

What would you change with a magic wand? with Sarah McLusky

(Research Adjacent Episode 99)

Sarah looks back on how guests chose to use their wave of the Research Adjacent magic wand

<https://researchadjacent.com/magic-wand-episode-99/>



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

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.

Sarah McLusky: Hello, and welcome to episode 99 of Research Adjacent. And my name is Sarah McLusky. As always, I am your host. And today, it is going to be the last of the compilation episodes that I'm putting together as we look back over the now nearly 100 episodes of Research Adjacent. So this episode is going to be all about the magic wand question.

Now, if you've listened to at least a couple of my previous episodes with guests, you will have heard me ask them what they would change if they had a magic wand. Now, I haven't asked this question in absolutely [00:01:00] every single episode, but I did ask it right back when I had my first guest on, Kirsty Ross.

So I decided that I was gonna have a question that I would ask in every episode, and the logic behind it is pretty straightforward. The first reason is to do with just effective communication and that was because if you have one or two what they call signature questions in every episode, it helps to create a sense of continuity and community for listeners.

So, part of the reason was to do it to help you to feel connected to the series. And you might have heard other podcasts that do this. Zoe's Science and Nutrition podcast, they have a kinda quick-fire round at the start of every episode where guests are only allowed to answer yes or no. And if you've ever listened all the way to the end of Steven Bartlett's episodes of Diary of a CEO, he has a thing where each guest leaves a question for the next guest.

So these kind of signature questions just act as quite good [00:02:00] hooks for a series. That said, obviously there's lots of different signature questions I could have had, so why did I ask this question about what people would do if they had a magic wand? And that is because I knew when I started the podcast, and it still is now, we're, we're in no way sorted on this, but I knew that we were gonna be talking about some tricky situations and some tricky topics, and I didn't want the podcast to just become a total moan fest and a bit of a downer.

I have found that in my time, I've noticed that a lot of research culture conversations spend an awful lot of time identifying the problems, but not a lot of time on finding solution to those problems. And I wanted to give my guests an opportunity to suggest their solutions to some of these really tricky problems.

And as, as you've maybe guessed from some of the other episodes that we've been on, I do tend to the optimistic side, and I do think it's really important to [00:03:00] imagine the future that we want to have, even if it seems a long way off. So that's the reason why I wanted a positive question. But why a magic wand?

Well, it comes from this, and you've probably noticed this in your own life. If you ask people why they can't change something, they almost always blame a lack of money or a lack of time. And this isn't something that just happens with work.

If you say to people, "Why don't you eat more healthy food or exercise more?" They will always say that, for example, healthy food's too expensive, it takes too long to cook, they don't have the money to go to pay for a gym membership, they don't have the time to go to a gym. They just... It's always about time or money, and it has become a culturally acceptable excuse for just about anything, and a way of shutting down conversations.

So that's why asking people why they can't change something isn't necessarily a very good question. But if you take [00:04:00] time and money out of the equation, or if you essentially say time and money are limitless, then the conversation gets a lot more interesting. Because people then have to think about how they would actually use that time or that extra money.

And so that's what the magic wand question does, and that is why, in my opinion, it is a magic question. So this compilation episode is gonna be looking back. I've been through all the episodes and kind of clustered together the things that people wanted to use their magic wand for into some themes.

Some of them have already come up in previous episodes. I don't think they will be a huge surprise, but I think some of them might be. So let's listen on and find out what our guests want to use their magic wand for.

Given the whole theme of this podcast, it's probably no surprise that a lot of my guests, their answers in some respect were about improving [00:05:00] research culture. And that included lots of different things including job precarity, recognition, more flexible careers, better CPD, all that sort of stuff.

So let's go through some of those in a little bit more detail. So precarity I'm gonna pick first, and that's partly because Kirsty Ross, the very first guest on the podcast, kicked it off by wishing right back then in 2022 that all impact and engagement professionals would be given full-time open-ended contracts.

And there are other people who have picked up that baton since then coming at it from some different perspectives, some of them looking at it from the perspective of people who are employed in organizations, some as freelancers, and some doing different kind of roles. So coming up now you'll hear from the current lead for the PRISM Network, Isabella von Holstein, also science writer Melissa Hobson, artist Sian Docksey, and careers consultant Sarah Ashworth.

Isabella von Holstein: I would like [00:06:00] universities to understand that keeping professional staff, research professionals in-house long-term, that doesn't mean in the same role, is an advantage, that all of that institutional knowledge, all of that sectoral knowledge, all of that network capital that they have built up, it's worth building structures to keep them.

Melissa Hobson: A lot of writers will have to supplement editorial work with other types of writing. And also a lot of journalists leave the sector and move into PR or comms because the stability of the income is a challenge.

Sian Docksey: There's precedents in Ireland there is more of a like basic income for artists who are maybe like in between residencies or in between jobs or in between projects. Or it would also just look like sick pay and like maternity pay for creatives, or if you work full-time in another job, workplaces, maybe including universities, like easing up a little bit so people have a bit more time for their own like [00:07:00] creative practice.

Sarah Ashworth: To have enough funding that people don't have to have fixed term contracts anymore. Because I think that's one of the really, really difficult positions that our professional researchers find themselves in, to be in the top 1 or 2% of most educated people within a country, but still not having a fixed term contract. If everybody could just have permanent position or a permanent contract, then they could have the freedom and the flexibility to think about their careers and their lives in a very different way.

Sarah McLusky: So the freedom and flexibility that both Sian and Sarah mentioned in their comments there came up a lot too, particularly recognizing that flexibility comes with benefits not just for the employees, but for employers too, and also for the work that they do. So we'll hear now from project manager Ally Hughes, policy director Rosalind Gill, and careers [00:08:00] consultant Holly Prescott

Ally Hughes: I would love to see careers just being a little bit more fluid, where we have lots more secondments in different areas, where we have lots more blending between industry and academia, where going away and working in industry or working in policy and then coming back to an academic research, that that's much more widely, not only more widely accepted, but is happening more widely.

Rosalind Gill: I guess the, the thing that I would most like to see changed is that I think sometimes we view knowledge exchange as quite an abstract kind of concept, when actually it's people moving between different careers, people sharing their ideas, expanding their ideas through networking and co-creation. And I'd like to see much more sort of investment and support for people to be able to move freely between different sectors, think freely between different ideas.

Holly Prescott: All of the language we have at the moment for talking to [00:09:00] researchers about options and paths is we've got non-academic, alternative, outside, even a adjacent. Yeah, and there's two issues for me with that. One of them is it situates everything as if academia is somehow at the center. Yeah. And that everything else is defined by its proximity to, or its distance from academia, which, it doesn't really sit well with me, but also I think it bolsters that idea that you either have to totally stay or totally leave and that there are not variations.

Sarah McLusky: I decided to include that quote from Holly as it makes a really important point about language that has come up again and again throughout the course of this podcast, and I previously talked about in the What is Research Adjacent episode. And the lack of coherent language to talk about the work that research adjacent professionals do has been a massive contributor to [00:10:00] the lack of recognition that seems to still face people in research professional roles.

So it's perhaps no surprise that several of my guests wanted to use their magic wand to fix this recognition problem. Here is outreach specialist Lorraine Coghill, impact expert Ged Hall, and technician Andrew Cripps.

Lorraine Coghill: Actually, as a sector, let's celebrate our professionalism. Let's celebrate what we actually do. We've talked before, Sarah, about the invisibility of public engagement professionals, but also the invisibility of the, the skills that we bring, and a lot of those, because they are soft skills, because they happen in the background, they aren't celebrated and valued.

Ged Hall: I think for me it's about changing that value system that we have. You know, I mentioned the academic CV, and that [00:11:00] kind of almost holds sway in terms of our value system in the sector. So I think it's about changing that as a default and actually recognizing all the contributions. And not just recognizing, but supporting them.

Andrew Cripps: For technicians to be properly recognized by the university they work at, to be properly remunerated by the institute, to be recognized in publications, papers. I know this is something that is starting to be pushed more and more but it's something that I think still needs a lot of work.

Sarah McLusky: So I am one of those annoying people who's always asking that so what question, and it comes this call for more recognition sometimes can face that similar call. It's like, "Well, you're getting paid, you're doing a nice job. Why do you need more recognition?" But partly it's because that recognition would [00:12:00] improve some of these other issues like precarity and also getting promotions and actually building long-term careers in research professional roles.

Another big gap that research professionals face is around good quality CPD, and I have to say that I never cease to be amazed by the fact that organizations who are all about educating students often neglect the education of their own staff. Now, quite a few people mentioned

CPD, CPD means professional development for everybody who doesn't know the jargon, continuing professional development.

There were some specific requests. John Elvin wanted more work placements, and Laura Evan Hills wanted more communication training. But here I've chosen to go with a quote from Andy Tattersall because he is explaining the knock-on benefits of better CPD right across an organization.

Andy Tattersall: If I was like king for a day, we would be in this position where [00:13:00] everybody, absolutely, everybody has guaranteed time to carry out CPD.

And I am lucky that I've been able to do a job where largely my job is continual CPD, so I'm continually developing and learning, but a lot of colleagues will not give themselves time for CPD or will not have the time given to them, and they'll have line managers who don't support them. But it's about the things that make you better at your job. And actually you care about your job more, because I think if you are better and then you care about the work, you take more interest in it and you try and develop it and change it. And I think the really valuable professional services people are the ones who try and change their environment for the better.

Sarah McLusky: I'm now starting to feel at risk of saying, "And another thing," too many times in this podcast. But another thing that would be solved by having more recognition is the allocation of resources, especially people to research adjacent work. [00:14:00] Quite a number of my guests wanted to use their magic wand to create bigger teams or to just create more capacity within the system for the people who are already working in it.

There's various things they would do with that capacity, so let's hear what they are from collaboration manager Orla Kelly, librarian Alice Cann, research manager Claire Toogood, and exhibition curator David Wright.

Orla Kelly: Yes, we don't have enough money. That's for sure. Everyone doesn't have enough money. But even if you threw all the money at it, we still don't have capacity in the system.

So if you think of the academic base, and they're strained to deliver teaching and to get research grants and publish papers. Where is the space in their time to explore those risky opportunities, go to networking events, make contacts with industry partners? Just take risks and explore ideas. They're so stretched, and so they need capacity to be able to do that.

Alice Cann: I think I would want to create the [00:15:00] capacity for a lot more librarians who want to, to be involved in research, to be involved in funded research.

Claire Toogood: Being able to buy space in your day, your week, to have time to just think and be creative and be curious is something that a lot of people are finding really challenging at the moment.

David Wright: We're not lacking good ideas in this sector, but what we are lacking sometimes is the resource to actually deliver them or deliver them in the best way. I think most museums and galleries are really understaffed, but they have teams of really passionate and dedicated people and, and that can be quite dangerous and people can end up doing way too much.

Sarah McLusky: And of course, one of the consequences of a lack of resources or resources being spread too thin, a lack of capacity, is then intense competition for those resources and for that time. Quite a [00:16:00] few of my guests would like to wave their wand to reduce competition and increase collaboration within the research system.

Here's research office director Lorna Wilson and researcher developer Johanna Stadlbauer.

Lorna Wilson: One of the things I find quite frustrating is that the kind of element of competition is so entrenched at times, and it doesn't have to be. And I think, like for example, with ARMA and some of our networks, you know, some colleagues will happily just openly talk to each other about problems, about challenges, about opportunities, but there is still a sense that some people hold back. And I just think things would be much better if everybody engaged in that open dialogue.

Johanna Stadlbauer: I put down, make it more collaborative and less hierarchical. So make academia maybe more like in the spirit of the Dutch universities, they have a slogan that's called Room for [00:17:00] Everyone's Talent. That would mean, little bit of the loosening of the different staff categories and just thinking in terms of the shared mission of a university and how everyone can contribute to the shared mission.

Sarah McLusky: Following on from Johanna's comment about there being room for everyone's talent, that means everyone from not just a perspective of different job roles, but also from a perspective of their ethnicity, their lived experience, and all the different multi-facets that make up the person that they are. It's perhaps no surprise that equity and inclusion were another research culture dimension that featured in many of the magic wand wishes from my guests.

The lack of diversity in the research adjacent world is no secret, but I do think it's one that we don't talk about enough. I think as you'll hear Sean say in a comment in just a moment, you only need to look around a room at a research adjacent event to see that this is [00:18:00] something we need to be doing better.

If this is something you want to dig into, I really recommend the Diversity in Research podcast, Jakob Feldvos Christensen is one of the hosts of that one, and I've been a guest on there as well talking about the diversity in the research adjacent world. But here are some of my guests now sharing their wishes in this particular area.

Helen Underhill: It is unconscionable to me that we are so far down the line of knowledge creation and we still confine knowledge to certain identities at the exclusion of others.

Tamara Poles: So we wouldn't have to do all of this like extra heavy lifting to make sure black and brown people have the same resources or people that have special needs have these resources as well. Like we would already think that, we would already realize, oh, we should listen to these folks. We need to make [00:19:00] sure we have a transcript for this, or we need to make sure this is in braille. We think of these things a lot more tactfully and inclusively instead of looking at it as a pie, if I have this, you can't have it.

Esther Lisk-Carew: I'm a black woman working in a sector that is historically underrepresented with people of color and particularly black people in positions of power. So I go to a lot of meetings and a lot of the time I will be the only person there. I used to do a thing called the Count where I go into a meeting and literally just physically count how many other people in the room A, spoke or B, didn't just look like a one homogenised look so always I like seeing more people who look like me and more variety, just generally in the world.

Sean McCaul: If I had a wand, I would convert half us all into men. The joke was there.

Sarah McLusky: No, but it's, you. It's a good, it's a good point.

Sean McCaul: I've only realized from coming here last year to the Research Academy [00:20:00] with a cohort, we're 25 in the team. And there's only five men. I just realized, I'm part of, I, I'm one of four, there was three women are Queens colleagues almost. So I just find it a very female orientated, that's not a bad thing. Just an observation.

Sarah McLusky: You just heard Sean McCaul there talking at the Impact Ignite conference where we were invited to do a live podcast recording. You'll hear from the other guest, Kirsty High, in just a moment, and both Sean and Kirsty are among the many impact professionals that I have welcomed onto the podcast. It's not surprising that improving impact and also the processes that lead to impact, like research involvement and knowledge mobilization, are right up there on the magic wand wishlist for many of my guests.

So here we've got impact manager Kirsty High. We've also got knowledge mobilization specialist Inbal Itzhak, patient advocate Helen White, and creative facilitator Mary Robson, who are gonna have their wave of their wands

Kirsty High: Projects are [00:21:00] finishing with no money left over, and the first thing that gets cut is the impact bit, it's the impact delivery or the impact pathways. And I think it's because it's seen as the icing on the cake. But no one wants to eat cake without icing, so it needs to have icing on it. So I wish people would see that it's really important and you can't just cut that.

Inbal Itzhak: So with a magic wand, I'd definitely try to have sort of a centralized place where both researchers know that there's a reliable place to go if they wanna communicate their science outward and share it elsewhere. And also a place that would help you as a researcher build relationships with the target knowledge users.

Helen White: And I think if I had a magic wand, I would want to see patient and public involvement being more embedded, more routine, part of the norm of research, rather than some cases it being a, a tick box exercise to get the grant application in.

Mary Robson: One of them is [00:22:00] the way that the people who are participants in research projects or voluntary sector, third sector organizations who help by having the space and the time to partner with research projects, the ways in which they are not recompensed and i.e., to me, not valued. I think that's fundamentally wrong, and needs some really concerted systemic action. I know there are arguments around it being coercive to pay people for what it is they do, but as one of my colleagues said this morning, it's not coercive to pay the researchers to do the research.

Sarah McLusky: Mary's answer at the end there touches on the need for better systems to help get this work done effectively and importantly, ethically. [00:23:00] And I love the fact that although some of my guests wanted to use their magic wand to solve quite esoteric problems, quite cultural problems, others wanted to use their wand to solve very deeply practical problems, whether that was from magically filling databases or improving capacity in the system for everybody to get the healthcare that they need, or looking at better ways to allocate research funding.

Here's just a few examples. We've got knowledge exchange consultant Hamish McAlpine, patient involvement manager Sam Rose, and research strategy lead Ipshita Ghosh dreaming big.

Hamish McAlpine: I'm tempted to say ban three-letter acronyms

Sarah McLusky: I think you'd get a lot of support for that.

Hamish McAlpine: But I think, given what I've done and given what I've said about my frustrations, I think it would be something around this beautifully harmonized, accessible, information that was completely burden-free to gather and that, more than that, that [00:24:00] decision-makers and policymakers actually had the ability to read and understand and act on it properly.

Sam Rose: So if I had a magic wand, I would love to instantly just fill the database with all of the information that we haven't collected yet, just to, to make it easier to see what conditions people have and where are they living, and what are their demographics, and all that sort of stuff.

Ipshita Ghose: There's a lot of unfunded research, excellent unfunded research, that almost seems a waste sometimes because people have spent a lot of time, they've collaborated with people, they've come up with new tools and methods, and projects, and it goes nowhere.

Sarah McLusky: Now we are coming towards the end of the episode, and I hope that having heard 25 minutes of people talking about all the things that they want to fix about the world that we work in, I hope that you are not feeling despondent or overwhelmed at the scale of the problem. As I said at the outset, my goal with [00:25:00] this question wasn't just to highlight problems, but to also highlight potential solutions as well.

No workplace is perfect. As I have said in previous episodes, I am not ending the Research Adjacent podcast because I think that we have fixed everything, 'cause clearly we haven't. But many of the things that people have suggested are possible with the right resources and collective will. So how do we get it all done?

Well, my last two snippets have their own suggestions, and to end on a little bit of a lighter note, I'm gonna hand you over to research facilitator Charlotte Stephenson and open research advisor Nick Sheppard.

Charlotte Stephenson: The first thing that came to my mind when you said that was to eradicate deadlines.

Which of course would be an impossibility, but imagine a world where we could work at our own pace, do what we wanted to do, not fear the dreaded 5:00 PM Friday deadline or, you know, whatever it might be. [00:26:00] I think, yes, an eradication of deadlines would be heavenly.

Nick Sheppard: I suppose as well, what might be a slightly easier job actually, is to stop time. 'Cause there's that much to read and to learn and to, and that's perhaps an easier spell than actually fixing the governance and bureaucracy of the higher education sector.

Sarah McLusky: Nick might be right there that stopping time is easier than solving all of these problems, but maybe if we can get just that little wave of the wand to work, and we can stop time for long enough to catch up with ourselves and everything we need to do, then that might get us some way. I find myself wishing, not for the first time, that that magic wand was real, and I have to say, stopping time is something that appeals to me very much sometimes.

So thanks very much to all of my guests, whether they were featured here or not, you can still go back and listen to that archive and, whether you want to pick up on one of the people who's been in this episode, find one of the other ones, see what people wished for with their magic wand.

I know at times people [00:27:00] found it an incredibly difficult question to answer, so I really appreciate everybody, having a go and creating a collective vision for the future of the research space.

You might be wondering now what I would choose. Well, magically editing these episodes would be a good start. But if you want to find out my real answer, you will have to wait for the next episode. We are coming to the close. The next episode, number 100, will see the tables turned, and I'll be in the guest's chair.

Your host will be Andy Tattersall, who you heard earlier in this episode, a veteran of excellent podcasts, including Under Review and Communicable Research. And he will be hosting and asking me all about life behind the scenes of this podcast, and then you will find out exactly what I would do with that magic wand, if only it was real.

See you next time.

Thanks for listening to Research Adjacent. If you're [00:28:00] 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 follow the podcast on LinkedIn. You can also find all the links and other episodes at www.researchadjacent.com.

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.