Enabling Networks

Communication, relationship building, and networking are skills that come naturally to some but not to others. Even those who are confident with certain modes of communication may feel anxious when it comes to new or different modes. These skills are crucial to civil servants, who need to spark conversation with new people, present confidently at conferences, and discuss deeply technical topics with individuals who may have never encountered the subject area.

Upbringing, socioeconomic background, confidence, language, specialisms, imposter syndrome, and so many other factors can influence how we network, and we hope in this article to provide some advice to put this process slightly more in reach. Whilst this article is for everyone, it was out of the heavy emphasis of the Fast Stream induction to 'network, network, network', that Lucy and Rohan decided to draw upon the lived professional and personal experiences of 30 senior civil servants to try and level the playing field when it comes to networking skills.

Lucy is a first-year Science and Engineering Fast Streamer, with a background in Biology and Environmental Sciences, who is currently posted in the Home Office working in Forensic Science Regulation. "My previous understanding of networking was limited to 'networking' events, where I felt super uncomfortable and never made any genuine connections. Since doing this project, I've benefited from more fruitful networking in the form of project-based networking and establishing skills-based mentoring relationships. Interviewing SCS was an extremely valuable process too, meeting some incredible minds with interesting experiences and backgrounds to draw from in my own career.".

Rohan is a first-year Generalist Fast Streamer, with a background in Politics, Philosophy and Economics, who is currently posted in the Department for Work and Pensions working on Work and Health. "Given I'm from a non-scientific background, I found it quite intimidating to try and develop knowledge, understanding and a network in this space – massive imposter syndrome for the first time! Whilst I feel comfortable communicating with individuals and groups, I was also keen on sharpening my skills in government after some networking errors in my current new role – the most notable being accidentally organising a meeting with 4 senior officials from another government department who, unbeknownst to me, thought I was there as an expert (I was a month into my role and the Civil Service!) to develop links between the two organisations. Make sure you take this article's advice and reflect the aims of your relationship clearly from the beginning, as I wish I knew back when I started. Huge thanks to the SCS who volunteered their advice, and for the interesting conversations I had the pleasure to have. I hope you enjoy!".
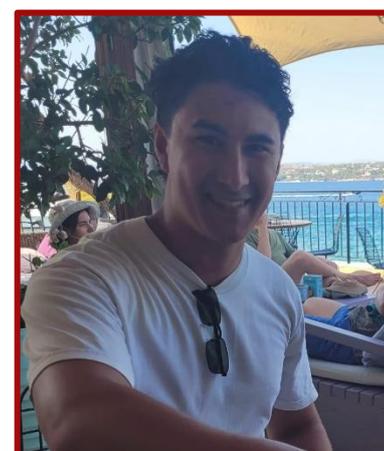
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Project Methodology

Senior civil servants (SCS) with roles relating to science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) from across Government were identified through online research and by drawing upon built relationships. Introductory emails outlining the aim of this project and the request for a conversation were sent, and for those individuals who agreed, semi-structured interviews lasting 20-30 minutes were conducted.

Insights from these interviews were used to inform this networking article. We have paraphrased, where appropriate given anonymity and security concerns, but have aimed to keep their core messages intact. We hope that you find their guidance and advice as useful as we have.

In total, 30 SCS were interviewed, from 15 departments. The departments and bodies represented are:

The STEM areas that participants represented broadly include:

- Research and Innovation
- Energy and Climate Innovation
- Future Farming
- Analysis and Statistics
- Active Travel
- Vaccines
- Net Zero
- Natural and Maritime Environment
- Regulation of Animals in Science
- Online Harms
- Digital Safety and Privacy
- Robotics
- Biotechnology
- Pharmaceuticals and Organic Chemistry
- Food Safety

The professions that participants represented broadly include:

- International strategy and engagement
- Product management
- Project delivery
- Policy professionals
- Statisticians
- Digital, data and technology
- Diplomacy
- Operational researchers
- Communications professionals
- Corporate services professionals
- Scientific advisors

Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) and Networking
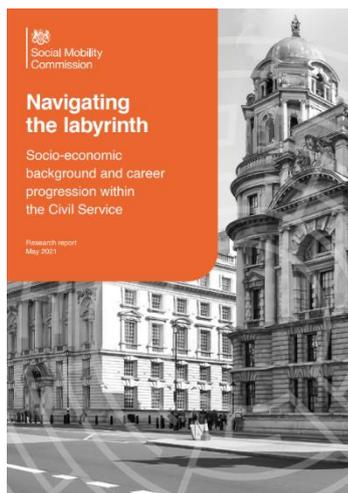
Whilst we were looking for SCS in STEM related roles, we noticed that in general there was under-representation of individuals from traditionally marginalised groups. The 'Navigating the labyrinth' report provides an accessible insight into how socioeconomic background shapes career progression within the Civil Service, and evidence that individuals from marginalised backgrounds are underrepresented.

This led us to consider how D&I considerations may impact experiences of networking and discuss this with SCS where they were comfortable to do so.

These discussions highlighted that some of the interviewees had at points during their careers noticed that they came from a different background to their colleagues; it is important to recognise that individuals from underrepresented backgrounds may experience networking differently, and due to a lack of representation may find networking more difficult. Sometimes, you might feel really out of place, and imposter syndrome is a very real challenge when it comes to networking. You are not alone if you have ever felt like networking isn't for you, or you don't know how to network. This

article will hopefully reassure you that this isn't the case, and that the SCS we interviewed who have experienced these feelings have some practical advice.

Firstly, in environments and social networks that already exist, recognise and acknowledge where there may be a lack of diversity. Allow yourself to feel whatever emotions this may create and know that these are valid. When trying to enter a space where you may not feel represented, try to make friendly contacts or rely on existing relationships and networks for support. Remember that you can make a space more diverse and inclusive by your presence and actions, which will hopefully make entering the space less intimidating for others in future. One SCS highlighted that as you develop a reputation for yourself throughout your career, people will realise you are the expert no matter what your background is, and that you should have confidence in this. Another SCS with a background in veterinary medicine explained that gender and gender identity can impact networking and that it may feel more challenging for women, for instance. She encouraged women to avoid apologising when networking, and remember that you aren't being rude by networking and promoting yourself professionally.

If you are a Fast Streamer, consider joining the existing Fast Stream Networks that can provide a starting point for developing your own network, and provide guidance and support for any concerns relating to D&I. There are similar support networks for the wider Civil Service and within many individual departments.

- [Fast Stream Autism Spectrum Network](#)
- [Fast Stream Race Equality Network](#)
- [Fast Stream Disability Network](#)
- [Fast Stream Gender Equality Network](#)
- [Fast Stream LGBT+ Network](#)
- [Fast Stream Social Mobility Network](#)

What is networking?

Broadly, networking involves creating and nurturing relationships of varying significance for some professional development purpose. It involves communicating with individuals, new and known, to gain in learning, in one's career, or simply out of curiosity. These relationships can be ones you draw upon when you are in need, and give back to reciprocally. These relationships will not always, or even normally, be equal on both sides, but on average it is good to give back into your network what you get out of it. For example, if you benefit from fruitful networking connections with close friends or family, you should aim to give back by supporting someone without that privilege.

Whilst networking has many similarities to traditional relationship building, it may differ in that when networking, you are building relationships for a purpose. This purpose might be short- or long-term, and may be mixed with other outcomes, but tends not to

be reaching out to someone just for the sake of friendship. Friendships can give way to networking opportunities, just as individuals in your network might become friends over time, but there is a notable difference between the two.

Why is networking important?

All SCS interviewed emphasised the importance of networking and provided numerous diverse examples of why we should pay attention to our networks.

1. Networking can make you better at your current job.

Most obviously, having a good network allows you to collaboratively solve problems you encounter in your work. A wide and diverse network also provides increased opportunities to identify connections between your work and the work of others, so that you can collectively maximise the impact of your efforts. This is particularly relevant whenever there are lessons to be learned elsewhere; for example, for societal issues in the UK, a global network can provide invaluable lessons from other countries about what is going well and what is going badly. Additionally, knowing researchers working on relevant problems can provide a sounding board when you might be stuck - one of our interviewees cited this as one of the most valuable benefit from their network.

> *My network has helped me on a day-to-day policy level, as having a good network has allowed me to make my work go further, by finding synergies with other people. It [my network] has also been important for overcoming blocks in my work, by identifying relationships I have with people that can help drive progress.*

- **SCS working in the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs on Net Zero and Carbon Budgets**

2. Your network can help you find your future work opportunities.

Knowing individuals from different departments and policy areas means you can gain insight into opportunities for progression in your career that you might not otherwise have been aware of. It is a common misconception that networking will automatically get you better jobs, by helping you know the 'right' people who can open doors for you; In the CS, all recruitment is based on the CS success profiles and behaviours, but a good network can help you with career progression by containing individuals who can point you towards opportunities that they think you will be a good fit for. An SCS who provides scientific advice in the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) provided an overt example of how a good network can make you aware of career opportunities; she had a contact who worked in GO-Science who she had previously worked with in another department, with whom they would meet regularly for advice. The contact made her aware of her current job in BEIS and advised her to apply. The SCS emphasised that if she hadn't developed a strong

network and had the contact who encouraged her to apply, she might not have even seen the role that she is in and now loves.

> *As I've moved around, I've found that knowing people at different grades in multiple departments continues to be useful, for knowing what opportunities are out there.*

- **SCS working in the Ministry of Justice in Analysis of Court Statistics**

3. Having a network can help you solve professional problems

A good network is also invaluable for providing support during difficult times or when you face professional problems; having contacts who you trust to have a vent to, or seek advice from, can make stressful circumstances more manageable. One SCS who works in asylum transformation discussed how important their network has been for providing support, challenge, and sharing of ideas in times where they have had a bad day or particular difficulty at work. In the context of the Civil Service, you will find various groups of supportive people that you can join such as coffee groups, Fast Stream Action Learning Sets, various networks and more, who may provide you with individuals at a similar stage in their career who can help you solve problems.

> *Peer support in my network has been really useful. If I have problems I go to certain people in my network for coffee and talk over knotty issues, which aren't always directly related to my role.*

- **SCS working in GO-Science in Security Resilience and Strategy**

4. Having a network is important for socialisation

Building relationships in the work context is an important means of socialisation, as many of us spend most of our day at work. Having a good network of individuals who you have meaningful connections with supports having fun and enjoyment in your work. One SCS who works in DEFRA in the natural environment directorate highlighted that it is nice to know people who you work with, and that often people who you have worked with in the past will cross paths with you again later in your career; creating strong connections can make re-sparking those relationships easier in the future.

> *There have been multiple times when I have been in a new job or encountered a new issue, and I've been able to remember working with someone who might have some interesting insight. Having networks opens a range of possibilities and knowledge you can access, but it's also nice to know people on a social level.*

- **SCS working in the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural**

Affairs in the Natural Environment, Trees, and Landscapes Directorate

5. Networks provide insight into personal development

Almost all of the SCS we spoke to highlighted that they have used their networks to gain advice and insight into how to progress their careers or develop themselves. A key way this was reported as done was by having a trusted mentor in the area you are interested in; a mentor can also help in the development of 'hard skills', such as coding. Mentoring relationships may form naturally, but most government departments offer specific mentoring schemes to facilitate these relationships.

> *Get a mentor! Having a mentor is in itself a form of networking, but they can also give you advice on who to network with, and introduce you to people.*

- SCS working for the Department for Transport in Active Travel.

6. A diverse network encourages you to challenge your thinking

Having a wide network consisting of individuals from various backgrounds, departments, and technical areas encourages you to constantly learn and challenge your thinking. This is important for developing the best advice for the Government and maintaining your critical thinking skills. One SCS who works in vaccines gave an example of how they moved into the policy profession through networking and speaking to people outside of their immediate profession; networking and having conversations with different people allowed them to see opportunities in policy by asking how they could get involved. After working in policy for a while, the SCS then moved back into finance, and took with them the different ways of thinking and working they had gained.

> *Having good networks helps you connect things that are quite disparate. For example, I did a policy MSc where I met loads of other students who now work in very diverse areas of policy.*

- SCS working for the Home Office in Animals in Science Regulation.

Networking in STEM

As a scientist or engineer, it can be invaluable to have a network that contains colleagues who also have expertise in STEM fields, because science is most effective when it is done in collaboration. You only need to look to the development of the Covid vaccines for an example of how collaboration allowed incredible progress and scientific breakthroughs. The SCS we spoke to made it clear that it is very important to have contacts in the scientific discipline you are trained in, and to have contacts from different disciplines. Having a multidisciplinary scientific network allows you to more easily connect science from seemingly disparate areas, and take a systems approach that is important for making progress and connecting ideas.

Nearly all the SCS we spoke to also urged us to remember the importance of scientists having a network containing contacts who wouldn't identify as scientists or engineers. This is because to effectively utilise scientific knowledge and methods in Government, scientists need to understand the non-scientific structures and processes, and seek help from colleagues who specialise in these areas, such as policy, commercial, finance, and HR. Individuals from all professions will have interesting insights that might not be initially obvious to scientists and engineers, and it is important to make sure your network captures the knowledge of all professions and does not become too focused on science or siloed.

How to Network

The SCS we spoke to had lots of advice for people who have recently joined the CS, or are looking for a career change within the CS, about how to effectively network:

Don't network for the sake of networking
- Instead, remember that networking is about building relationships, so network with an aim in mind (e.g. to seek help for a project, to seek support from mutual interests, for a specific learning and development requirement).   - Identify people who are interesting to you (e.g. for their career, work area, interests), and reach out to them for a conversation. Ask them about their jobs and for any advice they might have.   - Think longer term when networking and remember that the individuals you work with now who are contacts in your current network may be people that you encounter later on in your career. It is important to maintain connections where you can, as they can be helpful later in life.

Consider what you bring to a connection

- Remember that networking is reciprocal, and you will have valuable things to bring to contacts in your network.
- Spend time thinking about what you bring to a connection, and the 'categories' that your contacts might put you in. Remember that you wear many hats, you might be a newbie, a policy expert, a statistician, a Fast Streamer, an ex-medical professional etc. How you introduce yourself is important in reflecting your aims of the relationship.
- Always be your authentic self to make sure you are building genuine relationships.

When reaching out to a new contact for the first time, make sure…

- You understand exactly what it is that you are seeking to achieve, and articulate this clearly to the contact.
  - What is interesting to you about their role or background?
  - Why do you want to speak (e.g. information gathering, mentoring, learning, specific problem)?
  - Why have you chosen to ask this contact rather than someone else?
  - What are you asking of them (e.g. time commitment)?
- You are polite but straight to the point. People are willing to help, but they need to understand whether they can help you, or if they should point you in the direction of someone else who can. Everybody is short of time, so it is important that you get to the point quickly so as not to waste either your time or theirs.
- You are brave. If you are not a natural networker, put yourself out of your comfort zone. Remember that contacting someone out of the blue is wholly acceptable, but you need a clear reason.
- You don't self-censor if you are uncomfortable when reaching out (e.g. "I'm sorry for bothering you", "I know you're very busy, but"), as it is perfectly reasonable to make contact with people and ask for things - if people are unable to help or make that connection, they will say so. Instead of saying 'sorry', thank them for their time.
- You see if an introduction to a desired connection is possible from someone you already know. The 6 degrees of separation theory suggests that you are only 6 connections away from anybody in the world, so finding a connection to a contact you are interested in might be easier than you think!

Seek shadowing and mentoring opportunities

- Seek shadowing and mentoring opportunities to expose yourself to new environments and connections.
- Civil Service Learning runs a coach and matching scheme.
- Many Government departments have mentoring and shadowing opportunities, which can usually be found on departmental intranets or through particular professions. For example, Lucy has taken advantage of the Project Delivery Profession mentoring scheme available in the Home Office, to learn more about the Project Delivery Profession. Rohan has gained mentorship from various SCS in DWP, including through the Race Action Group.
- Mentor Match from the Whitehall and Industry Group - https://www.wig.co.uk/what-we-offer/mentoring/mentor-match.

Don't overthink networking, and do what works for you

- Remember that you are already building a network without trying through your daily work, as project-based networking (which includes with your direct colleagues) is the most effective way to build meaningful relationships. This is where you network through working with people on tasks, such as presentations, research projects or policy problems. It can be extremely useful for your network.
- Utilise the existing networks available to you, for example the Fast Streamer networks, or networks within your department. This is an easy way to meet people with similar interests, who are also interested in making connections and building their network.
- Figure out how you prefer to make connections, as this will be different for everyone, and don't worry if you think you're not 'good' at networking - a large number of the SCS we interviewed admitted they don't think they are either!

Consider moving horizontally

Moving horizontally means moving policy area or specialism at the same level of seniority, e.g. moving from future energy to climate innovation at G7-level. The below ideas are ways for you to do this, as recommended by SCS.

Build and nurture your transferable skills

- Wherever you work, the area will always require transferable skills such as communications or stakeholder management. If you consider vaccines, nuclear energy, genetically modified foods and autonomous vehicles, these all have huge communications challenges to overcome with different stakeholders, as is common with emerging technologies. One of our interviewees claimed his stakeholder management skills and ability to work across government enabled him to significantly move areas of work – from taxation to aerospace – and it was him acknowledging this overlap that allowed the move. Another interviewee worked for many years in foreign policy before moving into technology policy, relying on the common anchor of data which was key in the move.

Exploit interdisciplinarity

- Develop overlapping knowledge through L&D opportunities and learning on the job and ensure you know how to best utilise this. One interviewee explicitly looked for a postgraduate degree in the middle point of business change and technology to develop a unique skillset.

We were fortunate enough to speak with 30 extremely interesting individuals diverse in character and specialism, and we hope we have conveyed their insights in a way that might push you to send that introductory email, ask for some advice, or explore that policy area or specialism that has interested you for some time. Good luck!