

• Knowledge brokering: rising to the challenges of sustainability science

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Background

An incredible quantity of research results on a dizzying array of topics is not only available, but constantly growing. The lack of action witnessed in certain domains (climate change, inequality etc.), as well as the wealth of policies and actions launched without proper consideration for pertinent data, demonstrate the difficulties of mobilising science to inform decisions. One promising solution for bridging the gap between the research community and the people in positions to take decisions is the concept of knowledge brokering. Whether piloted by an individual or an organisation, knowledge brokering works to promote science-based decision-making, taking contextual circumstances and power balances into consideration, without grand illusions but also without naiveté.

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Further reading

DAGENAIS C. *et al.*, 2021 – Collaborative Research and Knowledge Translation on Road Crashes in Burkina Faso: The Police Perspective 18 Months On. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 19 (1): 3.

<https://catalogue.edulib.org/fr/series/le-transfert-de-connaissances>; <https://audioblog.arteradio.com/blog/184108/podcast/203684/tony-part-i-qu-est-ce-que-le-transfert-de-connaissances>

RIDDE V. *et al.*, 2013 – Une synthèse exploratoire du courtage en connaissance en santé publique. *Santé Publique*, 25 (2): 137-145.

Two separate worlds

The Covid-19 pandemic illustrated just how difficult it is to ensure that decisions are based on science. When governments decided to impose lockdown measures, they rarely consulted public health experts or historians of past epidemics. In areas such as climate change, health inequality and the inability of the poorest members of society to access healthcare, solutions have actually been available for many years: the lack of action and clear decisions demonstrate the limitations of scientific mobilisation. The scientific community is often denigrated, sometimes in very stereotypical terms. Scientists and decision-makers live in different worlds, worlds which are often too inward-looking, governed by rules and standards which are too different to allow for fruitful exchanges and discussions. Research teams are judged in the long term, based on the grants they win and the publications they produce, whereas politicians are often judged on their ability to make people-pleasing decisions within the short time frame of an election cycle. While members of the scientific community are sometimes criticised for failing to understand the workings of power, those in a position to make political and technical decisions are regarded as lacking in the scientific literacy required to gauge the quality of studies which might be of use to them - if, indeed, they are even aware of such studies.

From mobilisation to scientific mediation

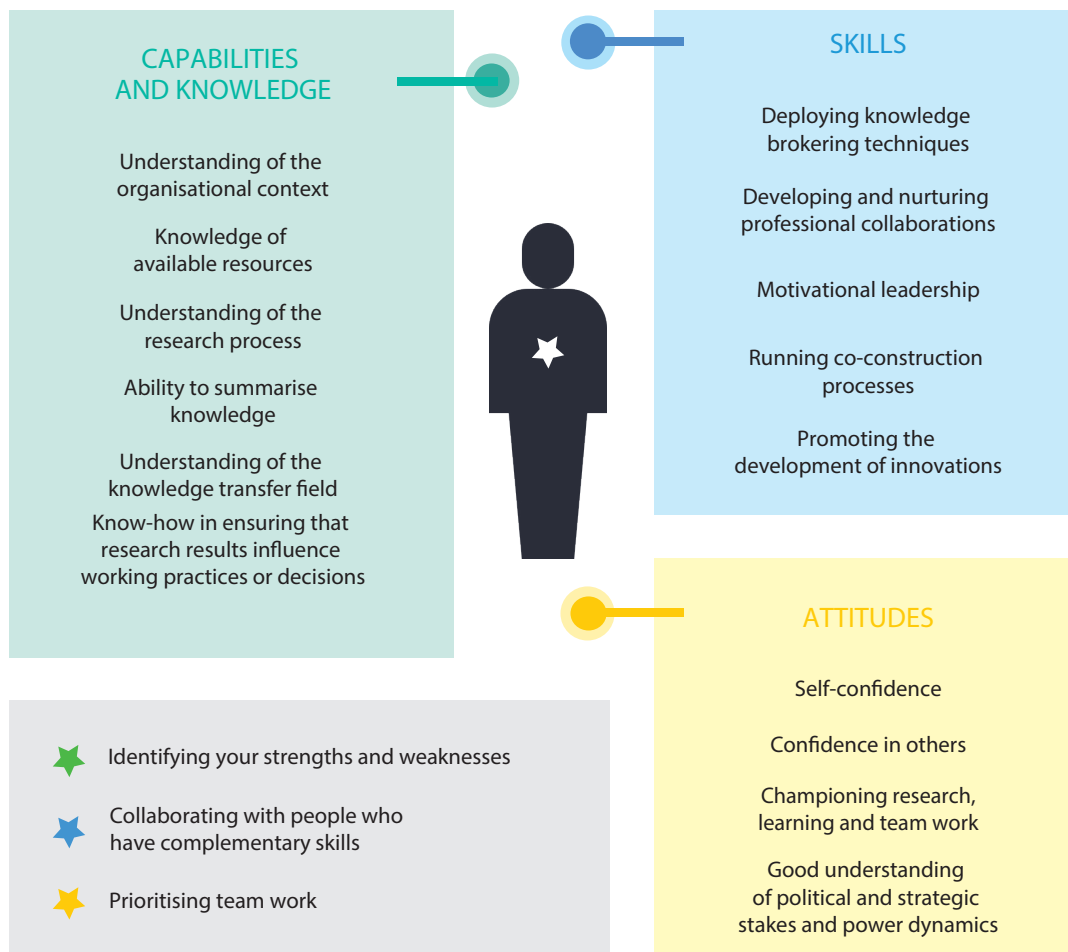
If the prevailing time frames, knowledge, skills, interests, capabilities, norms and

contexts of the academic and political spheres are so different and so difficult to change, then why not turn to a person or organisation capable of acting as an interface? Cultural mediation in museums, social mediation in neighbourhoods, interpersonal mediation for families - all of these are well-established. Nonetheless, the idea of an intermediary presence between science and the organisations responsible for establishing and implementing public policy is a relatively new one. Not all forms of research (especially in fundamental sciences) necessarily lead to decisions liable to change the way we live in the short term. However, if we accept that the knowledge generated by research can usefully inform decision-making, particularly in fields such as health, education, the fight against deforestation, habitat protection and the conservation of coral reefs - all matters of sustainable development - then there is certainly an opportunity to make use of knowledge brokering. The person or organisation acting as broker must seek to understand the needs of decision-makers, support research teams as they adapt their works for the purposes of decision-making, conduct systematic surveys of the current state of international knowledge on the subject, and present these findings in accessible terms conducive to action. Brokers need the requisite interpersonal qualities to fulfil this intermediary role (humility, motivation, dynamism, leadership), as well as the technical capacities needed to understand the scientific sphere (its methods and workings) and the mechanics of decision-making (strategic and political considerations, opportunities for action, need for

adaptation). Moreover, experiments with brokering in the development sphere are rare and will require further study in order to identify the conditions required for them to succeed. What we need is a science of how best to use science.

The challenges of knowledge brokering in Burkina Faso and the Île-de-France

Two examples can help to illustrate the current state of knowledge brokering. During a



Skills, capacities and attitudes for knowledge brokering

(<https://catalogue.edulib.org/fr/series/le-transfert-de-connaissances>).

five-year interventional research programme focusing on public healthcare in the Kaya district of Burkina Faso, the participants experimented with a knowledge brokering initiative. A person with a master's degree in sociology was recruited, trained and tasked with of creating opportunities for the research produced by the programme (on health insurance, malaria, dengue fever etc.) to be of use to local and national decision-makers. They produced summaries of new and existing knowledge, organised deliberative workshops, produced guidance notes and helped researchers to make their results more accessible and pertinent. The lessons learned from this experience demonstrate the importance of taking proper consideration of power dynamics (medical hierarchies, centre/periphery and North/South relations) and the context in which decisions are taken, in order to adapt knowledge

brokering activities and functions accordingly. Another example comes from the Île-de-France region of France, where insufficient use is made of available scientific data on social healthcare inequalities (SHIs) when designing solutions. With this goal in mind, an 18-months research-action project (Courtiss) launched in April 2022 is working to promote knowledge brokering as a means of reducing SHIs, running in partnership with the regional public health agency. The programme is seeking to improve the precision of the agency's SHI actions, using scientific knowledge to inform decision-making. In addition to the relatively short 18-month window afforded to a research-action programme, the fact that professionals often lack the time needed to take part in brokering activities remains a challenge, and highlights the need for more institutional support for knowledge brokering.

KEY POINTS

Knowledge brokering would appear to be indispensable for the realisation of social and political changes which are, at least in part, based on science. But brokering must form part of a clearly defined knowledge transfer plan, backed up with sufficient means and skilled personnel. Knowledge brokering is a promising strategy for encouraging the use of research results to inform decision-making. It is a relatively new function and a profession in need of further development, so that the scientific and political spheres can collectively contribute to informed decision-making in the interests of sustainable development. Like research, scientific mediation is a profession in its own right - a profession in its infancy, which needs to be supported and championed. This is one of the key proposals made by the Global Evidence Commission in a report published in January 2022.

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