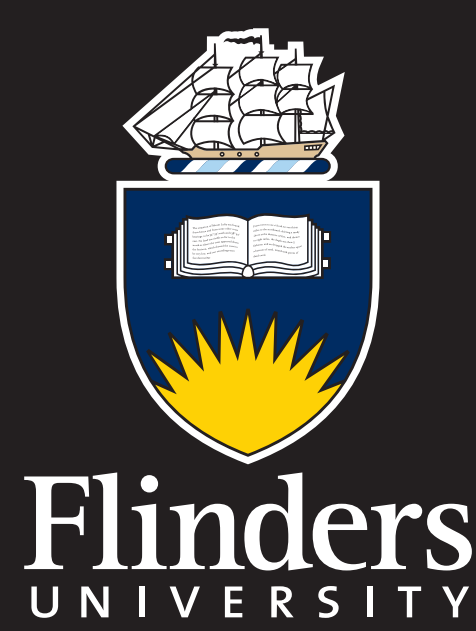


Networking: the Human Factor in Knowledge Exchange



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Introduction

As a delegate at this Conference you are a significant wheel in a temporary cluster of knowledge exchange! Conference clusters are a specific form of inter-firm organisation dedicated to knowledge exchange, network building and the generation of new ideas.

Transient in real time, these multi-dimensional structures function as powerful hubs to stimulate (both short-term and long-term) knowledge creation and knowledge exchange.

Just being there!

- Delegates are drawn to conferences by a shared interest in the topic.
- Attendance engages them in a thick web of specialised, multilayered information.
- The corridors, the cafés and the bars can be the most important places for knowledge exchange.
- Attendance allows delegates to participate in the spontaneous and fluid buzz of the cluster. (Bathelt et al, 2004; Gertler, 2003 ; Maskell et al, 2004; Lalonde et al, 2007)

Characteristics of effective conference clusters

- Delegates enter an environment constructed around the importance of networking.
- The Conference Program creates an intensive environment that facilitates initial, low-risk, face to face contacts.
- The Program sets the scene and underpins the quality and relevance of the buzz.
- The Program encourages understanding of different perspectives.
- Adequate opportunities for networking (both formal and informal) are scheduled.
- Delegates are provided in advance with access to abstracts as well as a Delegates List which includes contact details.
- Over time (including successive conferences) potential collaborators are able to develop the necessary trust to underpin future collaborations.
- The strength of such clusters relies on the reputation of an association, conference and profile of the delegates. (Maskell et al, 2004; Winter et al, 2008)

Aim

To evaluate networking opportunities at Primary Health Care Research Conferences (2007-2011).

Methods

Data from on-line post-conference evaluation surveys were analysed.

Results

An average of 49% of delegates responded to the evaluation each year. The results indicate the strong importance of networking to delegates and the range of formal and informal strategies they used.

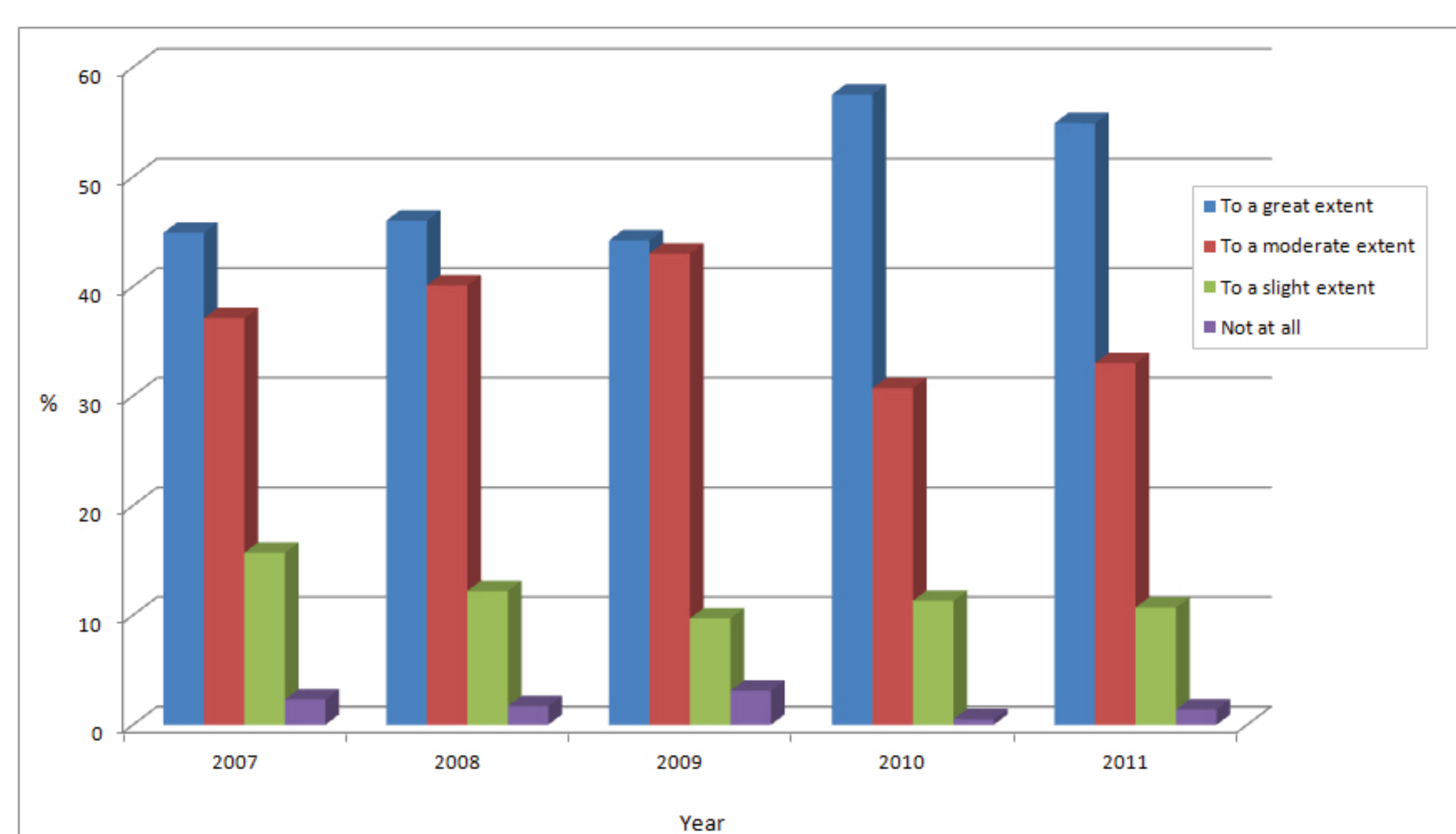


Figure 1: How important was networking to you at the conference?

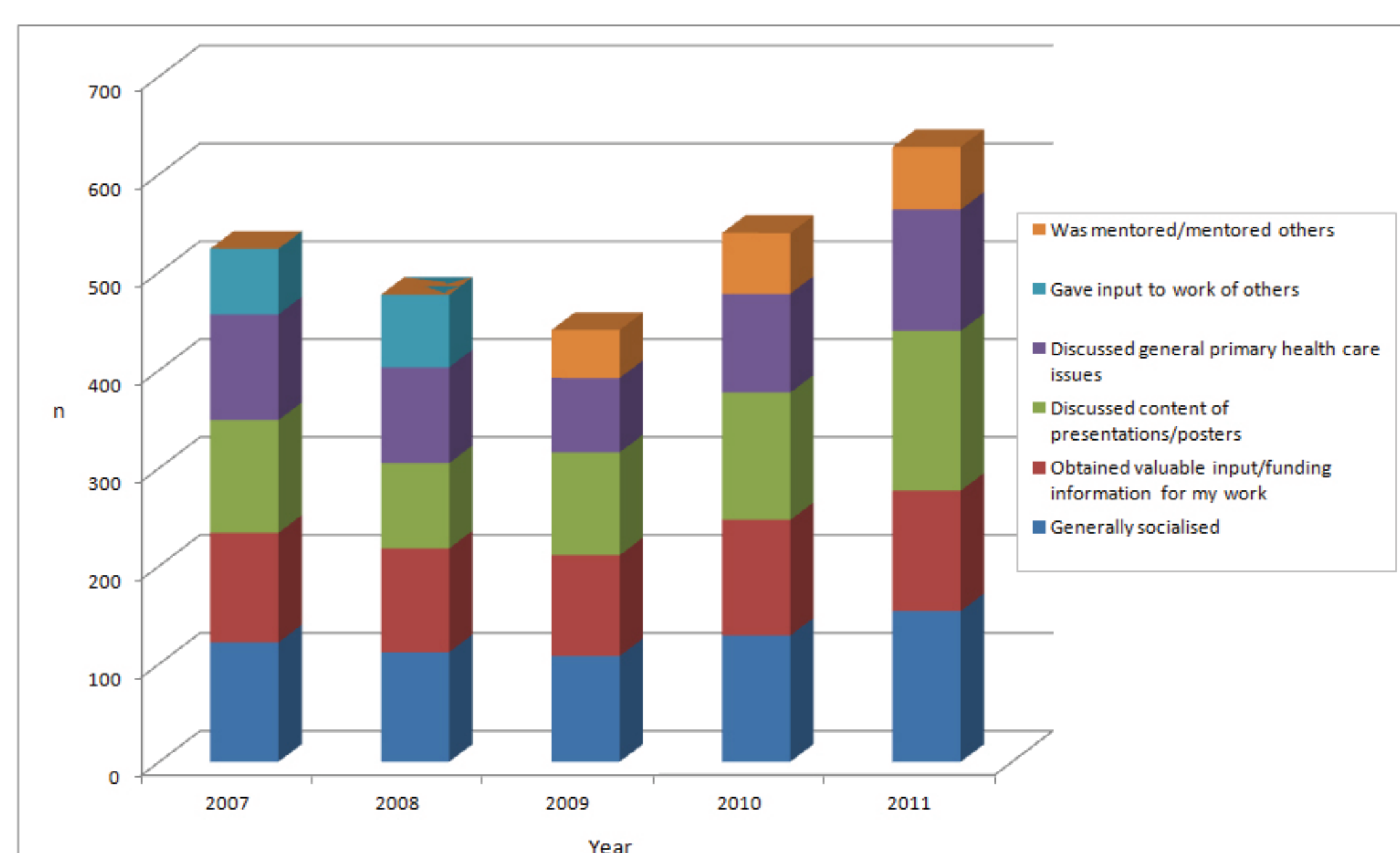


Figure 2: How did you use your networking at the conference?

Note 1: Delegates could tick multiple options.

Note 2: in 2007 and 2008 delegates were asked if they gave input to the work of others. In subsequent years this question was replaced by two options: was mentored or mentored others.

Table 1: Structured and unstructured activities delegates found useful for networking.

Structured	Unstructured
Powerful keynote speakers to set the scene	Extended morning and afternoon teas
Welcome Reception/Conference Dinner	Extended lunch breaks
Themed lunch tables	Conversations after paper presentations
Poster reception/Poster walk	General atmosphere of the Conference
Small tables at Breakfast Sessions/Workshops	Walking from the hotel
Small group site visits	Just being there!

Comments on networking

- *The general milieu and friendliness of the conference helps networking to flow more easily...*
- *... what did occur naturally, when the paper sessions ended, was that people milled around and talked/networked. This was where my best networking occurred, since people were there because they had a genuine shared interest*
- *Special interest tables at lunch was a great idea...*
- *Planned meetings with particular people – very deliberate strategy*

Comments on benefits of networking

- *I have built a strong network of contacts who I can engage with and link others to*
- *Increased my network of colleagues and my understanding of the primary health care community*
- *Explored potential collaborations*
- *Brainstormed research ideas. Made valuable contacts*



Delegates at the Welcome Reception for the Primary Health Care Research Conference



Lunchtime Discussion over Topic Tables at the Primary Health Care Research Conference

Lessons learned

Conference clusters or networks are valuable networking communication channels in knowledge exchange. These temporary clusters create an environment which facilitates initial, low-risk, face to face meetings of people who share a common professional interest.

Once a potential collaborator is identified in the buzz, there is the opportunity to take steps to consciously build trusting relationships and collaborations.

We live in a world of instant electronic communication and yet face to face communication remains important to facilitate knowledge exchange.

Implications

Conference networking is a valuable knowledge exchange strategy that is enhanced by the design and structure of the conference.

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