



Researcher:
**Jane Doe – Postdoctoral
Researcher in Business**

Business:
**Multinational
Corporation**

*(The case study was anonymised
to respect existing agreements
and working relationships)*

Authored by Dr. Tanja Collavo

The project idea

Jane (fictional name) was completing her MPhil and applying for a DPhil, when she met a fellow of her college who, given their common research interests, soon asked Jane to become her research assistant on a project she was working on. Thanks to their collaboration, towards the end of her doctoral degree Jane became aware that a business school was looking for a postdoc to employ on a multi-year project they had just established with a multinational corporation. Jane was interested in the project, because it was meant to explore, among other things, the role businesses can play in international development. She applied for the job straight away and managed to become a part of it as soon as she finished her DPhil.

The business school and an internal think tank of the multinational corporation, which was in charge of some of its corporate social responsibility projects, jointly led the project. The multinational corporation had realised that the collaboration with and respect of multiple stakeholders would have been fundamental for its long term survival. Creating value for multiple stakeholders while generating profits was still a relatively new concept in the business world at that time. The partnership with the business school was an opportunity to acquire unique knowledge in this sense by having recognised experts analysing its new projects and to become a thought and practice leader thanks to that knowledge.

From the start, the project was set up as a collaboration between academics working on different aspects of business, such as ownership structure, finance, accounting, and value chains. Each work area had a representative of the think tank and an academic from the business school, and the overarching project was coordinated by an academic lead and two administrators. Jane was a research fellow helping out with the management of the entirety of the program while conducting research for a specific work stream.

After only one year working as a postdoc for the project, however, Jane found herself in an unexpected position. Due to a relationship breakdown following organisational issues hampering some of the work streams, her boss resigned. Jane was promoted all of a sudden to a senior researcher role, which saw her in charge not only of one of ▶

the research streams but also of the coordination of the entire project directly under the guidance of the project Principal Investigator. Her new position became immediately more challenging as she had to contribute to the growth of the project by helping to hire and manage new research assistants working full time on it.

From the get go in her new coordination role, Jane realised that doing research for a corporation was tricky. There were many internal politics and resistance that made data and site access difficult at times. Furthermore, there was a constant risk of the company becoming too involved in areas that the business school found inappropriate, in virtue of it being the sole funder of the project and of the partnership lacking clear boundaries. In those days, Jane found some of the strength needed to deal with the complexities of the project in knowing that she was an employee of the business school and that, even if the think tank and related corporation were the funders of her post, she was personally and professionally liable only to the business school. This created a boundary that was extremely important to maintain her independence as a researcher and to protect also the independence of her junior colleagues. Indeed, conflicts of interest between conducting a rigorous, neutral and academically-relevant research and doing work beneficial for the company were frequent and an ongoing effort was needed to maintain a strong academic identity.

While the situation was tricky in many ways for Jane, given her little experience and the intrinsically difficult nature of the partnership, she enjoyed the opportunity to learn quickly how to be a senior researcher. As time went by, she tried new things in the collaboration that her boss had not done before and she developed her management, negotiation and budgeting skills. Moreover, in the four years that Jane spent on the project, she worked on analysing some of the corporation's programs in developing countries through multiple stints of qualitative and quantitative fieldwork. These represented excellent opportunities to access data, participants and to analyse projects that she would not have had access to otherwise.

The downside of these opportunities was that she had to navigate being a young female researcher in her early thirties facing several men over fifty years of age. In times of conflict, it was sometimes challenging to deal with counterparts using a more aggressive and demanding behaviour towards her than towards the Principal Investigator. From a data point of view, she also had to deal with access issues. Some research projects, especially quantitative ones, were relatively straightforward to set up but other projects were more challenging in terms of getting the necessary access and authorisations. Even when data could be obtained and analysed, in a couple of cases further complications arose when the findings were ready for publication.

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Overall, Jane feels that being involved in such a large project, driven by a single company, can be risky for a young scholar. It is sometimes challenging to publish work out of these projects because the company might be reluctant to reveal sensitive data or unflattering findings. Additionally, when a collaboration involves several managerial and coordination duties, the project might end up taking precious time and resources that should instead be used to produce academic publications. For example, while working on her research project, Jane had to deal with protracted issues connected to the management of teams and relations, and to contribute to the realisation of non-academic outputs such as the organisation of a yearly conference and the writing of working papers that were largely to the benefit of the corporation. She also had to attend several weekly meetings and, as senior researcher, she often ended up in the middle of issues between established academics working on the project, and wanting to quit it, and the company.

All these activities represented the dispersion of a significant amount of energy, spent thinking about reorganising the ways of working in order to match the think tank priorities or deciding whom to hire for the project, rather than on delivering outputs that could help her advance the goals of the research group and her academic career. According to Jane, "in retrospect, if there was so much effort needed to make things work, that should have become a higher level conversation but things were instead kept on my shoulders for too long and that made me feel vulnerable at times". In order to keep her career on track, she tried to publish papers based on her doctoral dissertation and to build a teaching portfolio outside of the project. Despite her efforts, Jane had less research done than she would have liked and she often felt an excessive amount of stress was arising from having to combine research efforts and her managerial responsibilities in a relationship that had broken down and kept being problematic. In the end, this made her decide to ►

step down from the project. After six months sustaining herself through a mix of teaching and research projects, Jane has now been hired by a prestigious university as an Assistant Professor.

Some interesting research and potential publications did come out of the project with the multinational corporation and Jane is also aware and proud that the business school and university benefited significantly from this collaboration, since they had the chance to prove their ability to generate social impact and, as a consequence, to move up in university rankings. This said, even in retrospect, she cannot but see the collaboration with the corporation and related think tank as not fully successful and as a project that was probably bound to be difficult, no matter the role she would have had in it. On the one hand, there was the lack of an overarching plan. The idea was that there would have been a year on year adjustment based on what was going on and that this would have resulted in good outcomes and the development of mutual trust. When this did not happen, the project became increasingly bureaucratic and the research outputs less aligned with the think tank expectations. On the other hand, since the collaboration was with an internal think tank rather than directly with the multinational corporation, access to data was often difficult because many

doors were closed even for the think tank and because their intermediation increased the level of political and organisational issues that had to be dealt with. These underlying characteristics of the project ultimately led to dissatisfaction and to the departure from the project of many senior academics, which reduced the overall productivity of researchers and left young postdocs to deal with a difficult situation.

Despite the challenges that she encountered and the fact she would probably not repeat the experience if she could go back in time, Jane would happily collaborate again with another business. Her experience taught her that there are premises and mechanisms that can be set up to make a knowledge exchange collaboration more likely to be positive for all parties involved and to succeed in its objectives. In this sense, the challenges that she had to face and the ways in which she overcame them put her in a very strong position to negotiate the creation of such premises and mechanisms. Moreover, despite the tough experience, she got to appreciate the significant potential of having real world impact when collaborating with a large corporation and, in the right context and situation, she would not think twice about embarking on a new project.

Key benefits & challenges

Thanks to her experience as senior researcher in the collaboration between the business school and the think tank/multinational corporation, Jane “learnt a huge amount in terms of managing public relationships, going through legal issues for publishing and managing complex research relationships”. She is now much more aware of the benefits and costs of a knowledge exchange partnership and of how to structure things differently to prevent some problems. Additionally, one of the research projects is still going very well and she has three papers coming out of it, even if they probably took more effort than usually needed.

She also thinks that being involved in a collaboration with a business adds value to her CV, especially when applying for high education institutions and centres, such as the one currently employing her, that place a lot of emphasis on research impact and collaboration with non-academic organisations. Indeed, she can offer transferrable skills in stakeholders’ management. At the same time, however, Jane would warn other researchers to be careful

when choosing whom to associate themselves with because working with companies in certain industries, such as those damaging health or the environment, might prevent future collaborations with third sector or public sector organisations.

Her key challenge in the four years in the project was around setting and protecting boundaries. Much of the collaboration literature does not talk about the importance of boundaries, focusing instead on the need to build trust. However, clear boundaries specifying respective competences, duties and areas of control are fundamental in partnerships with clearly uneven power relationships and a single funder. In her own experience, because of unclear boundaries, researchers did the mistake of saying too many “yes” at the start. This, over time, led to a collapse of trust, which forced them to deal with issues on day by day basis rather than in a planned and systematic way.

Another tough challenge that she encountered was dealing with bullying, which affected multiple members of the program and, in particular, the young researchers she was in charge of. As researchers, for a long time, they ▶

hold on to the view of having to toughen up because that might have been the way in which businesses worked. They only realised over time that what was going on was not appropriate and that, given the complaints arising also from senior academics and administrators, the best thing to do was to report the issue to the management of the business school. What the team had to endure before things were escalated left a scar on Jane because the most stressing part of the whole project was seeing bad behaviour towards the people she was managing and feeling powerless to do anything about it.

She will keep wondering if the situation might have been better with more senior leadership coordinating the project and with clearer goals to start with. She is

not sure the think tank fully understood the academic research process (e.g. publication processes, standards of evidence, authorship norms) and what was feasible (e.g. in terms of the time needed to reach meaningful findings). More time explaining these norms and needs would have been beneficial. Outside of the research program, it was also appealing for the corporation to fund a large, ambitious project and to gain significant prestige out of the collaboration. Therefore, if she had the opportunity to set up a new knowledge exchange collaboration, she would make sure to know well the motives of the business partner, their commitment and their understanding of what a research project might entail.

Advice for other researchers

When asked what insights she would like to share with other researchers, Jane came up with very interesting points. She encouraged researchers to consider that having a single funder is likely to trigger a fundamental conflict of interest. Funds create a power imbalance that might make it tough to say or publish controversial or not positive findings on the funding organisation. A way to overcome this risk would be to have multiple sources of funding, so the relationship would not be dyadic. Alternatively, it would be advisable to suggest and develop a research project that does not involve an evaluation of the funding organisation or of its practices. If the project is about creating a new product, material, or project, it is far less likely that it will be hampered by conflict of interest. In her case, the parts of the collaboration which were positive and successful were those whose content was not political or controversial, where there was a small working group and they had weekly calls and where the methodology was so structured and established that it had to be done in “an academic way”.

If none of these options is possible, the researcher should be ready to be confrontational and should make sure to be properly trained on data collection and usage, IP and legal rights in order to be able to face potential challenges to

their work. In any case, Jane thinks that it is important for researchers to be clear about boundaries and independence and to enforce them in a “take it or leave it” kind of way. Even if it is a collaboration, the academic output does not always have to be collaborative because neutrality and keeping an external point of view are important.

This said, partnering with businesses can be extremely useful and important. Companies are very powerful and can do much to tackle current global issues so it is important that more social scientists look into what is going on and develop research that could suggest successful interventions through companies. The structure of the specific partnership she was involved in had problems but collaborating with another business would be awesome and she is sure other researchers would benefit massively from such an experience. One word of advice, however, would be for early career researchers not to feel forced to say “yes” to everything. According to Jane: “it is good to be a bit picky and confident that there will be other opportunities in case you are not fully convinced by an existing one. Don’t be afraid to be choosy because the projects you will undertake will affect you personally and professionally in the long term”.