

How to Get the Most From Your Research Collaboration

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The right collaborations can make or break a research project. Making and developing collaborations is a skill that most researchers must learn early in their career. These days, more and more collaborations are international. Though some early career researchers might be tempted to choose collaborators they already know, it might be more beneficial to seek out those with similar scientific goals and interests – wherever they are in the world.

It is important for early career researchers to learn that they do not need to accept every offer of collaboration. Instead, they can be selective. Collaborations can often mean a large investment of time and resources. Researchers should make sure that any choice to team-up will truly benefit their career.

Challenges of International Collaborations

So, you've found the perfect collaborator – but they are based in a different part of the world. International collaborations can throw up some challenges, but these can be overcome, as long as you are prepared.

- **Time zones** – If your collaborator is in a different time zone, it can sometimes be difficult to communicate. To make sure that this is not a problem, you just need to plan ahead. Allow extra time for responses and set a particular time each day for meetings or chats. Agree on the type of communication that works best for you both – is it email, FaceTime, or another method?
- **Meetings** – Planning meetings with people in different countries can be challenging. Make sure you are aware of the different time zones involved – by putting them in your Google Calendar, for example. This will help ensure that no one is asked to work late too often.
- **Always communicate** – Don't assume that your collaborator knows what you are thinking! A lack of communication can seriously slow down the progress in a project. It is better to over- than under-communicate.
- **Cultural differences** – Understanding [cultural differences](#) can help a research project run smoothly. Always try to keep an open mind. If you don't understand something, just ask! This is particularly important when some or all of the collaborators are not communicating in their native language.
- **Get to know each other** – The better you know each other, the easier communication will be. Try to meet in person at least once. If that isn't possible, use FaceTime or a webcam to talk.

How to Maintain an Effective Collaboration

Once you have found a potential collaborator, you will want to give your project the best chance of success. To begin with, you will need to make sure that you have found the right person. Are their aims the same as yours? Together, do you have the skills and resources to make the project a success? Do you both understand the possible risks? If the answer to all these questions is yes, then you are off to a good start.

Once you have agreed to collaborate with another researcher, you need to take care of your collaboration. One way to do this is by ensuring good communication, as mentioned above. Here are a few more tips:

- Agree on goals and priorities for each researcher. It is important to do this before the project starts. That way, everyone understands what is expected of them. It is also a good idea to agree on how any disagreements or conflicts will be handled.
- **Find a champion:** This could be a senior person who understands how the project will benefit your organization. If your collaborator can find one too, even better. Your champion can offer advice and encouragement if you have problems with your project. This support will help to make sure your project is a success.
- **Measure success:** Agree early on how you will measure success. When planning, it is a good idea to set some early targets. This will help to ensure that your project

gets off to a good start. Early successes will also help motivate your team.

- Don't be afraid to end the collaboration. Of course, this should be a last resort – especially because setting up a collaboration needs a large investment of time. But if you have tried your best to sort things out, and it isn't working, don't be afraid to end it. This helps avoid wasting any more time and money.

Avoiding Fake Collaborations

Have you ever been a part of a “fake” collaboration? [Fake collaborations](#) occur when a researcher puts their name on a project, but either has no real involvement, or only carries out their own independent work. Researchers might do this to help win funding, for example, by adding a more senior scientist to the team. Senior researchers might establish a collaboration, but leave the actual work to junior colleagues.

Sometimes, researchers might not realize they are part of a fake collaboration. Different scientific disciplines tend to do things in different ways; a collaboration may become “fake” due to a lack of communication. This might only become clear when a funding proposal is rejected. The roles of the different contributors to a project need to be clear if it is to avoid appearing fake.

The Publisher's View

From the point of view of a publisher, effective collaborations can be a great benefit to [academic publishing](#). This is particularly true now that open access publishing is becoming common. Publishers themselves need to collaborate with researchers, libraries, and funders to ensure that open access requirements are met. Elsevier, for example, has faced [challenges relating to the rise of open access](#).

Research has shown that articles from groups with strong collaborations are likely to have a higher impact factor. In addition, international collaborations now account for a high proportion of published articles: 86% in 2014. This is only likely to increase. International collaborations have other benefits, such as giving researchers from low-income countries access to better resources. Clearly, such collaborations can benefit both researchers and publishers.

Have you been a part of an international collaboration? What was your experience? Is there anything you could have done better? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

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