

A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

Mediating University-Firm Partnerships

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Question

How can we create effective collaboration between universities and firms that have had little or no previous interaction?

Benefits of Past Interaction

1. Develops an awareness of partner's capabilities and resources that complement one's own
2. Develops common ground between the partners (interests, resources, practices)
3. Develops understanding and acceptance of legitimate differences
4. Develops confidence in the partners ability and willingness to fulfill obligations.

IBM

Centre for Advanced Studies

- Established in 1990
- Located at the IBM Software Development Lab in Toronto
- Partners with multiple universities primarily in Computer Science
- Small permanent staff – Director and Admin Support
- Rotating staff of Research Associates act as liaisons between academics and developers
- Projects require an internal IBM champion
- Small scale 1 to 3 year projects
- Projects funded from CAS budget

Bell University Laboratories (U of T Site)

- Established in 1998
- Administrated from university site – part time Academic Director and full time industry and university liaisons
- Projects require champion within Bell
- Partnerships with academics from multiple disciplines
- Funding proposals submitted to joint university-firm panel
- Funding large projects for 1 year with possibility for renewal up to 3 years
- Projects funded from BUL budget

Methodology

- Interviews carried out with university and firm participants in each case study
- IBM CAS – 15 interviews
- BUL – 20 interviews
- Part of a larger set of 98 interviews examining university-firm partnerships

Differences Affecting Collaboration

Interests

- Goals and expectations
- Pathways for gaining recognition and reward
- Level of independence within the organization
- Time horizon for results

Practices

- Social Networks
- Sources of Knowledge
- Instruments and tools
- Data and materials
- Skills
- Problem Characteristics
- Solution Characteristics

CAS

Research Associates

- Developers who spend a 3 year term with CAS
- Each an expert in 1 of the firm's business areas
- All have PhDs
- All have significant academic contacts
- All participate in academic and industry conferences and have numerous publications
- Participate to a limited extent in some projects

BUL

Business Development Officers

- Two full time business development officers (one employed by the university and one by the firm)
- Liaisons located on the university campus
- Both have experience working with university and firm personnel
- Both have business development backgrounds
- Provide administrative support to projects but do not participate in research

Key Roles of Mediators

1. Identifying key people, problems, resources
2. Marketing the program to targeted individuals
3. Matching people, interests, problems
4. Educating potential partners about the interests, practices, and resources the other
5. Translating expectations and concerns of one partner to the other
6. Providing stability and continuity to the program as a whole

Important Characteristics of Mediators

1. Understand each partner's interests and motivations
2. Work to ensure mutual benefit to partners
3. Not motivated by the agenda of one partner
4. Easily accessible to each partner – face-to-face communication important
5. Leave the research questions to the partners

Conclusion

Effective collaborations involve a two-way transfer of knowledge.

For mediators to be an effective tool in overcoming barriers to university-firm collaboration they need to work for benefit of both partners.