Working effectively
with professional / support staff
in academia

Martyna Śliwa
University of Essex
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University of Essex

Outline

- **Contextualisation** within the landscape of UK higher education
- Possible **theoretical approaches** to considering the relationship between academics and professional / support staff
- **Examples** and anecdotes
- **Practical advice** for developing effective working relationships
- **Discussion**

Context (1)

- Past:

  - Extensive **state funding** of academic institutions

  - Academics perceived as the '**core**' employees of universities

  - Administrators **supporting** academics and students

  - **Hierarchy** of importance and perceived contribution along occupational lines

  - Differences in levels of **education**, **pay** and **status** between academics and administrators

  - Mutual (gendered) stereotypes, e.g. 'secretary', 'absent-minded professor)

Context (2)

- Present:
    - **Marketisation** of academia: student fees and institutional competition
    - **Performance management and measurement** regimes associated with governmental audits and reporting obligations – REF, TEF, in the future, possibly also KEF
    - Shift from '**administration**' to '**professionalisation**'
    - Creation of previously non-existent professional support roles and introduction of **new occupational cultures** in universities (e.g. marketing, research management)
    - **Shift in hierarchies** associated with an understanding that professional support staff fulfil diverse, highly skilled and important roles in the university context
    - To an extent, **disruption** of traditional differences between academics and professional support staff in terms of education, pay and status

Possible theoretical perspectives

- Sociological categories-based (class, gender, ethnicity)
- Occupational identity
- Organisational culture

Sociological perspective

- Traditionally, different **social class** origin, especially in the UK: 'working class' / 'middle class'

- **Gendered** profile of both academic and professional services departments

- Places of origin: local versus international

    - What are the implications inherent in these 'socio-demographic' underpinnings for the dynamics of mutual perceptions, understanding and relating at work?

    - How does intersectionality play into this? What does all this mean for you?

Occupational identity perspective

- Work as a central **source of identity** and a **criterion** by which to judge a person's **value** to a society.

- We identify as workers and make sense of ourselves and others as **particular types** of workers

- *'Particular types of work are distinguished from one another through* **discourses** *and* **practices** *that (re)produce our understanding of that work and the place it holds in society. Through* **communication** *over time, individuals share in the practice of* **occupational identity construction** *(...) Increasingly, the value and meaning of work(er) have come to be defined by notions of professionalism, where work is highly specialized and dependent upon prescribed* **performances of fitness and commitment** *(…) As work has become more specialized and organizational control more distributed, it is precisely* **employees' sense of self and identity** *that becomes the "contested terrain" on which the dynamics of* **workplace control** *gets played out' (Way et al., 2017: 160-161).*

Occupational identity

Occupational 'sense of self': assumptions / values associated with:

Academic work	Professional work
Vocation	Job
Progression expected	Progression possible in some roles but not all
Full time and (well) beyond	Full-, part-time and 'flexible' roles
Work at the centre of life	Work as an element of life
Workplace as one space of professional activity and identification	Workplace as only space of professional activity and identification
Expectation of career moves beyond the institution	Expectation of long-term employment
Collegial forms of governance; suspicion towards 'management'	Normalisation of management and managerial ambition; 'grades' culture
Internalisation of employee obligations and commitments	Internalisation of employee rights and entitlements

Edgar Schein's model of organisational culture

- Artefacts – things you can observe
    - The dress code of the employees, office furniture, facilities, behaviour of the employees etc.
- Espoused values – stated values and rules of behaviour
    - Philosophies, goals, strategies, ideas about how employees should be managed, what is important and what isn't etc.
- Basic assumptions – reflection of shared values within a culture.
    - Basic assumptions are deeply embedded and often unconscious; they are the 'essence' of culture.

Developing effective working relationships with professional / support staff: practical advice

- Treat people how you would like to be treated yourself
- Build a **good reputation** for yourself – positive effects will multiply!
- Make sure you cultivate **positive interactions** and don't fall out with anyone
- When you **share** things about yourself and others, be conscious that you may be sharing with more than one person
- Find out what someone's **'grade'** is to understand what they do, what they don't do, and why they act in certain ways
- Find out about people's **working hours** as well as the dates of half-term breaks and other factors that influence their working patterns

Developing effective working relationships with professional / support staff: practical advice

- Say 'thank you', show **appreciation**
- **Praise** – especially in front of senior staff and in emails
- Show **interest** in people's personal lives and hobbies, and remember what they've told you
- Be aware of a diversity of **skills**, **backgrounds** and **qualifications** – they will reflect the abilities demonstrated at work
- Be inclusive – in **meetings** and in online communication
- Remember that adapting to **change** can be really **difficult** – it's you who could be seen as transitory
- **Offer help** and be ready to give it
- Be professional but also **authentic**

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Thank you!