

Barter in research

- ⇒ What do you offer a person that supports your research efforts?
- ⇒ Who is part of your network of collaboration?

Goals: The purpose of this Skill Sheet is to make you aware of the importance of a research network and gives a number of pointers how to behave in such a research network.

Content: This Skill Sheets discusses a number of important factors in creating a 'barter' network.

User guide: Use this Skill Sheet in combination with SS A8 'Research feasibility study' and SS A11 'Checking your research output'.

This Skill Sheet is dedicated to explaining some 'silent' rules that apply to doing research. A big problem when carrying out research is getting people to devote time to helping you with your research topic: time to answer your letter, to fill in your research questionnaire, to give you an interview or to send you the material requested. Often, the people who you need information from are also the people with the least time. To put it simply, the basic question that they ask themselves is: **what do I get in return for my collaboration?** The question for a 'fair deal' is rarely stated explicitly, but it will severely affect the feasibility of your search strategy and therefore the relevance and quality of your research if you do not take it into account.

Because it is not common to offer money in return for the time and efforts of those who help you, the conduct of relevant research resembles one of the oldest forms of economic activity in which two actors trade without using money as a means of exchange. This economic activity is known as *barter*. Your own trade position involves knowledge, which is contained in research reports, interview elaboration, references to interesting literature or it even can involve the exchange of hearsay. The quality and the extensiveness of the information that you receive from other actors, critically depends on your knowledge of the unspoken rules and norms of research barter. This Skill Sheet presents some of these rules together with some suggestions on how to handle them in an effective manner.

1. Trade equilibrium

Always take care of fair terms of trade: ask yourself how you can establish equilibrium in the relationship.

2. Research interest for partner

Specify what is at stake (→A3), so that your (potential) barter partner can form an opinion about whether he/she shares your interest in the topic, and the aims of the research. If this is not the case, you will not succeed in reaching important and relevant people. Specifying the stakes requires:

- that when writing a letter, you include a short description (not more than one page) of the research questions and intended users of the report;
- that before you call someone, you prepare a short introduction in which you state what the aims of your research are and why you think this particular person is important for your research.

3. Time indication

Always make clear how much time it will take to assist you with your research. If you ask for an interview or if you send a questionnaire, state the approximate amount of time that it will take. Your time reference shows that you have considered the effort required from your informant, and increases your status as a serious researcher.

4. Return for effort

Furthermore, the more you give the more you can ask of your barter partner. So, always make clear (also for yourself) what you give your informant in return for their efforts. If you have nothing to offer at the moment (for example, if you have just begun your university education), be creative when inventing a fair reward!

- The minimum return, which you must always offer, is to promise that you will send the end result of your endeavour: the research report. Do this explicitly and spontaneously. People expect you to do so!
- You can send your informant a written section which has already been completed. Receiving a draft text, often gives people the ‘thrill’ of being able to read manuscripts which have not yet been published! Using this important psychological factor is more successful when the research project includes many people. A detailed description of the contents of your research might also do the ‘trick’.
- Compile tables with information about other companies, actors or phenomena in which the organisation of your informant is also included. In your research, work towards producing these kind of overviews (→A5). Such an overview makes it easier for your barter partner to check whether the information on the organisation is correct. It also gives some insight into the nature of your research and the information already collected. A table suggests that the research is already in progress and informs the respondent that you have only asked for the information to complement existing knowledge, and is not at the beginning of a research project that might take the respondent much more time. A table also specifies more clearly what you want from your respondent. People will be reluctant to give you information when it is not clear what you want.

5. Open-ended questions

Never pose open-ended questions that clearly indicate that you don’t know anything about the topic, and that also give the impression that you have not done your homework. Open-ended questions like: ‘could you send me any relevant material on.....?’; or: ‘can you complete this questionnaire’ (followed by ten pages of mainly open questions, which will take at least an hour to complete and of which the relevance to the respondent is unclear); or: ‘could you tell me what the people at your department are doing on this topic.....’. Open-ended questions like these are **forbidden** in real barter for two equally important reasons. Firstly you will get very few answers. Secondly you are not able to control the quality and direction of the answers. So even if you receive information, it might be useless.

6. Network of collaboration

If an informant, a ‘colleague’ researcher/student, or someone who you closely collaborate with anticipates that you do not respect the unspoken rules of barter, the willingness to collaborate immediately declines. You cannot build good research on extractive relations in which you primarily extract information from the other party. If the declining willingness to collaborate remains part of an unconscious process, you both lose valuable time (→F4, F5).

Also apply the barter principle to yourself. If you send people information several times, without receiving something in return, consider whether you would be willing to sustain this (unbalanced) relationship! Make a list of people who also apply the principles of barter towards you: over a longer period of time that they will remain the hard and stable core of your personal network of research relationships.