Introduction

As a delegate at this Conference you are a significant wheel in a temporary cluster of knowledge exchange! Conference clusters are a specific form of inter-firm organisation dedicated to knowledge exchange, network building and the generation of new ideas. Transient in real time, these multi-dimensional structures function as powerful hubs to stimulate (both short-term and long-term) knowledge creation and knowledge exchange.

Just being there!

- Delegates are drawn to conferences by a shared interest in the topic.
- Attendance engages them in a thick web of specialised, multilayered information.
- The corridors, the cafés and the bars can be the most important places for knowledge exchange.
- Attendance allows delegates to participate in the spontaneous and fluid buzz of the cluster.

(Bathelt et al, 2004; Gentler, 2003; Maskell et al, 2004; Lalonde et al, 2007)

Characteristics of effective conference clusters

- Delegates enter an environment constructed around the importance of networking.
- The Conference Program creates an intensive environment that facilitates initial, low-risk, face to face contacts.
- The Program sets the scene and underpins the quality and relevance of the buzz.
- Over time (including successive conferences) potential collaborators are able to develop the necessary trust to underpin future collaborations.
- The strength of such clusters relies on the reputation of an association, conference and profile of the delegates.

(Maskell et al, 2004; Winter et al, 2008)

Aim

To evaluate networking opportunities at Primary Health Care Research Conferences (2007-2011).

Methods

Data from on-line post-conference evaluation surveys were analysed.

Results

An average of 49% of delegates responded to the evaluation each year. The results indicate the strong importance of networking to delegates and the range of formal and informal strategies they used.

Table 1: Structured and unstructured activities delegates found useful for networking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structured</th>
<th>Unstructured</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Powerful keynote speakers to set the scene</td>
<td>Extended morning and afternoon teas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Welcome Reception/Conference Dinner</td>
<td>Extended lunch breaks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Themed lunch tables</td>
<td>Conversations after paper presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poster reception/Poster walk</td>
<td>General atmosphere of the Conference</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small tables at Breakfast Sessions/Workshops</td>
<td>Walking from the hotel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small group site visits</td>
<td>Just being there!</td>
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</table>

Comments on networking

- The general milieu and friendliness of the conference helps networking to flow more easily...
- ... what did occur naturally, when the paper sessions ended, was that people milled around and talked/networked in the corridors, the cafés and the bars. It occurred, since people were there because they had a genuine shared interest!
- Special interest tables at lunch was a great idea...
- Planned meetings with particular people – very deliberate strategy

Comments on benefits of networking

- I have built a strong network of contacts who I can engage with and link others to...
- Increased my network of colleagues and my understanding of the primary health care community
- Explored potential collaborations
- Brainstormed research ideas. Made valuable contacts

Figure 1: How important was networking to you at the conference?

Figure 2: How did you use your networking at the conference?

Note 1: Delegates could tick multiple options.
Note 2: in 2007 and 2008 delegates were asked if they gave input to the work of others. In subsequent years this question was replaced by two options: was mentored or mentored others.

References


Gentler MS (2003). Tacit knowledge and the economic geography of context, or the undefinable tacitness of being (there), Journal of Economic Geography, 3, pp. 75-99.

