiring fellow into the 'more difficult to reach' contacts i.e. new academic collaborators. However some aspiring fellows were able to perform this task themselves. Aspiring fellows also activated existing contacts to take on various supporting roles, for example getting feedback on project ideas, the written proposal, or the interview presentation. For each task a contact with the appropriate characteristics was sought.

Interestingly all fellows talked about the necessity of being able to ask for help, and often about getting used to the accompanying sense of discomfort. It was often described as a negative quality, ranging from being 'cheeky' or 'pushy', to being manipulative or ruthless.

3. Networks have some key commonalities across disciplines: Aspiring fellows' influential networks all contained contacts who could provide support for the intellectual development of the project idea, and people who could act as a guide in navigating internal HEI and funder systems pertaining to fellowship applications

The Tour Guide: a contact approached by the aspiring fellow due to their insider knowledge of logistics and how to navigate the internal application systems. This person was the 'go to guy' as they had a good network within academic support services at the researcher's current organisation.

The Career Champion: this contact was usually the first person the aspiring fellow discussed their application with, and frequently was the one to initiate the discussions. When approached they immediately responded in support of the application facilitating access to the resources needed to develop and write the application (e.g. giving permissions and writing time as the researcher's PI). They contributed to the fellow's academic development, and expanded the applicant's network outside their current organisation.

All twenty-five fellows had identifiable contacts in both of the specific roles (sometimes the same person) characterised above, which map to Bolden *et al*'s (2012) academic leadership, and management leadership, distinctions.

Acknowledgments

This project was funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

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