

February 2020 blog

This month's blog is written by Katherine McDiarmid, exams officer at Kendrick School, who looks at the benefits and importance of networking.

Networking is an important element of any profession. Teachers will have subject networks, small businesses have monthly networking breakfasts or lunches, and exams officers have a range of network opportunities...

Unless you work in a FE setting where there are many people involved with examinations it is likely that the Examinations department in your centre is rather small. You may be fortunate enough to have an assistant/jobshare, however, the majority of you will be in a department of one! This makes networking even more important to ensure you have the support and contacts you need.

Local network meetings

Your first focus should be upon finding and attending your local network group. OCR have a fabulous team of regional customer support managers who host network groups throughout the year. Check their website; contact your local rep and get on the circulation list for the next meeting. Your local contacts will be invaluable in your time of need, such as when you run out of awarding board stationery in exam season; need to go for a coffee and let off steam to someone who understands what has happened; call on them if you have a contingency situation; share visiting examiners/moderators when you don't have enough candidates of your own. I still recall my first network meeting where I met a couple of fellow EO's who have certainly been influential in supporting me in my fledgling early days. It was also where I heard about the 'Exams Officer Facebook Group'.

The 'Exams Officers UK Facebook group'

The Facebook group was started by an EO local to me who recognised the benefit of such a resource. There were only a couple of hundred members when I joined and I remember the excitement when we reached 500...we now have over 3,000 members! If you are one of those 3,000 then you will know how important the group can be in supporting you in your role. Membership is restricted to 'verified' exams officers and their 'approved' assistants along with a select handful of awarding board customer representative. The group provides an information resource, discussion venue and social interaction space for exams office staff. It is a community which extends not just across England and Wales but has members from JCQ centres across the world.

National conferences

I have heard many reasons why exams officers don't attend the national conferences...

'My centre doesn't see the need for me to go to conference'

'My centre won't give me the time off to go to conference'

'I go to local network meetings and read all the online published information - what benefit would I get from conference?'

'I have been an EO for years - it's not relevant to me.'

For me the winter and summer conferences are the key reason I persuaded my centre to join The Exams Office. Even if you read everything published by the JCQ and the awarding bodies, there is something different about having it presented by a person. The clarity of a personal presentation often avoids misunderstanding. Then there are workshops that are not covered directly by readable documents, or that go deeper into best practice and workability and interpretation of regulations. All this is part of your professional development – which is important no matter how long you have been in a role.

Then of course you get the chance to talk to board representatives at their exhibitor stands in person, very often putting a name to the face on the end of the phone, and the opportunity to ask them questions...and pick up those essential stationery freebies!! There may also be industry relevant stands where you can see and test such things as reader pens, accessibility software, secure storage and exam desks/chairs.

Most importantly, conference is an opportunity to meet up with your peers outside of your immediate local area. Quite a number of exams officers which I count as important friends are a long way from me geographically. This could have a future benefit if, for example, a candidate has a clash between an exam and a national sporting event and you need to find a centre to accommodate them.

Be generous

Networking needs to be a process of give and take across our community. If you have received support from someone, pass it on to someone else. For example, in my first season I needed emotional support and confidence rebuilding and two lovely ladies took me for a Saturday morning coffee session with tissues. Regularly, I have had practical support over the phone when my brain has 'frozen' and I needed help to resolve an issue with my MIS, and occasionally, I have required access to someone to invigilate when I have needed an emergency reader. I have tried to return this support, whether it has been to listen to a colleague who has required emotional support or training/mentoring a new local exams officers by inviting them over to shadow me and by going to their centre to answer questions, or even creating and delivering a malpractice assembly to their exam candidates as the scary stranger!.

Networking enriches your career and has benefits to your centre, and you never know when you will need that contact you have made.