Sarah Morton, speaker at the second plenary session at the 2015 ASIS&T Annual Meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, began by asking what we mean by research impact. She used the term knowledge exchange (KE) to refer to all the processes of research use between researchers and others. Her definition of impact has three sections:

1. **Research uptake:** people being interested in research, collaborating, reading, talking about it, coming to presentations and so forth
2. **Research use:** people doing something with research, changing their views, passing research on to someone else and applying it to practice or policy
3. **Research impact:** a contribution to change as a result of research use.

**How Does Research Impact Happen?**

Research use isn’t straightforward, Morton said. Carol Weiss defined [1] six ways research can be used in policy:

1. **Problem solving:** research used to provide evidence to solve policy problems
2. **Knowledge-driven:** research driving new technological developments
3. **Interactive:** interactive, non-linear model with many actors communicating with each other
4. **Political:** research used to lobby for political viewpoints
5. **Tactical:** research used to delay action, avoid taking responsibility, deflect criticism, maintain prestige or rally academic support
6. **Enlightenment:** research changing conceptualization of a problem through slow percolation of ideas in policy and society.

**Keywords**

- research and development
- information sharing
- policy
- information impact
- information use
- social sciences

**EDITOR’S SUMMARY**

At the University of Edinburgh, Sarah Morton studies the process of social research and how it affects policy. In her plenary session at the 2015 ASIS&T Annual Meeting she cast research impact as knowledge exchange, bringing together researchers, the ways research is used and consequent change. Morton explained that research is used to solve problems and drive knowledge development, typically with multiple contributors, and applied to alter viewpoints or bring about change. For research to have effect it must be communicated, presented in context and put together with real world experience. While a formal research setting promotes an organization’s use of research, time issues, competing priorities and poor communication undermine getting the most benefit. When assessing research impact, the presence of collaborative networks, planned user engagement throughout the process and knowledge sharing strategies gained are key. The focus for research has evolved from knowledge dissemination to recognition of relationships and multiple information sources. Ideally a systems model of knowledge combines priorities, culture and context, mediated by relationships and including both researchers and those who put research findings to use.

**KEYWORDS**

- research and development
- information sharing
- policy
- information impact
- information use
- social sciences

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**2015 Annual Meeting Coverage**

**ASIS&T ANNUAL MEETING PLENARY SPEAKERS**

**Creating Impact: Issues, Challenges and Solutions: Sarah Morton Addresses Plenary**

by Steve Hardin
Morton then explored 11 statements about research impact issues, based on principles developed by Davies and Nutley in a forthcoming work:

1. Research does not speak for itself. It needs to be communicated, tailored for different audiences to incentivize different people.
2. Research doesn’t stand alone. Research must be seen in the context of other evidence, other systems and cultures.
3. Research has to be integrated. For practitioners, it has to be integrated into practical experience.
4. Using research is often not an event. It’s a more gradual process.
5. Research impacts not just learning: unlearning matters too. Part of it is letting go of previously held ideas that were very dear. People are reluctant to accept evidence that alters their beliefs.
6. Knowledge is often co-produced. Collaborative research can be very helpful, offering new insights. Researchers have posted a manifesto for partnership research between academic and other organizations at www.crfr.ac.uk/manifesto-for-partnership-research/.
7. Knowledge creation is deeply social. It occurs through interaction and dialog. Relationship building is crucial.
8. Research impact is not about products, but processes. We need to have good products.
9. Research impact is not all about decisions but often more about framings. It can be most powerful when it causes shifts in thought processes.
10. For organizations to be serious about research use, they need “skin in the game.” Morton has found organizations with more formal settings for research are more likely to use it.
11. Leadership in impact settings needs to demonstrate active support for research creation and use.

What Helps and Hinders Research Impact?

Morton cited barriers to research use including lack of time, low priority and poor communication of research. Sometimes research is not timely or relevant to users’ needs or it may not be the most important source of information. There may be other factors such as organizational resistance or a lack of skills.

The UK Economic & Social Research Council impact assessment activities (www.esrc.ac.uk/research/evaluation-and-impact/) found the most important drivers of impact include established relationships and networks with user communities, involving users at all stages of the research, and well-planned user engagement and knowledge exchange strategies.

Morton turned her attention to ideas about whether there is a gap that needs to be bridged between researchers and users. Rather than a gap, she encouraged thinking about all of the organizations, like the media, professional bodies, think tanks, audits, inspections, scrutiny, advocacy groups, knowledge brokers and lobbyists, who can help with research use.

Best & Holmes (2010) [2] suggest that from the 1960s to the mid-1990s there was mainly a linear model of research use, focused on dissemination, diffusion and knowledge transfer leading to impact. Knowledge was seen as a product. From the mid-90s, relationship models became more dominant, acknowledging knowledge from multiple sources: research, theory and practice. Interpersonal, social relationships became more important. Finally, Best and Holmes argue a systems model is needed, featuring knowledge woven within priorities, culture and context. Relationships mediate throughout the cycle. These three generations of models are nested, Morton said: rather than superseding each other we need all three to be interlinked.

What Have We Learned About Research Use Since 2001?

Key messages include that research use is a process, not a product; it is complex and context specific and often involves long time frames.
Translation, relationships and systems matter. There are many kinds of evidence: research, evaluation, data, practice, knowledge. We have to have the humility to see that that research doesn’t trump everything else.

To take research use forward there is a role for both academic researchers and non-academics. Researchers can network, build relationships with key users, involve them in research and KE and strategize KE. Non-academics can systematize research use, ensure leadership and learning time, and work with key academics.

Morton concluded by pointing out there’s even more information available in one of her articles [3] and a forthcoming article [4].

**Resources Mentioned in the Article**


