

From outrage to embedded: 25 years of impact with Sarah Morton

(Research Adjacent, Episode 86)

Sarah Morton reflects on a career spent helping researchers and research to make a difference

<https://researchadjacent.com/sarah-morton-episode-86/>



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[00:00:19] **Sarah Morton:** Planning for impact, opportunities for reflection and learning and feedback, and being able to say something over time about what difference you made. Those are things that apply, whether you're a researcher trying to make a difference or a charity trying to make a difference, or a public sector team trying to make a difference.

[00:00:36] **Sarah Morton:** But I just think my magic wand would be that research impact is seen as a third pillar

[00:00:44] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello there. I'm Sarah McLusky and this is Research Adjacent.

[00:00:51] **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.

[00:01:07] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello and welcome to another episode of Research Adjacent. First up, apologies for the husky voice. I have succumbed to laryngitis that is doing the rounds, but fortunately I don't feel as bad as I sound.

[00:01:19] **Sarah McLusky:** If you're listening to this episode near its release date, I have a couple of happenings to share with you.

[00:01:23] **Sarah McLusky:** First up is a webinar called Getting Started as a Research Adjacent Freelancer, which is on Monday the 23rd of February at 4:30 PM UK time. This is aimed at people who have recently become self-employed and are trying to navigate this weird and wonderful space. Trust me, you don't have to do it alone. I'll have all sorts of insights to share from my own experience and that of other freelancers who are part of the research adjacent community.

[00:01:52] **Sarah McLusky:** Another thing that you can't do alone is networking, and our second event is an opportunity to gather in person, which is very exciting. Genuinely, I'm very excited about it. It is an after work networking event in Manchester on Thursday the 12th of March. I'll be facilitating to make sure that you get to meet lots of new people and it is open to everyone regardless of whether you are employed or self-employed, and no matter what kind of organization you work for. I will put links to sign up for both events in the show notes, and I hope that I get to meet you at one of them.

[00:02:25] **Sarah McLusky:** So now on with today's show this week I am talking to impact consultant Sarah Morton. Now Sarah describes herself as the granny of impact, even though she's about the same age as me, so I'm not sure how I feel about that, because she started working in and around knowledge exchange and impact before it was even really a thing. It means that she is well placed to make sense of how impact has evolved over the past 20 years from something that incited outrage and petitions when it was first announced to the more embedded approach that we have now. This deep understanding of impact led Sarah to set up her own business initially as matter of focus and now as Capture Impact to help researchers understand plan for and track research impact.

[00:03:08] **Sarah McLusky:** Listen on to hear Sarah's story.

[00:03:11] **Sarah McLusky:** Welcome along to the podcast, Sarah from another Sarah. Always love to meet another one. Tell us a bit about who you are and what you do.

[00:03:20] **Sarah Morton:** Thanks Sarah. It's really nice to be invited to have a chat with another Sarah. I am Sarah Morton. I've just set up a consultancy called Capture Impact. I've been working around the impact agenda since 2001 in various roles, but in particular my specialism has become impact assessment or trying to understand the processes of research impact and I suppose I'm particularly interested in ways that we can plan for, do research impact work really well and get feedback so that we can improve, but also that helps us tell the story of the difference we make.

[00:04:00] **Sarah Morton:** And I work not just around research. I also work a little bit with charities and public sector organisations who also want to understand, improve their impact, their data for impact, their strategies around impact. And I do a little bit of mentoring as well around the impact agenda in and outside universities.

[00:04:20] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Lots to dig into there. So you've said that you've been involved with this since 2001 now I was vaguely in this world in 2001, but I wasn't aware of the term impact until much later. Yeah. So maybe, yeah. Tell us a bit about the story of how we've ended up where we are now.

[00:04:38] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah. So I sometimes call myself the granny of research impact. That makes you a granny of research impact as well. I dunno how you feel about that. So I took a job in 2001, a brand new research centre at the University of Edinburgh, but with partners at other Scottish universities. And the context was the new Scottish Parliament and they were the first social scientists to get a grant, which had up to that point had been really mainly won by scientists who had some sort of widget that they wanted to collaborate on. So a group of researchers all working around families and relationships across the life course got together and applied for one of these grants so that they could create better links between research policy and practice.

[00:05:19] **Sarah Morton:** And I saw this job advertised and I thought, oh, this job has my name on it because at that point. I, my background was in the voluntary sector. I, my, I did I did sociology at university, but then I did community education, really focusing on adult education. And I'd been working in mainly in intermediary bodies actually, I was the first worker for a few different intermediary bodies, but before I saw that job I'd been working in the national, a national organisation called Children in Scotland, whose job is to develop the agenda around children and families. And I'd been working on a job around children and HIV, which was very topical at that point in time in Edinburgh particularly.

[00:05:58] **Sarah Morton:** And I'd also been teaching at the Open University a family policy course. So seeing this job, which was about linking research with policy and practice around families and relationships, I was like, oh, this is a thing I know quite a lot about. And it was a kind of weird mixture really, because, I dunno, it was just a bit of serendipity.

[00:06:18] **Sarah Morton:** But I remember going to the interview. It was a massive interview panel. I think it was eight people and thinking, oh, I know all this stuff that they don't know. Because I knew all the organisations in the third sector in Scotland, I knew all the local authorities. Like I knew the sector outside the university that was relevant to this new research centre, and they really didn't.

[00:06:37] **Sarah Morton:** It was one of the most knowledgeable times. One of the times I felt more knowledgeable than any other point in my life. 'cause I was like, oh yeah, I have stuff they really need to know here. So that was how it started off and I was called a research liaison officer. So we didn't have, like you said, we didn't have the language of impact, didn't really have the language of knowledge exchange.

[00:06:56] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah. There was a bit of knowledge transfer going on, but that was very much based on the idea that universities have a thing that they're gonna share with the external world. And there was a bit of science communication going on. But there was very much like training students to go into schools, it wasn't really, or, and the science festival of course.

[00:07:16] **Sarah Morton:** It felt like it, it was a very kind of new area of work at that point in time. But yeah, also a great opportunity. New Scottish Parliament, brand new civil servants, brand new ministers, parliamentarians, all going, oh, what are we gonna do now?

[00:07:30] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, really interesting point in time to come into it.

[00:07:33] **Sarah McLusky:** And then, so you say at that point in time we didn't use the language, like impact wasn't something that's used. Knowledge exchange wasn't even something that was used. But do you think that work that you did there then laid the foundations, some of the foundations for what we now understand as knowledge exchange and impact?

[00:07:53] **Sarah Morton:** I think in some ways, yes. So I started that job in 2001 and I stayed there till 2017 in various roles in the university. Not the same job, but I, in 2008 I did what I call my midlife PhD, because I suppose I was working there, so it ended up. We had a little team of people working at that research centre with all of these researchers, not just at the University of Edinburgh elsewhere.

[00:08:17] **Sarah Morton:** So an events person, a designer who did a newsletter. It started off with just me. I was like laying out a kind of policy briefing using a desktop publishing tool, you know, so it was, it was very primitive. And then we also had some knowledge exchange staff that came on particular projects. So we ended up being a little team and I suppose by the time I got to 2008, I'd been there for quite a while and I was like, so I was I'd become a director of the research centre, but I was like okay, it's, it's quite good fun doing all this stuff and getting researchers to go and talk to government or, I dunno, we did quite a lot of work with like people with lived experience and representing their views and, we had I was gonna say a webinar series, but no, a seminar series. People used to come to the door

[00:08:59] **Sarah McLusky:** in real par, in real life yeah, yeah,

[00:09:00] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah, where social workers would come and researchers would come, and people from the government or public agencies would all come and, to hear about new research, and talk about new research.

[00:09:10] **Sarah Morton:** It was very vibrant and it was, it did really well. But we were quite far ahead of the impact agenda as we would now think about it. So in 2008, I was like, this is good, but like I can't quite see what's gonna happen next. And I decided to do a PhD partly to consolidate my learning, but also 'cause I realised career wise there was a bit of a, there is a block within the university system around progression if you've not got a PhD.

[00:09:36] **Sarah Morton:** And I was on an administrative contract until right near the end, before I left. It's, it was quite random where knowledge exchange people were on administrative or academic tracks. It just really varied and so yeah, so I decided, okay, let's do a PhD and then I was doing the PhD in what is research impact and how can it be assessed in, so 2008 to 2012. So I think REF impact got announced halfway through 2010.

[00:10:05] **Sarah McLusky:** I was gonna say my, in my head impact became a thing around about 2010. I couldn't put an absolute date on it. Yeah, I think it, but it was, but it felt like it was around then. Yeah.

[00:10:15] **Sarah Morton:** So I was like, oh, this is interesting. I went to a conference in London where it was announced by, I'm trying to think who it would've been. Anyway, it was announced by one of the, one of the research bodies and Research England, I think probably, or or maybe Research UK Anyway and people were absolutely outraged at this idea of impact. There was a petition made by the union called Save Our Research.

[00:10:39] **Sarah McLusky:** Oh goodness.

[00:10:39] **Sarah Morton:** And people in the room where it was announced, people were actually shouting about it. They were so upset. And so I was, it was quite weird for me because I was used to working with researchers who thought impact was important in my role. Yeah. And I was sitting there going, oh okay.

[00:10:54] **Sarah Morton:** So people really worried about this. But, 'cause I wasn't at all worried. I thought we have the REF. The REF is a bit of a. It's so heavy on publications, it skews the agenda towards that. To me it was more like a balancing measure than anything else. Yeah.

[00:11:07] **Sarah Morton:** But, and as we know, everyone accepts it now, but at the time it was pretty controversial.

[00:11:11] **Sarah Morton:** So by the time then I finished writing my PhD in 2012. Of course, REF 2014 was pretty much coming down the line quite fast, and I got quite involved in helping people with impact case studies at the University of Edinburgh mainly a little bit elsewhere, but yeah. So it all trundled into this whole new world then.

[00:11:31] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. So what were some of the big objections that people had to impact in the beginning?

[00:11:35] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah, so some of the things you still hear a little bit now, like, how on earth could I have impact? My job is to research. It's not up to, impact is what other people do. So that kind of idea that there should be a real separation between research thinking and action and the government or actors in the social world. And then a bit of, yeah so that's the kind of, that's the kind of existential objection. And then if you're gonna introduce a measure and you're gonna force people to have impact, you are going to ruin research because then the only thing people will ever pursue is what they think the government wants.

[00:12:11] **Sarah Morton:** It was very. It was very kind of black and white thinking about it. And I think that, there were lots of, there always have been lots of really impactful researchers haven't there who worked with policy, influenced practice, whatever else they've done, influenced public debate, all of these things, and.

[00:12:28] **Sarah Morton:** It was a bit of an overreaction and also at that point they didn't know, impact case studies is not every single member of staff. All of those nuances that came in later, I think made people a little happier, but people were generally not that happy all the way up to 2014.

[00:12:42] **Sarah Morton:** It was only after the fact. Then they were like, oh look, we've had all this impact. We can put it on our website, doesn't it make us look good?

[00:12:48] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Which is interesting. The reason I ask is I think it's really interesting parallels with the conversation that's been happening literally in the last week or two around a certain amount of outrage, I think there definitely is in some parts about the inclusion of culture or whatever strategy, whatever they've decided to call it, metrics in the REF. So it's interesting to see the parallels and then also to see, as you say, once the dust settled and it's clear what's expected or what's not expected, how people then start to perceive that it can be a good thing.

[00:13:25] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, but

[00:13:26] **Sarah Morton:** People don't like change, do they? I was thinking about this the other day with the smoking ban, right up until the day the smoking ban came in. People are like, oh, it's going to ruin pubs forever and there's gonna be all this devastation. Almost the next day no one really cared. It was quite stark. So people don't like change, do they? And yeah. And in the end, the REF is an accountability exercise and I feel like it does drive the agenda more than it should. And apparently academics are more susceptible to these government accountability exercises than other professions.

[00:13:56] **Sarah Morton:** Other professions are a bit like, oh yeah, that's the government thing. Let's just game it as much as we can and get on with our real job. Whereas I feel, I think academics are maybe they're people who are used to doing well in tests. So they see it as a test. They're like, oh, we must do our best in the test.

[00:14:12] **Sarah McLusky:** It's interesting. I've often had that thought about, yeah, the the whole culture of academia and everything like that is this is a group of people who have always come top of the class for everything. Yeah. Because otherwise they wouldn't be where they are. And yeah, sometimes the vulnerabilities that come with having to learn something new or be. Not, I don't mean to be bad at it 'cause everybody's bad at something when they first do it. Yeah. But to have to learn something new. Have to learn something

[00:14:36] **Sarah Morton:** or change their kind of formula if you like. 'cause they've learned a formula that has made them succeed in a very particular way. And basically all of these things are saying, actually that formula isn't completely fair and we want to look at it a little bit more of a rounded way. And then they're like, oh, but no, 'cause we are, we're really good at this formula. So it's yeah. It's not surprising.

[00:14:58] **Sarah McLusky:** Interesting. Oh, but yeah so you did say that of the work that you don't just look at impact in academia, but also you've worked with like charities and other types of organisations. So how do they approach thinking about, you know, do they use the same terminology or do they think about things differently?

[00:15:18] **Sarah Morton:** The whole terminology thing is really fascinating because whether you talk about impact or outcomes, it depends a lot on, it's just a sector thing. We found, because for the last seven or eight years, I was working with my colleague, Ailsa Cook at a Matter of Focus, and we were working right across international development universities, public sector organisations, charities, and the only thing we could ever find was it was just a sector preference.

[00:15:42] **Sarah Morton:** So if you're in health and social care, you probably talk about outcomes. If you're international development, you might talk about outcomes and impact. If you're in the public sector you might talk about impact. A lot of charities want to talk about impact.

[00:15:56] **Sarah Morton:** I think I, I'm sorry, I'm not very well informed about this, but there's a new thing coming to the charity regulations in England where people have to talk about impact.

[00:16:04] **Sarah Morton:** So it is it's very slippery. It's not very well defined. And it's very interesting when you spend your time going between all these organisations because the challenges are all the same. Like people are like, oh, I've got a track impact, but I don't really know what it is. So you can't track something until you've really clearly defined it. So a lot of the work, I've done over the years and still do with people is helping them think, what actually is it?

[00:16:28] **Sarah Morton:** And how are we gonna approach it as an organisation? How can we support it? And I think getting people to track impact just raises all these questions about strategy and the place in the institution and what support they can expect and all of those kind of questions. And that's the same whatever sector you're in.

[00:16:45] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. And do you find that whilst the terminology and things like that might change, you use the same methods and approaches and techniques and things with different

[00:16:54] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah. Yeah. We've developed a very particular, quite practical approach 'cause I suppose when I came to this thinking, trying to think about it in a little bit more of a kind of strategic and practical way through my PhD, I was someone whose job was Director of Knowledge Exchange.

[00:17:11] **Sarah Morton:** Like my job was not impact assessor. And so I so I was thinking about it very much as, okay, well I really want to know that when I do these things, they're the right things to do and they're making a difference and they're having an impact. 'cause in the end, the only reason I'm involved in any of this stuff is 'cause I think research should have an impact.

[00:17:28] **Sarah Morton:** We shouldn't spend lots and lots of public money on stuff that just is only for academic debate and never really benefits wider people. So you know, that's what I care about. So then I'd be like, okay, how can we know as a team of knowledge exchange people whether we're doing the right things, what the most effective things are, where should we put our resources?

[00:17:47] **Sarah Morton:** So I very much came to it like that. And it's not like you are gonna pay someone to come and be an impact evaluator for you, you need to have something that you can fit in with what you do in your job, which is what's happened to researchers more generally in the research impact agenda.

[00:18:02] **Sarah Morton:** So, you know, I wanted to develop a method that was really pragmatic, that helped planning for impact, that provided opportunities for learning and reflection. And that could be used for tracking impact. So the the kind of, it's based on contribution analysis, the way that I do that, but that is equally relevant, like planning for impact, opportunities for reflection and learning and feedback, and being able to say something over time about what difference you made.

[00:18:27] **Sarah Morton:** Those are things that apply, whether you're a researcher trying to make a difference or a charity trying to make a difference, or a public sector team trying to make a difference. The principles all apply and the methods applies. Yeah.

[00:18:40] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah it's, it really interesting to hear that the same concepts apply across different situations. I guess another thing that must apply across lots of different situations is that, as you say, you can plan for impact and you can take steps and you can capture things and reflect on it and so on, but it doesn't always go the way that you think it's gonna be. And so managing those expectations around impact must be challenging as well.

[00:19:07] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah, one of the things we developed, at Matter of Focus was getting people to tell success stories as a way of really thinking about how does this happen when it's working well? So we have a little framework that we get people to set out a theory of change with. So this what I developed off the back of my PhD, so getting people to say, actually, how does change really happen here? When it's working really well, what does it look like? Because

no one's hosting a policymaker breakfast because they just invented it today. They're doing it because they've seen someone else do it, or they've heard it's the right thing to do, or someone's wants them to do it, or there's always a reason.

[00:19:42] **Sarah Morton:** So everyone has a reason for doing the things they do, and it's really getting all of that out in the open in a very explicit way that gives you a way of then testing it. Saying, oh, is it working well or is it we want, is it what we thought? For an, for example when I was at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, we had a long-term collaboration with Childline Scotland and we did some research with them and it was very much partnership research.

[00:20:04] **Sarah Morton:** And someone from their team was on our research team, their policy officer, and we were sharing results of one particular part of bit of research we did, and we decided that directors of social work and education were really important to hear these results in the local authorities. So we're like how can we get them?

[00:20:22] **Sarah Morton:** So we designed this kind of prestigious event to try and get these heads of social work and education, and actually we got quite a lot of them. Good. But then we went, okay, how many did we get? How many did we not get? What should we do about the ones we didn't get? You are you're not just going, okay, we're gonna do this, and then we've done it and walk away.

[00:20:41] **Sarah Morton:** You're actually trying to build in a kind of way of thinking a bit more deeply about what went well, what didn't go well. Do we, did we get the sort of response we want? Do we need to do something else or have we missed people? Or whatever. So it's that really deliberate, plotting out what you think, what you hope's gonna happen, but then as it unfolds, testing it. And saying, oh has it happened? What went well, what didn't go well? And then how can you regroup if it didn't go well? And actually I've had a couple of other occasions that there was one time we presented some research that was received in a very hostile way. I won't go into the details, but I can if you want, but I think it's too long story. And so we did not get the reaction we'd hoped at all.

[00:21:21] **Sarah Morton:** And so then we were like, okay, right now what are we gonna do? And we actually had to go back to the drawing board and partner with some of these organisations who'd been really hostile and work out with them how can we change this?

[00:21:34] **Sarah Morton:** And what can we do together to make this, these messages more palatable? Because. They still were really important messages, but people didn't or weren't ready to hear them. So we'd made a load of assumptions and people were gonna go, oh yeah, great. We should really change this. And actually they didn't. They felt really criticized and they completely put their hackles up. So I think, yeah, tr just trying to be more reflective and really build in a sense of why we doing this and what do we hope is gonna happen and then is that what happens? Yeah. Is that what we can see? And if you haven't got any feedback your own observations, one form of feedback, but if you're not getting feedback from people, things can just die.

[00:22:10] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah. And then they're gone, yeah. And then you've not had an impact, yeah.

[00:22:14] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. It sounds very much though what you're talking about reminds me of when I used to do research though, and you know I do experiments and you'd try

something. Yeah. And if it works and then see if you get the result you expected and if you don't then you try something else and you keep working at it.

[00:22:30] **Sarah Morton:** And maybe the thing is that people are used to, if they're researchers, there're being a lot of scaffolding around that process. And when it comes to knowledge mobilisation. There's no scaffolding. Yeah. And people are just inventing it over and over again, even though we know quite a lot now about what's effective and what's not effective.

[00:22:45] **Sarah Morton:** And there has been quite a lot of research done into, how does it happen, how does impact happen and what goes on. But people feel they're in this kind of free for all, where they've just gotta make stuff up and just do things. And actually. The other thing that, that we, that in the work I do is getting people just to take a step back from that and go, okay, what would be the most effective strategy if I want to educate A&E nurses about a new whatever, then so rather than just launching off and doing the things they've always done, just really taking a step back and trying to strategise around what are the best methods for knowledge mobilisation, really. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:23:22] **Sarah McLusky:** Just that pause can make such a difference, can't it? Pausing, thinking, really thinking about why, that comes up for me so often when I'm talking about, just less big picture things, just communications and events and things. It's like, why are we doing this? What do you want to get out of it? And and then designing things around that rather than just doing, either doing something 'cause it seems like a good idea or doing it because that's how it's always been done.

[00:23:49] **Sarah McLusky:** So you've hinted at some of your journey. I wonder if we can maybe just piece together some of those bits and pieces. Yeah. So you spent a long time at this, I'm gonna probably say it wrong, but Centre for Children and Families. Yeah. So that research centre and then, yeah.

[00:24:04] **Sarah Morton:** So Centre for Research on Families and Relationships. Yeah. Yeah. And then I got a little bit more involved in, other parts of the bigger parts of the university, more a department level or institute level. And the thing is up to then, as I was saying, I, I worked in the voluntary sector when I was young. I knew, I had a lot of jobs where I was the first one. So I was the first person to the work on HIV and AIDS.

[00:24:28] **Sarah Morton:** It was trying to make links between adult HIV organisations and children's organisations. Non-specialist children organisations. And then I was the first worker for the Association of Chief Officers of Scottish Voluntary Organisations, which just changed its name. And I was the first worker for another intermediary.

[00:24:46] **Sarah Morton:** So I'd been in this space where I had quite a lot of room for action. And then when I started at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, no one talked about impact. No one else was doing my job. I completely got to do what I wanted to make it up. And but then as I progressed and we were chatting in our previous call about, it's actually really hard to progress in knowledge exchange, knowledge mobilisation, whatever you wanna call it, within an institution.

[00:25:10] **Sarah Morton:** I know this is still the case now. So I did get some promotions, but every promotion we had to argue for because if you're on an administrative track, it's all about how many people you manage and if you're on an academic track, it's all about your publications and grants. And of course I was somewhere in between those two things, but also it

wasn't really the people I directly managed, it was more about all of the external contacts and partnerships and all of those kind of things. So every time we would fail on the tick box exercise, but when we went to appeal and explain, they'd be, oh yeah, fine good. So it was quite a battle to really, it definitely felt it was quite hard to fit and especially when the union had a petition, save our research when they announced the impact agenda, it just made all people who had roles like mine think is this union even for us?

[00:25:56] **Sarah Morton:** 'Cause that's what our jobs were. So I got to a point where then, I was director for knowledge exchange for kind some bigger units and stuff, but I just, all I could see ahead of me was this massive great bureaucracy and I just thought, I can't, it doesn't suit my skillset and my orientation towards work to be just in a big bureaucracy playing the politics and everything being a little bit of a battle and especially in an area that wasn't well trodden 'cause it wasn't like there was an automatic way that you could progress. It was gonna have to be, every step of the way trying to redefine the space. And so at that point I decided to, a few things happened that, and then I'd finished my PhD and I invented this method of assessing impact based on contribution analysis.

[00:26:43] **Sarah Morton:** And I started working with Ailsa Cook who I went then went into business with because we were like, okay, this is a really interesting way of getting people to think about outcomes and impact in a more robust way so they can really understand the difference that they make in whatever setting they are. And after we talked for about a year actually, to define what we wanted to do, and then we set up Matter of Focus and we built a software tool, A Matter of Focus that helped people like hold these theories of change and be able to pull data and evidence in against them. So we became two middle aged women tech entrepreneurs.

[00:27:17] **Sarah McLusky:** Love it. Fantastic.

[00:27:19] **Sarah Morton:** And we, and again, we did did not fit at all. We actually were in a tech hub to start we were in a tech hub for a while, we were so not the normal mould, although, it's shown that people who are older and more successful in business. People who go into business with other people, like between two and five directors is much more successful than one. So the whole solo entrepreneur model, that's held up, is actually a bit of a fallacy. There was quite a lot of, it was quite a lot of advantages to the way we were doing things and yeah.

[00:27:46] **Sarah Morton:** So did that until quite recently yeah.

[00:27:49] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. It's interesting this business of being on an administrative contract and then not fitting into the spaces and then trying to evidence the work that you were doing that was more applicable to the academic contracts and not being able to get promotion.

[00:28:05] **Sarah McLusky:** I think so many people listening to this will really resonate with that and will also resonate with the fact that when they look at what might be ahead in their careers. It's, it becomes almost the more senior you get in a professional role in somewhere like a university, the more administrative it becomes.

[00:28:27] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. And the less you do the work. So that's certainly something that I've experienced and other people that I've spoken to on the podcast have experienced as well. But to take the pivot from that, to go and start a business is quite a big move, but as you say you're now changed again and you're doing something on your own now. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:28:49] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah. So we decided just recently to close Matter of Focus just because the current environment is, as everyone knows, is really tough. It just felt there wasn't enough room for manoeuvre anymore, and so we decided to close the company. We sold the software onto another company, and I've just set up on my own, but doing similar kind of work, so working with organisations around how can they be more impactful, whether that's having better strategies for impact. Whether that's assessing impact more, whether that's building capability and skills within an organisation to use data and evidence better so that they can understand impact. A little bit of mentoring people 'cause there's quite a lot of people who are the only impact person in a team, an organisation or whatever that is.

[00:29:33] **Sarah Morton:** And it can be quite lonely and I think, and actually going back to your previous point, I think a lot of us thrive in these knowledge exchange roles because we're really good with people. We're quite innovative and we don't really mind not being quite completely absorbed by one thing or another. You're like a little bit on the periphery. Yeah. And really good at relationship building and all of that, but all of those skills really are not what you need if you're gonna be in a more bureaucratic position where it's much more about, you know, fitting in and playing the politics.

[00:30:03] **Sarah Morton:** So I think there is a big mis mismatch there. And you know, most people in knowledge mobilisation and research impact roles, they have to be quite innovative and and positive and encourage people to try things and, take people to the lake whether or not they want to drink, and all of that sort of stuff. So I, I think it's. In terms of people's skillset, it's not very well suited to then these big bureaucracies. Yeah,

[00:30:24] **Sarah McLusky:** No, but, and it's a skillset as well that is as you say, so incredibly valuable. Even just when you talked about the very first job interview that you went for, where you realised that you had all these networks, all this experience.

[00:30:38] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, which was exactly what they didn't have. So having those connections, having those networks, having those communities, those, that ability to pull together lots of different threads is so fundamental to how these roles work and are successful. But also often quite invisible work. There's been a couple of episodes recently on the podcast where we've talked about hidden roles and hidden labor in research and, yes with the REF and they're saying anybody can submit outputs or be like named or that sort of thing. They're still talking about outputs. Yeah. And you can't, you can't quantify the impact of these kind of relational roles.

[00:31:25] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah. And I once did a bit of impact assessment work for UNICEF, partly because they, for UNICEF research arm, because there were these researchers who they were working around ending violence against children, and they were in Peru and they were spending a lot of time building relationships between the government statisticians, the different cross departmental government bodies that needed to be involved in changing anything around violence against children, the local academics and the local organisations.

[00:31:55] **Sarah Morton:** And they were under a lot of pressure from their organisation about where are your outputs? And what they were doing was doing all this relationship building and eventually when they did produce outputs, they produced them collaboratively with these government statisticians and they had a massive impact.

[00:32:11] **Sarah Morton:** But they were trying to fend off this pressure to deliver publications really, yeah, before they were ready. And so yeah, they got me in to save their bacon in a way

because they had to show that what they were doing was impactful. Yeah. When 'cause it was completely invisible in the system.

[00:32:27] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah. That's what they were up to. And I think that's often the case, isn't it?

[00:32:30] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, I think definitely. And I think it is still. Lots of people that I've talked to recently talking about how this emotional labour, the relational work that goes into a lot of these projects and programmes is still missing in the conversations, even though, things are improving but there's still these gaps.

[00:32:55] **Sarah McLusky:** So as we've covered a huge amount of ground there, and I'll be interested now to know your answer to my magic wand question, which is, if you had a magic wand, what would you change about this knowledge exchange and impact world that you work in?

[00:33:12] **Sarah Morton:** Oh, and I still think that knowledge exchange impacts in universities particularly is just still such a little baby compared with these monolithic research and administrative kind of tracks within institutions. Now, both of those, so the way we do research and the way we administer universities is hundreds of years old.

[00:33:36] **Sarah Morton:** It's been built on hundreds of years of evolution and design. Quite a lot of things wrong with both of them, but there's quite a lot of things that work really well about both of them. And then along comes little baby knowledge exchange going, oh, look at me. I need a bit of space.

[00:33:50] **Sarah Morton:** And honestly, the space is still so tiny with such little resource and such little strategy. So I think what tends to happen is, universities have these big grand statements about how they're gonna be the most impactful in the Western world, or, whatever it is. You know that most universities now have something like that, but it doesn't knit down into structures, processes, and resource flows. It just sits there and it's batted between admin and research. So I'm sure a lot of research impact officers experience this every day because they, maybe they're responsible to some sort of administrative boss in some way in that side of things. But all the, all of the day, every day they're working with people on the research side of things.

[00:34:37] **Sarah Morton:** And then the resources that are supposed to pay for or anything they hope people might do, or they might be trying to support people to do or invisible, or maybe they're supposed to be in the research grant but they're not, or they're supposed to be, and then there, there's some really hopeful shoots of things like impact prizes and a bit more recognition of people.

[00:34:54] **Sarah Morton:** But I just think my magic wand would be that research impact is seen as a third pillar, because in the end, and also the university see it as something that matters at its own sake, not just because the REF says it should, but because they actually care about having an impact and that it's as structured with strategy people very clearly defined roles and resources as the other two, but I think, how many do we need to another 400 years for that?

[00:35:26] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, I think in some universities that might be the case. I think some are getting there. I've definitely seen, it's interesting you talked about three pillars model. I can't remember who it was, but I've definitely seen something like that recently where it had, you know, research, teaching and impact as the pillars the university was built on.

[00:35:44] **Sarah Morton:** And one of the reasons I left was because after REF 2014, I was like, okay, good we've been through the pain of that. People have got the idea of it. And in that REF, I dunno if you remember people who, some people remember you, you had impact case studies, but you also had a sort of impact statement for each unit of assessment.

[00:36:02] **Sarah Morton:** So you'd say something about how do we support impact in this unit. We have a seminar series, whatever. And I thought, okay that's happened. Now universities can think about how do we support impact, but no, they went straight into where are our next impact case studies, and I just thought, okay, they only care about the exercise.

[00:36:19] **Sarah Morton:** They don't actually care about thinking, where are our structures for impact? How can we actually support it and make sure it happens? And I just feel like it's really tough on researchers saying, oh yeah, just have some impact. You don't have the skills, you don't have the knowledge, you don't have the expertise, and we might give you half a day of someone, maybe two hours to come and talk to you about a pathway to impact or help you write a bit of a grant. Or maybe if you're really lucky, organize an event. Although not that often, you normally have to pay for that. So there's such little resource and help, and people are just supposed to do it as though it was something they've always done. I thought I can't work for an institution that actually cares this little about impact because I really care about it. And I think that's true of a lot of us, isn't it? In these roles, like we actually really care about impact actually happening and the good it can do and when it works well, we've all seen amazing things can happen. Yeah. But the institution isn't really there to support that and learn and think what amazing things can happen.

[00:37:21] **Sarah Morton:** It's much more interested in looking good a lot of the time, or ticking the boxes. I'm sorry to sound cynical, but Yeah, I just, for me, this is not the right fit. I need to do something that's a little bit more focused on what actually matters. Yeah. And I was really pleased that during lockdown when Ailsa and I managed to write a book, which kind of consolidated some of our method and put it out there, and it's called *How Do You Know If You're Making a Difference*.

[00:37:45] **Sarah Morton:** 'Cause in the end, that's what I care about. We gotta make, we're trying to make a difference here. The whole idea of assessing the impact isn't so that you can tick a box. It's so that you can show you've made a difference.

[00:37:57] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Yeah, that's absolutely, it's almost flipping the incentives, isn't it? And I appreciate that REF and at least it's helping to move things in that direction. But still so many organisations are doing it because they have to, not because it's the right thing to do aren't they, but it sounds like that book is a fantastic resource for anybody who is interested in finding out about your work, can you just remind us again what it was called?

[00:38:25] **Sarah Morton:** It's called, *How Do You Know You're Making a Difference*. It's at Policy Press. If you're on the mailing list, I think you get a discount. And I've also, I can share, we can share in the resources. I wrote a paper off the back of my PhD about assessing research impact, which is a really highly cited paper. So if people want a free version, that's it.

[00:38:44] **Sarah McLusky:** Fantastic. We'll get we'll get that. Track it down, get it into the show notes. Yeah. Brilliant. And otherwise, whereabouts can people find out about you and the work that you do?

[00:38:54] **Sarah Morton:** Yeah, so I'm on LinkedIn, so really happy to connect with people on LinkedIn. And also I've just set up this consultancy called Capture Impact, so you'll find me on captureimpact.co.uk.

[00:39:06] **Sarah McLusky:** Excellent. Oh, I'll get those links as well. Put them in show notes. Thank you. Thanks. So thank you so much for coming along, sharing your story, sharing your insights on impact. I'm sure it'll be really helpful.

[00:39:16] **Sarah Morton:** Thank you. It's been lovely to talk to you.

[00:39:20] **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. You can also find all the links and other episodes at www.researchadjacent.com.

[00:39:36] **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.