



Observations of an Owl (9)

Caught in the Net

We owls are loners, that's a well known fact. Although I admit that it's not always fun doing everything on your own. That's why from time to time we seek out company to have a chat, exchange stories and experiences, or just to have fun. However, after a while we always find we've had enough. We say goodbye to each other and go

our own separate ways, back to our solitary affairs.

You see, we owls are not really keen on working in big teams or even in networks. No, we owls perform best when tackling things alone.

Scientists seem to be quite similar. At least, the classic cliché of a scientist has, for a long time, been that of a loner. Think, for example, of Gregor Mendel or Barbara McClintock. And I can assure you that I have met many more who fit this stereotype.

However, in recent years there has been a change. More and more questions are turning out to be solvable only by big interdisciplinary efforts. So what's happened? Ever more and ever larger interdisciplinary networks have been set up.

Now, don't get me wrong, this is fine when there's no other choice. You define a problem, figure out that you need expertise from several disciplines and then create a research network to combine all the necessary expert teams. However, at least you go into this with your eyes wide open. You have accepted from the outset that you will be obliged to sit in network meetings twice a month, where one person does the talking while the rest are forced either to listen or to drowse. You also accept that it is necessary to spend umpteen days a month writing reports, applications and other administrative documents for the network. "I'm not important, I'm doing this for the benefit of the whole project" is your new mantra. (I know, I know – you don't have to tell me that you would rather be in your lab doing real experiments. After all, that's why you wanted to become a scientist, right?)

But wait, don't complain too much. Because this is only one way that research networks come into being. Things could be even worse, now that politicians have realised networks provide elegant, efficient and publicity-aware means for directing research policy. So what's happening now? Well, they're creating what I like to call "forced networks", one after the other. In brief, Network-Mania has taken hold!

The problem with this kind of "forced" research network is that few of them remain focussed on specific scientific questions – their creation encompasses whole fields of research (for example, cancer, diabetes, or marine biotech) in a very ill-defined way. Thus, even researchers who were only peripherally concerned with the "big topics" are suddenly forced to become "networkers", despite their entirely different interests.

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I realised how this could happen, and where it could lead, during a phone conversation with an old friend of mine who, at the time, had a very small, but admirably productive, group. The conversation went as follows:

"Any new results?"

"No, things have barely been moving for quite some time."

"Why?"

"No time to do experiments. Have to write mammoth grant applications."

"Pardon?"

"One for that big rheumatoid arthritis network the government announced. Another one for a similar European network."

"Sounds very medical. You're still a cell biologist, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course I am. But over the last couple of years I've been trying to establish special cell and tissue cultures which could eventually be used to study rheumatoid arthritis."

"And that's why you fit into the networks?"

"I don't think so. But I have to apply anyway."

"Why?"

"Well, you know the rules of the game. If I try to apply for cash on my own, they'll just say 'there are two big networks with money for this field. You need to apply to them, not here'. So applying for network money is my only option."

"Hmm. I see what you mean."

"The worst thing is that these network application forms are absolutely enormous. It takes weeks and weeks to get the applications filled in – time when I can do hardly any experimental work. You know, I'm still doing a lot of practical work myself. In the meantime, my competitors are snapping at my heels. The whole situation's got 'career nosedive' written all over it."

"Yeah. Not good. Looks like you'll soon be having a lot more to do with medical researchers."

"Yes, and I'm sure I'm going to hate it. It's just not my world."

"Yes. I know," was all I could reply.

My friend was an excellent researcher. He wasn't even a true, teamwork-phobic, loner. However, he was one of those scientists who function most brilliantly when allowed to think and work completely on their own. He certainly wasn't a networker. So it was sad to see how his research began to splutter from that "network episode" on. He finally ended up at a small technical college.

So much for the synergy that research networks create.

Comments are welcome at: owl@lab-times.org

