Building a Research Profile

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About Sara:

I founded Shinton Consulting in 2000 to focus on my interest in researcher development, which came from my personal experience as a researcher (physical chemistry), careers adviser and working in academic development. I've worked with thousands of researchers to help them develop more effective approaches to their research careers, to consider alternative paths and in developing their leadership. You can find out more at www.shintonconsulting.com

Building a Research Profile

These notes have been developed from a 'Building a Research Profile' course which I contributed to at the University of Edinburgh in April 2013. As such, they reflect the workshop discussions and point to additional resources, some of which may be specific to Edinburgh.
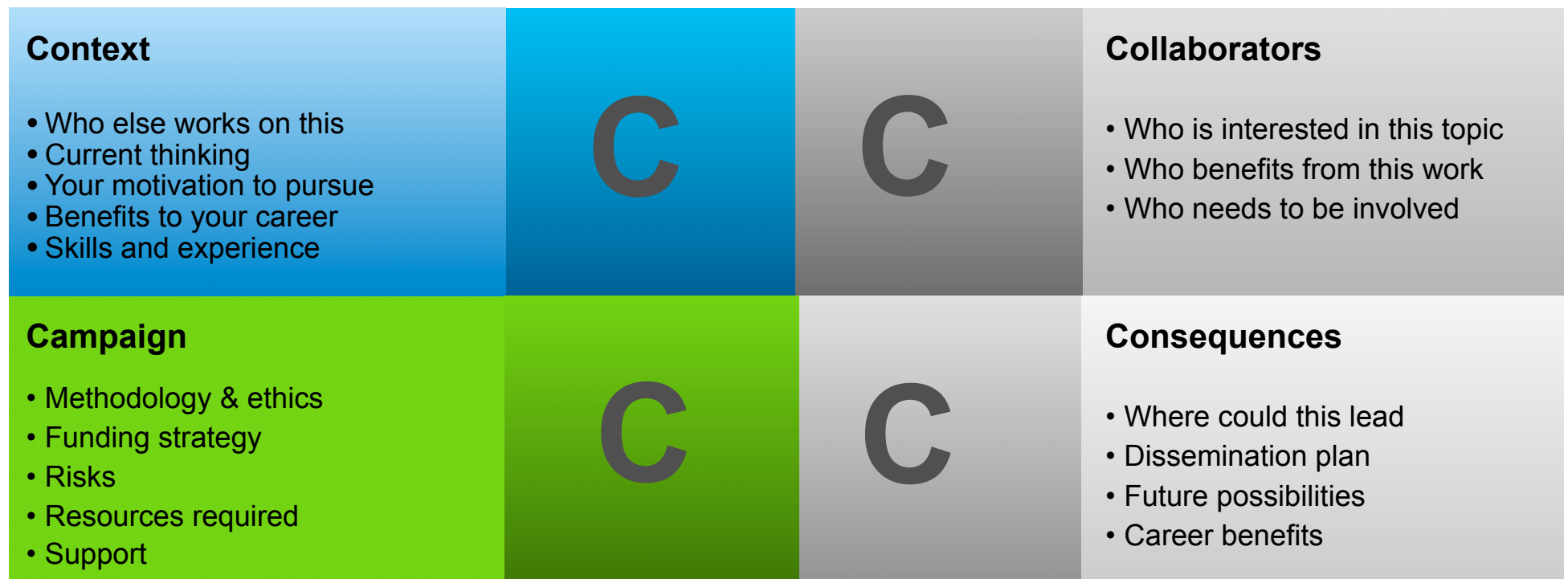
The objectives of the session were to use questions and discussions as planning tools for developing a research portfolio and individual projects.

Another theme of the session was to reinforce the importance of strategic thinking as a way to understand your context and look to the future. All I mean by strategic thinking is the process of looking beyond the here and now – thinking about things that aren't part of your day to day routines but have a long-term importance.

The final area I wanted to emphasise was career development – being proactive so you can maximise the potential of all the projects you are involved in and constantly having an eye on promotion and progression.

Good luck with the development of your research profile and if you have any feedback on this guide or suggestions to develop it, let me know via twitter @sarashinton

Dr Sara Shinton, April 2013

Context	C	C	Collaborators
• Who else works on this • Current thinking • Your motivation to pursue • Benefits to your career • Skills and experience			• Who is interested in this topic • Who benefits from this work • Who needs to be involved
Campaign	C	C	Consequences
• Methodology & ethics • Funding strategy • Risks • Resources required • Support			• Where could this lead • Dissemination plan • Future possibilities • Career benefits

This is the 4C model I developed to use in the session – the acronym isn't critical, but the four themes are worth remembering.

Understand the context in which you operate – what is happening around you in the university and your research field, consider the context of research in your wider career – what do you want to achieve.

Next think about the wider team of people and organisations that will be part of the research in various ways. Some will be potential research partners, working with you on shared funding with shared goals; some will be an audience for the outputs, reading and hopefully citing your work; some will be supporting the development and delivery of the project from other places in the institution.

The campaign is the plan of action for research and is the point at which you start to explore the details, identify priorities and consider the risks. You'll be exploring the tools for effective planning in a future session.

The final theme is the one that can be toughest to consider in the early stages of developing research ideas – it is to consider what will happen once the project has run its course. We're looking here beyond the natural outputs of a project (the publications) more widely at the possible trajectory of future work (thinking about who might continue to be involved and who might naturally leave the project team); thinking about potential difference the research might make to the world (which informs who should be involved in the project and engaged from the start; which dissemination strategies to use). We focused on more personal consequences – what should your research strategy and individual projects deliver in career terms? It's important not to lose track of this at any point in the project – and worth adding a note which wasn't referred to in the session. In addition to your own career, if your research involves students, research associates and technicians, you should also be aware of their career development and preparing them for the transition to the next stages of their careers.

Context

Existing work

What are hot topics?
Who is active in this field?
How do you differ from them?

My skills and knowledge

What is unique about your position?
How are you equipped to answer the question?

Drivers

What motivates me?
Why will this interest other researchers?
Why will this interest funders?
Which agendas does it relate to?

Lots of questions here – some will be more pertinent to your research than others. However, each sub-set is important. We focused on one:

What will my proposed work contribute to my field? This question helps you to think about your research with the end in mind and helps you to develop a more effective approach to dissemination.
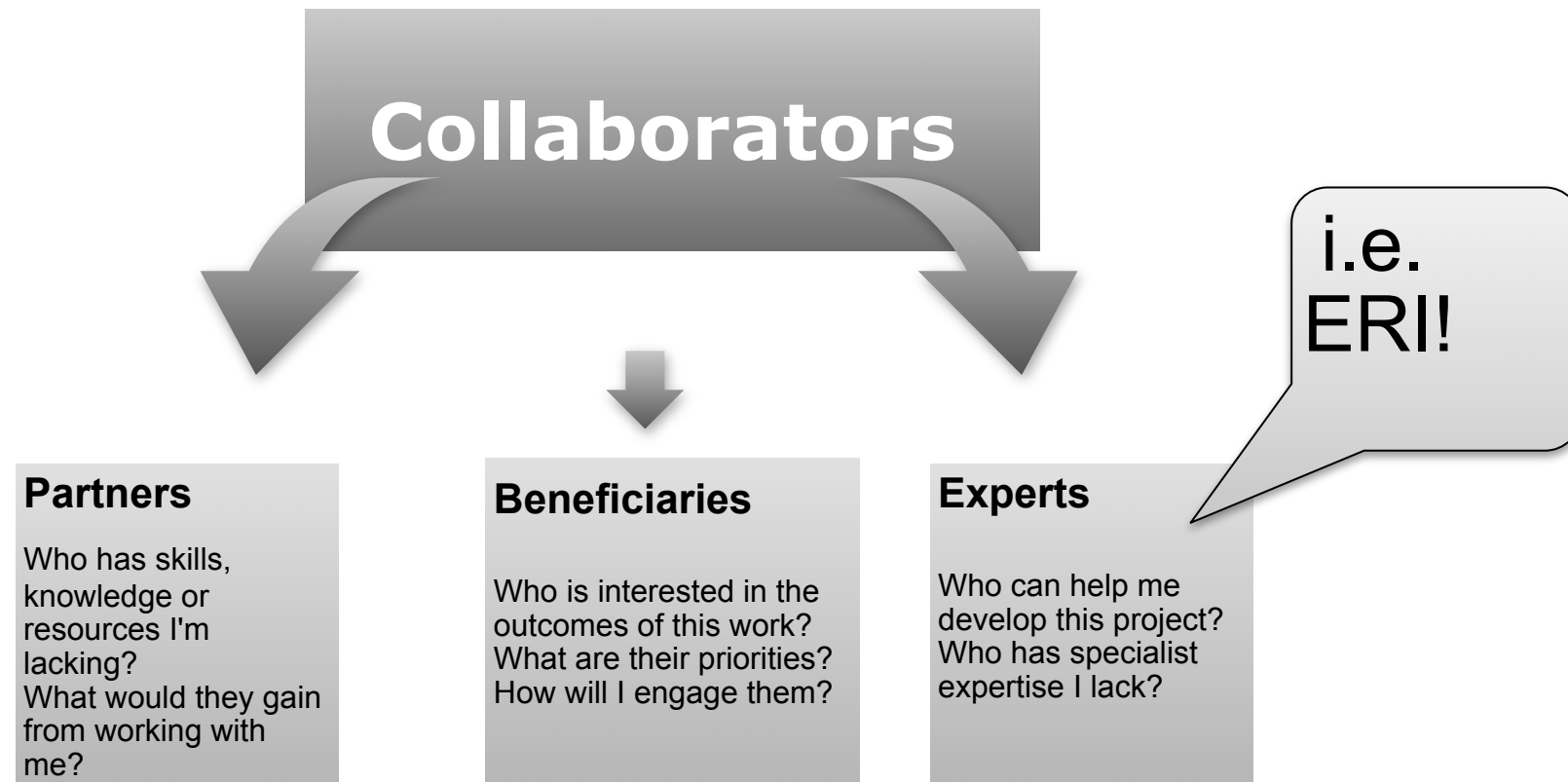
How is this different from other researchers? Your unique position should be clear – by presenting clear messages about the differences with your approach or skills (and why this differences are critical and positive) you are making it easier for funders (and reviewers) to support your proposals.

How does this tie in with funders' priorities?

...and "which is the right funder for me?" – it's important to remember that different funders have different philosophies and these change from time to time anyway. Although you should adapt the presentation and positioning of your research so you can produce a proposal which is targeted to the funder, this can only go so far – you're more likely to be successful if you find a funder whose values and motivations are reflected in your own.

Which mechanism for dissemination is most appropriate?

This question helps to start identifying from the outset what will be needed for the research to achieve the best possible result – if the contribution to the field is purely academic, then the dissemination must be targeted in this direction, becoming familiar with the key journals, identifying the right conferences and networks to engage with. If the contribution is to policy development, the dissemination must go beyond the academic – identifying the point in the long (and often convoluted) path to policy making that you are going to engage with, thinking about the timing of any outputs and whether there are intermediaries you might need to use to help deliver your messages

Collaborators

Partners

Who has skills, knowledge or resources I'm lacking?
What would they gain from working with me?

Beneficiaries

Who is interested in the outcomes of this work?
What are their priorities?
How will I engage them?

Experts

Who can help me develop this project?
Who has specialist expertise I lack?

i.e. ERI!

Collaboration isn't just about formal partners – it's about all the people and organisations who could be affected by your work, be interested in it; contribute to it; advocate it; challenge it or facilitate it.

A collaborative approach to research is not just important in terms of the breadth of many research themes, but also the increasing complexity of research life. It's important to invest time to understanding the role of internal experts and to developing relationships with them – if you are challenged by something and don't feel equipped to deal with it AND if you aren't the only person dealing with that problem, it is probably on the radar of the University. Open Access publishing is being considered by the Library, researcher and student development by units such as the IAD (at Edinburgh), funding by units like the ERI (at Edinburgh) – get to know your institutional structure and the specialists.

The question we focused on was the potential that collaboration adds to a research portfolio. You will have discussed this at different levels depending on your research model.

The additional questions looked at the implications of collaboration. If you want to bring partners into your research, what will motivate them to engage with the project and prioritise work on this topic over competing demands on their time (and their own research).

Some groups will have also moved onto considering the realities of collaboration.
What are the challenges of collaboration?
How do you minimize these challenges?

Identifying good practice for effective collaboration is a day in itself (at least), but there are resources which can help you to start projects and relationships with good systems and approaches in mind. Transparency sits at the heart of good collaborations – if people are aware of what is happening, how it is happening and can see the progress made and challenges faced by their partners there is more chance of maintaining motivation and addressing problems early.

The Innogen research unit has undertaken a series of studies into collaboration and come up with a series of useful short guides which can be found:

Go to the Interdisciplinary Wiki www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/ then search for "ISSTI short notes". The short interdisciplinary guides are available on:
–Developing ID proposals
–Reviewing ID proposals
–Building ID teams
–Supervising ID PhDs

–Troubleshooting

–Knowledge exchange   ...and other topics

I also mentioned the NIH Ombudsman which tries to minimize problems with collaborations through good communication and planning practices. Their resources are available from
http://ombudsman.nih.gov/tools.html

Although this includes a sample partnership agreement, you are better served by identifying the right INTERNAL documents such as the Memorandum of Understanding mentioned by Hamish and available from ERI.

Of general value is a guide to having difficult conversations (!) and a guide to "Team Science" – both downloaded from the Ombudsman site above (look under "Tools for Managing Conflict"). The "Team Science" guide is a very useful resource for all researchers – it's not just for scientists and not just about collaboration. It includes a lot of information and advice relevant to the development of research leadership.

Campaign

Methodology

What is the best approach for this question?
What ethical issues need to be considered?

Risks

What could go wrong?
What are the constraints on the project?

Plan

What resources do I need?
What is my timescale?
When are the deadlines?

The individual activity under this heading was to look at mapping out your research portfolio (or an individual project if this was the right starting point) using the prompts on the following page. Other useful resources for research project planning include:

Chapter 7 of "Making the Right Moves" from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute:

http://www.hhmi.org/resources/labmanagement/mtrmoves_download.html
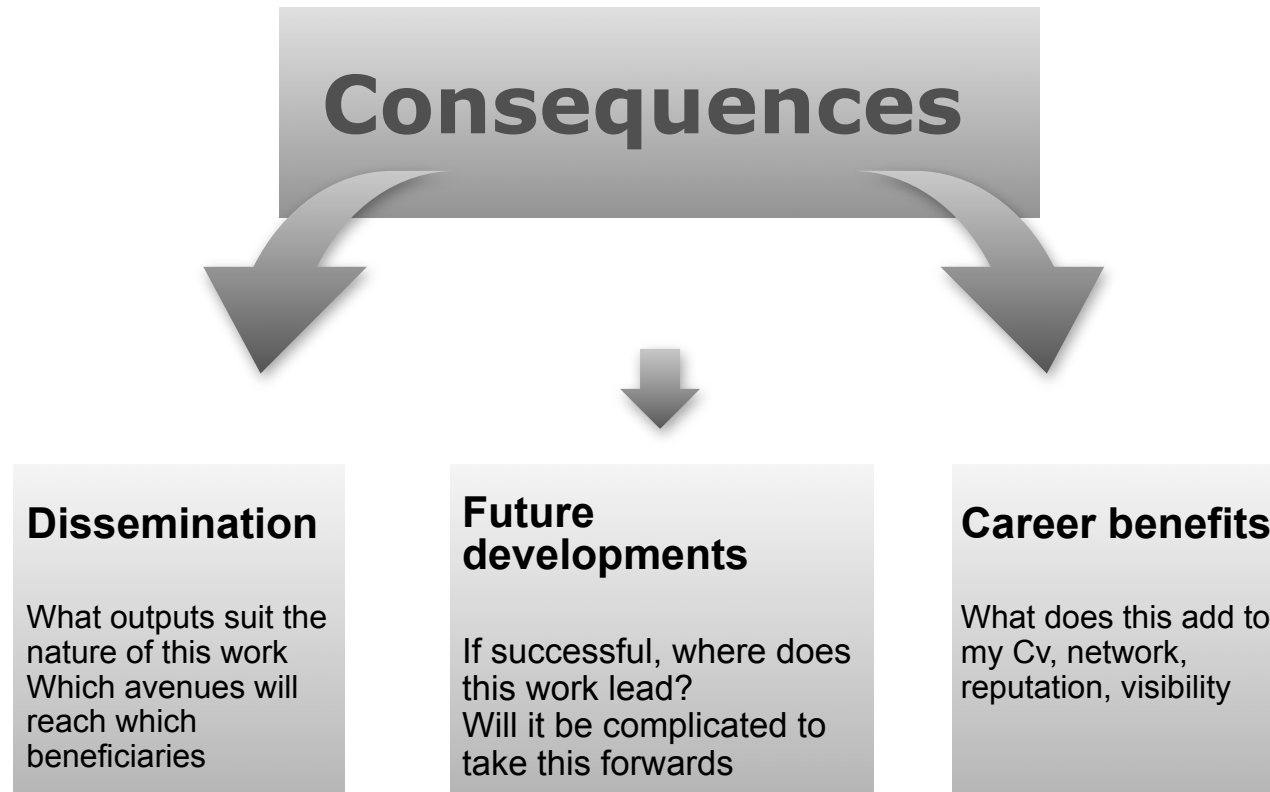
More generic resources are available at:

www.businessballs.com

www.mindtools.com

These sites are not academic, but they effectively introduce the tools and concepts of project management.

I've written on research project planning in the blog section ofwww.shintonconsulting.com.

My skills

The field

project

context

for me

Why am I doing research ?

the future

Why is this project
happening ?

risks

How is it happening ?
(methodology)

Impact - what
changes?

Who will benefit ?

Who could fund
this?

Challenges

for me

project

Consequences

Dissemination

What outputs suit the nature of this work
Which avenues will reach which beneficiaries

Future developments

If successful, where does this work lead?
Will it be complicated to take this forwards

Career benefits

What does this add to my Cv, network, reputation, visibility

Finally, we look at the end of the project and the possibilities it opens up. As previously discussed, this includes the dissemination strategy, but also the potential off-shoots from the research and who is likely to be involved in them. From a careers point of view, each project must deliver more than publications. Think carefully about the people you would like to be more visible to, the networks you would like to enter, the influence you would like to have, the opportunities currently denied you that might open up through this project.

You thought about what you need your next project to add to your CV which might influence the project plan

and the project team. For your own benefit though, you also need to consider the impact previous projects and opportunities have had on your promotion and progression.

What has stopped you maximising outputs from previous projects?
Which skills and roles do you need to add to your CV?

Do you need to become more comfortable with promoting your research and your own achievements?

Do you need to become more assertive when dealing with challenging people?

Do you need to find a mentor?

Are you prioritising the right things? Is your time management effective?

Could social media help build your reputation?

Do you need to put yourself forwards for particular roles (within the institution or in professional networks)?

Do you need to build strategic thinking habits – learning to look beyond the immediate day-to-day demands?

Finally, make some commitments!

If you can take a few small steps in the next 72 hours, you can start to put in place new ideas.

Over the next two weeks, find a few hours to start making progress and scheduling more serious time to achieve objectives.

If you start now, there is more chance of making progress on larger scale goals over a 3month period. The next page includes a few ideas of goals requiring different time commitments.

Context	Collaborators	Campaign	Consequences

72 hours

Context	Collaborators	Campaign	Consequences
Sign up for email newsletters from key funder	List areas which I'm struggling with and X-reference with Uni support	Talk to a colleague about research challenges and risk	Produce a beneficiary map and work out key people to engage

2 weeks

Context	Collaborators	Campaign	Consequences
Have a meeting with HoS about my research plans	Formulate questions to take to experts	Identify the project planning approach required by funder	Critique key papers which are widely cited - are there patterns?

3 months

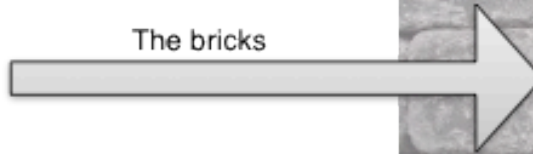| Context	Collaborators	Campaign	Consequences
Produce a map of funders with overlapping values and interests	Act on their advice!	Develop my research strategy - ten year goals	Attend an event with wider beneficiaries - start to engage

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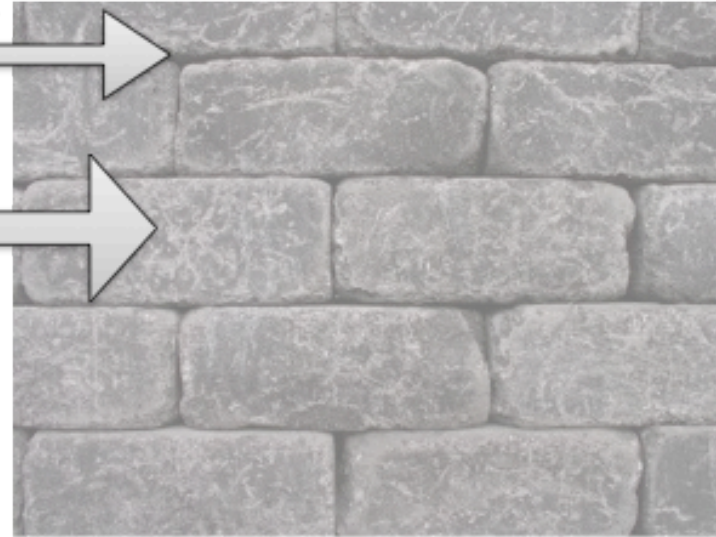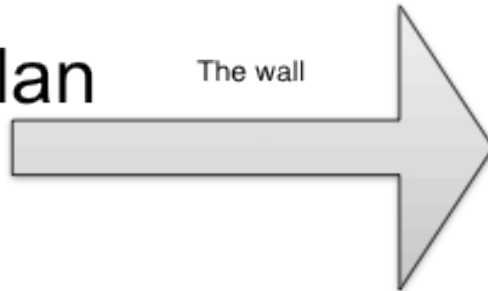
- 72 hour plan

The gaps between the bricks

- 2 week plan

The bricks

- 6 week plan

The wall

So, what about your plans?

What can you do in short, sharp bursts?

What do you need to find an hour or so for?

What will take more than a few hours at a time?

Good Luck!