

Conferences that put people before PowerPoint with Russell Arnott and Sarah McLusky

(Research Adjacent Episode 85)

Sarah and Russell are reinventing research conferences to prioritise connection and collaboration

<https://researchadjacent.com/conferences-that-put-people-before-powerpoint-episode-85/>



[00:00:01] **Russell Arnott:** You've brought all these people together. It's such a waste of time if you're not gonna get them to actually talk or learn from each other.

[00:00:10] **Sarah McLusky:** Making a little bit more room for connection and conversation I think just makes such a massive difference.

[00:00:18] **Russell Arnott:** This is gonna be facilitated and this is going to be much more interesting, impactful, and you are gonna get much more out of it than the normal conference experience.

[00:00:31] **Sarah McLusky:** It's a real skill, and it's not just about, yes, there's the logistics, but there's also essentially the psychology behind what you do and the ways that you put people together.

[00:00:46] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello there. I'm Sarah McLusky and this is Research Adjacent.

[00:00:52] **Sarah McLusky:** Each episode I talk to amazing research adjacent professionals about what they do and why it makes a difference. Keep listening to find out why we think the research adjacent space is where the real magic happens.

[00:01:08] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello and welcome to Research Adjacent. Today's episode is on a topic very close to my heart, and that is events, or more specifically conferences. I am joined by Russell Arnott, and on paper, Russell is an ocean science communicator, but like me, he's also an educator, facilitator, and event organiser.

[00:01:27] **Sarah McLusky:** Between us, Russell and I have been organising science communication and research related events for decades, and we have a lot of thoughts about why most academic conferences are letting their audiences down. We're talking about information overload, poor networking opportunities, and key decision making delegated to inexperienced staff or even PhD students. In an era when we are looking to research to solve huge global challenges, this seems like such a wasted opportunity of all the knowledge and talent that get together in a room when there's a conference on.

[00:02:00] **Sarah McLusky:** But we also have a lot of ideas for how we could be doing things better. So we are putting our money where our mouth is, and together we are launching Re:Conference, a service, which helps conference organisers to create more engaging and impactful events.

[00:02:14] **Sarah McLusky:** Listen on for tips on how to turn passive audience members into active participants who show up ready to contribute and connect rather than just listen.

[00:02:24] **Sarah McLusky:** Welcome along to the podcast. Russell. It is fantastic to have you here to have a bit of a chat. Could you tell us, first of all, just a little bit about who you are and what you do?

[00:02:33] **Russell Arnott:** Certainly. Well, thanks for having me on and I'll try not to be too self-indulgent on this bit. Like a lot of people in the research adjacent group, I wear many hats. So I have a background, I guess in ocean science communication. So I run a marine education non-profit called Incredible Oceans and we. I think, excel I've gotta say that, at taking ocean content to people that don't really care about it. I think a lot of the time ocean content is either really depressing or quite preachy. It's just like endless stuff about straws up whale noses and things like that, and it's like, oh, okay, that's not what got me into the ocean. So we do that. I think my research adjacent part of that is that we run training for environmental researchers. So I think with normal science communication, the focus is entirely on jargon busting and getting the audience to understand what you're saying. I think within an environmental context, it's really important to not only get it the information across, so an audience understands it, but emotes with it, like it, they causes some kind of emotional resonance. And if you include that, then they're more likely to, you know act on the information that you've given them. So that's, yeah, that's kind of what I do. And I also do a little bit of lecturing here and there. There we go. So yeah, that's me.

[00:04:08] **Sarah McLusky:** All sorts of stuff then around this area of how you communicate research well in a way that connects with the audience, I think is really important. And that then I guess, leads us on to our shared interest and the thing that we really wanted to talk about today, which is how we translate some of that knowledge about how to do communication well and how to connect with audiences, but how that is done through events and conferences.

[00:04:35] **Sarah McLusky:** So why is this an area that you are particularly interested in?

[00:04:40] **Russell Arnott:** I think having been in academia. I went to my first academic conference, which was the European Marine Science Educators Association, and it was in Valletta, in Malta, it was amazing. And I was like, whoa. And because everyone, there was basically a presenter and educator, and it was this really passionate group of people. It was just brilliant, and everyone there would stand up and they would do tell you amazing things. They didn't overstay their welcome. We had these great interactive sessions where people were learning from each other and contributing skills and and information and sharing best practice. And I was like, oh my God, this is brilliant. And then I went to a proper academic conference and I was like, oh this isn't like the EMSEA conference. This is horrible. This is awkward and weird and so boring and useless and expensive. And, and I'll be honest, I was like, it, it made me feel so thick. I was like, this is my, this is supposed to be my research area. And if I honestly. I didn't understand what 90% of people are saying on the stage or why, why, what is this space? And it really made me feel, I think, quite othered and like academia and this conference space wasn't a place I was supposed to be. So I went from yay the EMSEA conference to, oh my God, no. What have I done?

[00:06:24] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, I've certainly had really similar experiences there where I've gone along to conferences and just been just overwhelmed by the amount of information, the detail, the, just too much to take in too many people, and then actually coming away from it wondering why I bothered.

[00:06:47] **Russell Arnott:** I mean, I also, I mean, again, this was, this was ridiculous that I did this. I, because I had no idea really. So I, I come from, I played in punk bands for years and I toured across Europe. And like for me, a conference in my head was like a gig. And I turned up, got a travel grant and I went to Portland in Oregon for the ocean science meeting. And I turned up and they said, I'm really sorry, we haven't got you, you're not registered to attend. I said, no, no, you don't understand. I'm speaking. 'cause I didn't, I didn't realize that like everyone there was speaking, but, and they,

[00:07:27] **Sarah McLusky:** Right.

[00:07:28] **Russell Arnott:** and,

[00:07:28] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:07:29] **Russell Arnott:** were like, no, no, no, that we don't care. And like, but I, I'm speaking and they were like, everyone's speaking and

[00:07:36] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:07:36] **Russell Arnott:** I was like, well, how much is it? And they were like \$550. I was like. I just had to pay to speak and I was like,

[00:07:47] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:07:47] **Russell Arnott:** I was shocked. I was shocked. But but that's, that's what conferences do.

[00:07:53] **Sarah McLusky:** Well, it's what conferences do and I think that it is that having organised conferences and events, you know, to some extent that is what they cost to run. If you want a nice venue and you want nice catering and you know, all that sort of stuff, that kind of is

what they cost to run. But I think the main point here is that they don't always feel like good value for money, do they?

[00:08:16] **Sarah McLusky:** That's the thing and, and especially as you say, when people are paying to talk, but then often, that's one of the challenges about them is that people won't even get permission from their organisation to attend unless they're speaking. So that's a big issue as well, and it's why you get so many talks and so many posters and so much information crammed in.

[00:08:39] **Sarah McLusky:** It's for people to justify the reason that they're in the room. But then it presents such a fantastic opportunity because. You've got all of the experts, like you say, the the, you go to these and you're like, well, this is my area of expertise. These are in theory, these are my people. And I don't feel like we make the most of having all those people in the same place at the same time.

[00:09:04] **Russell Arnott:** No and I think because, I mean, it's interesting with academics because if you give them five minutes to talk, they'll get their point across. If you give them seven hours to talk, they'll just fill it. But you have the same takeaway. So think it's very passive, just kind of sitting there. Letting one person after another kind of speak at you. And then the question time, everyone's really nervous to put their hand up and ask a question publicly. Apart from that one guy who's always like, not so much a question, more of a comment, really, that guy, and you're like, oh God, and then he just tries to destroy the person on stage in front of the whole of, you know, your, your sector. And it's like, why are you doing this? Just have a chat with them afterwards, but there's so much like the awkward networking, like the forced networking sessions as well

[00:10:00] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:10:01] **Russell Arnott:** Where everyone just kind of stands awkwardly with a cocktail. I dunno

[00:10:06] **Sarah McLusky:** No, there's all kinds tricky things there going on, isn't there? There's the power dynamics, like you say, with the kind of Q and A and the power dynamics implicit in who gets to speak on the stage and who doesn't. And then, you know, I don't know about you, but I virtually never ask questions, partly because the intimidation of putting your hand up in front of everybody and potentially saying something that everybody in your head, you're always thinking, well everybody else knows, surely everybody else knows the answer to this and I'm the only one who didn't get it. Partly that, but also partly 'cause sometimes I need a bit of time to process the information or if I just had the chance to chat about it and then I could formulate questions. So I think some of that structure there is really problematic and the power dynamics and things that it sets up, but also the, or like you say, the networking. I think, we'll maybe I'll maybe park that for now and we'll come back to that later. But one of the, the things that's coming up here, and I think it's really relevant to both of us, is that that sense of just having people on the stage and them passively just throwing information at you just isn't good from a learning and education perspective.

[00:11:21] **Sarah McLusky:** And that's something that both you and I have, that's the route that we've come through. I did years working in kind of STEM education and running events for schools and helping researchers to communicate their research to young people, but then also, I was actually a lecturer for seven years as well.

[00:11:38] **Sarah McLusky:** So we've both trained as teachers so we know how to structure information and how to communicate information so that people can actually take it in, and I think that's something that's missing a bit as well, isn't it?

[00:11:54] **Russell Arnott:** Massively I mean, being within the ocean education world, the conferences that I tend to go to talk about how people learn of different ages, how different people absorb information. And it's almost like when you get into the academic world, everyone's like pedagogy. That's not for us because we're academics. We are above this and we are so intelligent that we learn in a completely different way to all the other people. So all of this pedagogical research and everything, I don't need to apply it to you. I can talk about it, but it could just go completely out the window. I mean, I think, what is it, the average person doesn't take in information after 20 minutes, so I'm like, why have we got these, even in a university setting these hour long lectures. I was a secondary school science teacher for the best part of 10 years, and you structure it and you have like, right, I've got a starter. And then we get up and we do an activity. And then I want to test that you've understood the information I've told you or the experiment that we've done with a little wrap up at the end.

[00:13:01] **Russell Arnott:** And it's, it's paced and everything. And sitting in a conference hall, you know, with no windows and over air conditioned and strip lighting and just being spoken at after one, after the another with these intense dense talks. You're like, what? How? Who decided that this was the format?

[00:13:23] **Sarah McLusky:** I think you do wonder sometimes 'cause yeah, like you, when I was, when I was trained as a teacher, we were told you never talk for more than 10 minutes. And then you break up with something, and when I talk to academics about this, sometimes I get that reaction of like, you say, well, we are not kids. So that doesn't apply to us, but I think it just applies to human beings. That's what, to me, is so important. And yes, maybe you, you take things, you know, as a communication specialist, it's always about the audience and it's always about what does that audience need? So when I say you don't talk for more than 10 minutes, maybe where you break it up is you show a video rather than talking, or you ask a question and you know, get some feedback from the audience.

[00:14:04] **Sarah McLusky:** It doesn't need to be the same kinds of activities that you would do in education, but the principle is the same, that people just can't absorb constant information, information, information, and then they go away. And I think it's always the case. I, I'm, I'd be interested to know if you've had the same experience, but when I go away from a conference I might remember little snippets and there might be certain things that I think, oh, I want to go away and look that up. But that's really all you're doing is you're just planting that little seed and then giving people maybe something they want to go and look up afterwards. Those people are not taking that information in in the moment.

[00:14:44] **Russell Arnott:** I think my main thing don't like about the format is that you have this audience of people with an amazing experience, amazing knowledge and skills, but the, the onus is put entirely on the person on stage as being like the expert and everyone in the audience is kind of dismissed I'm like, you've brought all these people together. It's such a waste of time. Like if you're not gonna get them to actually talk or learn from each other. I think conferences, they're so stuck in their ways that people are like, this is just how it is and you can't see anything else.

[00:15:27] **Sarah McLusky:** So I've got some thoughts on why we've got stuck in this way of doing things, but I'd be interested to hear what you think about it. How have we ended up here?

[00:15:37] **Russell Arnott:** I've seen how conferences are organised, having been in academia and it's literally a PhD supervisor walks into the office and goes, you two are organising the conference and they're like, huh, what do I need to do? Well, you need to get a tote bag completely covered in bad logos, and you need to put a pen in the tote bag, and we need to have a big meal and you need to get, get sticky pads for big posters and and you need to book some lecture theaters so everyone can talk and it's just that. It's like lowest common denominator. I pass the baton over, I'm giving it to people who, who aren't events experts or specialists, and they're told this is how I have to do it. And the system just perpetuates.

[00:16:32] **Sarah McLusky:** I think that is so true, and I think that it is, or when they do get somebody else in to organise it, it's often a pretty low grade admin assistant, essentially, and they'll be tasked with something like, you know, booking the hotel and booking the catering and you know, all that sort of thing. Maybe liaising with the speakers, and that is a really, really important work. So I'm not in any way dismissing that. A lot of that stuff is the absolute bedrock to running a successful event. But often those people, because as I say, they're usually on a pretty low pay grade. And then there's also this power dynamic again. So they either don't have the experience or they don't have the authority to put their hand up and say. Why are we doing it this way? You know, couldn't, couldn't we be doing something different? And I think there's this pervasive expectation that people think until they've done it. Think organising events is easy. They think, you know, you just book a room and people turn up. And that's it. But it's not, and I've been doing this stuff now for over 30 years really and, and it's a real skill, and it's not just about, yes, there's the logistics, but there's also essentially the psychology behind what you do and the decisions that you make and the ways that you put people together.

[00:18:01] **Sarah McLusky:** And some of that comes from my experience of working in education. Some of it comes from my experience of working in academia and seeing how people interact with each other and bringing all of that stuff together is the way that you deliver an amazing event. You know, some of the things that I've done over the years, like the biggest one that I did was 6,000 kids over the course of like four days, like over a thousand kids coming in each day, like all these buses lined up. And a lot of people would take something like, I know other people who've run similar events and all they'll do is just get a big hall and just put all the kids in there and have loads of stands.

[00:18:43] **Sarah McLusky:** But the thing is. I know that that actually doesn't, people don't learn very much from that. So even though it was harder work, my approach is like, no, we give them, we give them a bit of variety and we'll have like a kind of show and then we'll have some little workshops. And it was really important to me that we give them a variety of experience because everybody learns differently. And when we think about accessibility, it's not just about having, you know, lifts to get into the building and not having stairs. It's thinking about all the different ways that people learn. And so all of that experience is what you need to pull together to actually do an event that feels exciting and special and genuinely connecting people. And, and I think the people that are currently organising conferences, it's not their fault, but they just don't have that breadth of understanding of what goes into it.

[00:19:39] **Russell Arnott:** Exactly, and I, not going to name the conference or the experience which I had over summer. But it was, it was a long experience. That was two weeks. Two weeks.

It wasn't your normal thing. It was 120 people assembled from 40 different countries, and it was absolutely awful. It like, I cried four times.

[00:20:09] **Russell Arnott:** It was, it was painful. There was no opportunity to kind of interact or learn from any of the others. We were treated completely like children, I had an intervention with the conference organisers and it was like, we are not children like I'm a university lecturer. Like please let me help with this I, I was, yeah, I was just absolutely flabbergasted.

[00:20:36] **Russell Arnott:** And when it did finally fall to pieces, like a couple of days before the end, because they hadn't done any kind of group cohesion or anything like that. One of the organisers, I saw her and she had her head in her hands, and she was like, oh, you know, I'm a researcher. I'm not an events organiser. You know, I didn't think it would be this hard.

[00:21:00] **Russell Arnott:** And I'm like, yeah, it is. What did you think? What did you think you were gonna get this wad, wad of money, assemble these people, fly them across, put them in a hotel and just speak at them and not do anything else for two weeks.

[00:21:16] **Sarah McLusky:** Is, I mean, that is an incredible scenario to and, and such a, oh, when you add up, it's not just the cost of running the conference, but it's the cost of those people's time. It's the cost of the transport costs, the accommodation costs, all of that. And then, I mean, I feel so sorry for that event organiser but that's one of the problems is people don't know that until they're in it and she probably never gonna want to do that again. She's gonna like run screaming in the other direction. And then that's how we don't get things getting better either, is because people, like you say, it might be a PhD student or somebody, they just tick that box and move on.

[00:21:59] **Sarah McLusky:** Another thing that happens a lot of the time as well is I think that these, the really big conferences are outsourced to external companies. And those external companies often just have a vested interest to get it done as quickly and efficiently as possible. And so for them, they just follow, like, this is the template, we follow the template, tick all the boxes, and then it's done. And because for them, the outcome is deliver a conference. They're not incentivized to encourage people to have those conversations, for people to go away feeling, you know, that they've made some connections and it's been a good use of their time. That's not baked into their contract and why they're there.

[00:22:37] **Russell Arnott:** Yeah, and I, I guess a bit of me feels that now as a conference attendee, I, I am, when I turn up, I'm expecting this passive experience, and I think maybe people are, well, what, what? What could you do? You want it to be all kind of bells and whistles and like putting people outside their comfort zones and things like, you want to be just like, oh, we're so out of the box. Let's like, well, what? Go on then. It's very easy for you guys to sit there and slag off the conference format, but like. Well, what are you gonna do? And then it's like, okay, you've got these academics and let's face it, compared to the general public, I would say academics are probably slightly more introverted, maybe slightly more on the spectrum.

[00:23:26] **Russell Arnott:** So putting people into uncomfortable situations, I think people are like, well, I don't wanna do that with this crowd. Let's not stress test the system or try and push people outside their comfort zones. Let's just keep doing it because the audience is expecting this as well, this kind of very passive experience.

[00:23:45] **Russell Arnott:** So

[00:23:46] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, but I think that leads us on really nicely though to one of the reasons that we wanted to have this conversation and put it out into the world is that, that we've got some ideas about how we could do things differently.

[00:23:58] **Russell Arnott:** Yes.

[00:24:00] **Sarah McLusky:** and, and as you say, doing things differently in a way that is helpful and that maybe pushes people out of their comfort zone a little bit, but not too much, too quickly.

[00:24:15] **Sarah McLusky:** And some of those things I think are very simple. You could take them all the way up to completely redesigning conferences, but yeah. What are some of your thoughts about how we could be doing things better?

[00:24:26] **Russell Arnott:** I think that needs to be a complete shift as the, from the conference attendee being a passive recipient of information to being an active participant in the community and in the conference. And I think this idea of pushing people outside of their comfort zones. I think if you let people know what to expect and what their expectation is when they're coming to this conference. It's not like they're being sprung, like, okay, I want you to stand up and give a five minute dance interpretation of your research. You know, it's not gonna be something like that. Yeah. So I think

[00:25:06] **Sarah McLusky:** I do know some people have done that though, and they've made some very cool events, but that's an entirely different side of things.

[00:25:12] **Russell Arnott:** you know what I mean? It's like, like putting people on the spot isn't, isn't what this

[00:25:16] **Sarah McLusky:** Absolutely.

[00:25:17] **Russell Arnott:** about

[00:25:17] **Sarah McLusky:** Definitely not.

[00:25:18] **Russell Arnott:** it's, it's like in life you get out what you put in. I think should be more of a focus on the attendees as participants within a community bringing skills, knowledge, and experience to share. And the conferences that I've seen that have worked really well in terms of interactions are where people are encouraged to submit information to an online portal or an app or a webpage where you can see who's gonna be there. You can filter it by interests and people can basically say, this is what I'm really good at and I'm happy to talk about, or happy to share. And I'm interested in meeting people that are able to do this or have conversations in and around that. So. Doing that small bit of prep in advance to kind of pave the way, to smooth the way and facilitate interactions, skill, knowledge exchanges, I think is really simple and really effective.

[00:26:16] **Russell Arnott:** But that's, I think, is this, the key is that the conference participant shouldn't be a passive. They should be an active contributor to the community and to the event.

[00:26:28] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. And I, I really hope that that making people feel like more like participants rather than audience members can also help to shift some of that dynamic as well. 'cause as you say, people often go in just, you know, oh, clinging on for dear life. Like, get through this presentation or, or get through this poster.

[00:26:50] **Sarah McLusky:** And it, it is often that sense of this is something that I have to do to tick that box on my CV or, you know, show my research with the world and I feel that people often don't show up to conferences feeling very. Like expecting very much from them, you know? But I think as you say, some of that, just a little bit of prep work before, I mean, recently for an event I was sent a delegate list beforehand, and it's the first time in years that I've been sent a delegate list.

[00:27:22] **Sarah McLusky:** And I had forgotten what a gift that was because I knew that there were gonna be a lot of people at this event that I hadn't met in person that I knew, maybe from LinkedIn or, you know, we connected over something else. We had, you know, mutual connections in common, but I hadn't met them in person before.

[00:27:39] **Sarah McLusky:** So having that list meant that I could go and look them up on, on LinkedIn before, remind myself what they looked like. And just be like, right, okay, yeah, I, I want to talk to them. Now. Fortunately, that was a, a small event, so it was really easy to find people. But another thing I found is recently I went to a really big conference where, again, I knew there were lots of people in the room that I knew in some respect, but hadn't met in person.

[00:28:05] **Sarah McLusky:** At the end of the day, I hadn't managed to speak to any of them because I couldn't find them because it was a really big conference and there was no structured, you know, there was no kind of way to help people to network, to find people, like you say, maybe to have small group conversations.

[00:28:24] **Sarah McLusky:** Even just stuff like, some of the things that I feel would make such big difference are really small, like just making the coffee breaks longer, making the talks shorter. Maybe after a talk you have people just spend a couple of minutes talking to the person sitting next to them about the talk and about what they heard, and then maybe that gives people an opportunity to frame questions.

[00:28:47] **Sarah McLusky:** Some of this stuff is so, you know, like you say, we're not talking about interpretive dance or, you know, research based standup comedy or something. It's, it's just making a little bit more room for connection and conversation I think just makes such a massive difference.

[00:29:07] **Russell Arnott:** I wanna walk away with having learnt something properly or, or having found a, like a collaborator that I'll be able to, and not just someone like, oh, I've got a business card. I'll follow up with like an, an email. Actually have a connection with someone. Like, okay, this is great.

[00:29:23] **Russell Arnott:** We're gonna walk away from this and something is gonna happen, something's gonna gonna get done. I think one of the most impactful things, again, going back to the EMSEA conference was one of the founders of it, Peter Todenham, he ran this thing called open space where you just have a map of the conference and you've got different tables or different rooms, and if you want to talk about something, you write it on a post-it note and you slap it on the room and everyone goes to that room who's interested to talk about that thing. If you, if you suggested the session, you make notes and you give it back to the conference organisers, and then they decide the direction of the subsequent days, I think. I think there's this idea that, okay, well what I'm being lazy as a conference organiser if every moment isn't filled with something, and that actually, if it is a bit more flexible and a bit more fluid, and I can allow as things pop up or people want to talk about something or within our community, we could be adaptive to be able to kind of deal with that. And similarly with open space, it's great if you

decide I want to talk about this, you go to your room and no-one else is there. You clearly know that this thing that you've proposed isn't in of interest to your community. So you're

[00:30:45] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:30:46] **Russell Arnott:** there we go. And you know, it's a great rule. You know, you can be active within those sessions. You can be a passive butterfly and flit around them all. But the rule is you only stay if you are contributing actively, or you are learning something. And if you're doing neither of those things and none of the sessions that are proposed are of interest to you, then just go check your emails.

[00:31:06] **Russell Arnott:** No one cares. You know? So there you go. It's, it's, but again, if you were like to propose that and people are like, oh, what? What's the conference agenda? And you sent it through and you were just. What? Well these guys are lazy. What you, you expect me to give up a day of my time for like open-ended chat?

[00:31:27] **Russell Arnott:** And it's like, well, yeah, but trust in us as the organisers that this isn't us being lazy, that this is gonna be facilitated and that this is going to be much more interesting, impactful, and you are gonna get much more out of it than the normal conference experience. So.

[00:31:47] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, I think that that sense that it is often, I often say that it's the content that gets people through the door, so that's where, like you say, who are the speakers and what's the topics and that sort of thing. So it's finding that balance, isn't it, between making people feel this is something worth showing up for and then giving them what they really want or what they really need.

[00:32:07] **Sarah McLusky:** I mean, I think not just with the fact of, you know, now the, the push for interdisciplinary, interdisciplinary collaboration and the increase in hybrid working and you know, there's this sense that when we do actually get people together in a room, we need to make really good use of that time. So I think we've set out there all these ideas and things we've got and so we are pulling those ideas together into a bit of an offer for any conference organisers. So if there are people out there listening, thinking, yeah, I, I've been to those conferences that were, you know, grim. I want to do things a little bit differently. What can we offer to help?

[00:32:55] **Russell Arnott:** Can we offer? Well, I think that we both have a lot of event organisation experience. We have been to our fair share of really bad conferences from across different, different areas. And I think we've been to conferences that have tried something a little bit interesting and have developed between us a little bit of a toolbox, which we think is applicable across all different types of conference. It not just our own specialists. So I know I started at the beginning talking about ocean stuff, you know, the, the stuff which we are proposing isn't is for any conference. so we have put together a thing, a thing, a collaboration,

[00:33:44] **Sarah McLusky:** A thing? a collaboration. Yeah.

[00:33:46] **Russell Arnott:** Which we are calling Re:Conference because we want to reimagine, rethink, redo the conference format. and yeah, if you are interested in working with me and Sarah to improve the conference experience and we have a tiered approach depending on what your budget or, how much trust you wanna place in us. But we have a website, which is re-conference.org, where you can go on there and you can see who we are and what we are proposing. And yeah, we look forward to hearing from you

[00:34:25] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Yeah, so I'll put the link to the conference webpage in the show notes so people can find it there. We've discovered not the easiest thing to Google, but you'll be able to find either me or Russell as well, and you can get in touch with us that way. But some of the things that we're thinking of that we could offer is some of the things that I've found that can make the biggest difference. Basic level is you can just come to us with your conference agenda and what you want to get out of the conference and we can give you some suggestions. And as I say, it might be some of just those small tweaks, like making the breaks longer.

[00:35:03] **Sarah McLusky:** Having maybe just one session that isn't quite so structured where you have a bit more discussion. Maybe it's sending out the delegate list in advance, or having some kind of online forum that goes along. You know, so there's little things that you can do around a workshop or a conference to, to make a big difference actually to the experience of the attendees.

[00:35:23] **Sarah McLusky:** So you can come along and we can give you that advice there. Or you can get me and or Russell to come along to your event and run some sessions for you. And that might be helping to do some facilitated networking that doesn't feel awkward and cringy and actually gets people having natural conversations and finding the people that they are interested in connecting with.

[00:35:47] **Sarah McLusky:** We can do that. We can run some of these open space type, discussion centered kind of activities we can help to, get people out of the conference room if that's what you want to do. You know, it's well known that sometimes you have the best conversations when you're not face-to-face with somebody and when actually you're maybe doing something a bit more relaxed.

[00:36:07] **Sarah McLusky:** So we can help to organise those things as well. But yeah all sorts of things that help to shift the focus from being presentation centered, information centered to being a bit more people centered, and that is very much what we want to offer out there into the world,

[00:36:27] **Russell Arnott:** I think this is really important, like really important for, for science in particular, because at the moment I feel that this is a bottleneck in scientific advancement, in knowledge exchange, skill exchange, you want. You are there, like the stuff that I'm involved with often is trying to save the ocean, trying to deal with climate change, these big issues, and if people aren't collaborating as well as they can, if people aren't sharing knowledge and information and skills as well as they can, then. You know, we are stalling the system.

[00:37:04] **Russell Arnott:** The system is, isn't progressing as quickly as it should be. So I think this is one of the reasons that we're, I feel a slight desperation about trying to do this and help people come together for, for the good of humanity. And I think all this is what all science, tech, everything is, is aiming to do so, and the conferences are, are a one chance a year where everyone comes together to talk about or should talk about the big issues and it's not happening. So there's a slight kind of urgency I think, in terms of what I'm trying, what we are trying to achieve. So yeah, there we are that get off my podium.

[00:37:52] **Sarah McLusky:** We need to get you on your soapbox there. Oh, fantastic. Well thank you so much Russell, for coming along. For sharing your insights into conferences and yeah, and for it should be said, Russell is kind of the, the origin of this and managed to drag me into this scheme. But I think between us, we have, as you say, got a lot to offer and I think it, I think

people might be surprised at how easy it is to make a really big difference to the experience to people in conferences. So yeah, come and come and have a chat.

[00:38:30] **Russell Arnott:** Don't say that. We have to make it like it's really difficult and people have to hire us. To be fair, we have shared quite a lot of ideas on the podcast, so there we go. Yeah.

[00:38:40] **Sarah McLusky:** Yes. Yeah. Well, I think it's, as you say, if our mission is to actually make things better. Then there's more, there's more conferences out there, and then we can possibly help. So yeah, we need to get the word out.

[00:38:57] **Russell Arnott:** This is very true. Make your conferences better everyone! Make them better!

[00:39:04] **Sarah McLusky:** Thanks for listening to Research Adjacent. If you're listening in a podcast app, please check you're subscribed and then use the links in the episode description to find full show notes and to follow the podcast on LinkedIn or Instagram. You can also find all the links and other episodes at www.researchadjacent.com.

[00:39:22] **Sarah McLusky:** Research Adjacent is presented and produced by Sarah McLusky, and the theme music is by Lemon Music Studios on Pixabay and you, yes you, get a big gold star for listening right to the end. See you next time.