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Peer to Peer: At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy

Research about how foundation staff access and use knowledge about effective practices in philanthropy

Foundations often invest in projects to improve practices in fields like education, medicine, and international development. Until now, we have lacked objective data about how funders find and use knowledge about effective practices in philanthropy. To help the Hewlett Foundation learn about this topic, we partnered with Edge Research on a unique study that involved more than 70 interviews and a survey of more than 700 foundation staff and board members. Together this data provides a clear picture of how funders seek out, share, and use information related to effective philanthropy. The full report is available at <https://harderco.com/how-do-foundations-learn/>.

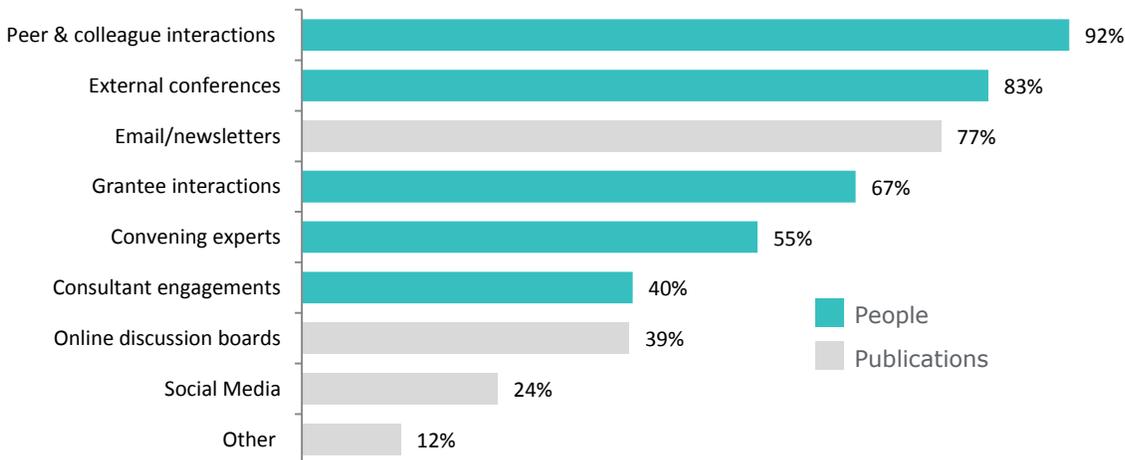
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Funders like to talk with others, particularly peers and colleagues, for insights on effective practices. Peers are important because they can be consulted in confidence, they respond quickly, and they share information that speaks directly to the concern at hand.

Interviewees said that they often feel overwhelmed by the volume of practice knowledge available. Peers help solve problems, identify promising practices, and offer advice and encouragement based on their philanthropic experience. Written products that are concise, use summaries to simplify complex ideas, and include practical tools like checklists and sample discussion questions are more useful to funders.

Peers and colleagues are the most trusted sources for practice knowledge



Funders are a skeptical audience for practice knowledge

We asked funders to assess the current state of practice knowledge on five key dimensions. Their responses show that a large proportion finds the information they receive to be duplicative and unverified, illustrating the critical eye that funders have on practice knowledge.

"I find that practice knowledge in the field is..."

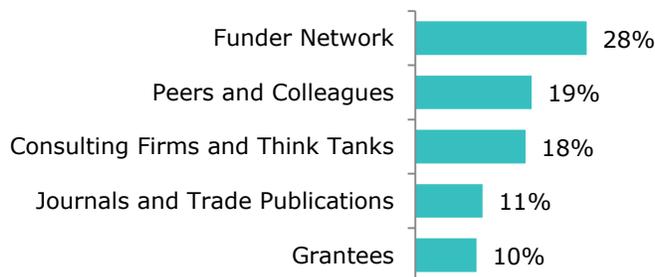


Interviewees also shared concerns about the quality and applicability of practice knowledge. One interviewee observed that some knowledge products are *"one step up from opinions,"* and several interviewees expressed frustration with agenda-driven, non-scientific opinion pieces.

Funder networks and peer endorsements drive changes in foundations

Reports and articles can inform how a change in foundation practice is implemented, but they are not sufficient to prompt action. Funders rely on formal networks and informal conversations to decide when to implement a change. That advice is valuable for deciding when organizational conditions are right for change, and how to adapt a standard practice to fit the unique culture of a specific foundation.

What contributed to your foundation's decision to make a change?



The obstacles to using knowledge and changing practices in foundations are familiar: bureaucracy, a risk-averse culture, lack of accountability and limited time. Changes in the external environment, new leadership, and purposeful planning and assessment processes are opportunities to push past these barriers to make changes that lead to more effective philanthropy.

The full report provides more details about these topics and includes four in-depth case studies about how knowledge produces change in foundation practices - it is available at <https://harderco.com/how-do-foundations-learn/>.

"This morning, a board member sent me an article from the Wall Street Journal. I read it and it was fabulous. It actually comes through my Twitter feed, but I didn't see it. I saw it when it was sent from a trusted source that said, 'Pay attention to me!'"

-Funder
