



Community of Practice  
Research-Policy  
Translation

# Boundary Spanning

## Statement of Value

# Introduction to Boundary Spanning

## What Boundaries?

**Organisational silos** happen when teams or departments operate in isolation, with limited communication or collaboration, creating communication divides termed 'boundaries'. This working style is particularly pronounced within and between academia and governments, however these boundaries can also exist between policy sectors, stakeholders, and communities.

These barriers to communication and collaboration lead to a reduced ability to tackle complex, interconnected policy issues (like climate change, or health inequities) resulting in the **17-year gap between research and its translation into policy action**.<sup>1</sup>

## What is Boundary Spanning?

Boundary spanning is the practice of working across these divides to build connections, support collaboration, and enable the exchange of knowledge and ideas. This practice improves communication and thus enhances research, public policy outcomes and community impact.<sup>2</sup>

## Who?

Boundary spanning is a diverse practice that can occur in many forms but there are three most commonly cited mechanisms:

- **Singular boundary spanners:** dedicated personnel solely responsible for spanning across a particular divide
- **Boundary spanning teams:** groups which bring together people from diverse backgrounds, connected by a shared goal or philosophy (such as a community of practice)
- **Boundary spanning organisations:** organisations who sit in the divides and purposefully and habitually communicate with outside stakeholders.



## Key Terminology

**Boundary Spanning** = the *practice* of spanning boundaries

**Boundary Spanners** = the *individuals* involved in spanning boundaries

**Working in silos** = working with lack of collaboration between departments and organisations

**Boundaries** = the edges of these working 'silos' between which there is a gap that must be spanned/bridged in order to instigate connection

**Terms used to describe boundary spanning include (but are not limited to):**

- Knowledge brokering
- Knowledge broker
- Change agency
- Change agent
- Knowledge translation

# What We Know from the Literature

In 2025, CHiAPRT finalised some ongoing research into Boundary Spanning and its practical implementation in bridging the gap between Academia and policy making. This section will provide a summary of the paper '**Beyond the concept: how boundary spanning is implemented at the science-policy interface to tackle complex societal challenges**'.

## Boundary spanning: Initiating, Operating, Sustaining

A key focus of this research was to investigate how boundary spanning appeared in practice, including how specifically boundary spanning was initiated, how it operated and how it was then sustained across various domains.

### Three Most Commonly Cited Methods of Boundary Spanning Initiation

1. **Funding programs or mandates** that explicitly require research-policy collaboration and knowledge translation components. This method ensures that stakeholders design the process together from the outset, securing buy-in and aligning objectives early.<sup>3-7</sup>
2. **Establishing formal partnerships or agreements** to embed boundary-spanning roles within existing structures. This could include a memorandum of understanding, joint appointments, or multi-organisation networks.<sup>8, 9</sup>
3. **Emergence from prior relationships or direct stakeholder demand**, involving researchers and decision-makers recognising a need and coming together to create a bridging mechanism.<sup>10-12</sup>

### Different Disciplines Operate Boundary Spanning Differently

Once such initiatives are in place, boundary spanning operates in practice through various activities and roles that facilitate continuous knowledge exchange. It was found in the literature that boundary spanning is operationalised in different ways within different domains. Listed below are the most commonly cited Boundary Spanning Implementations for three key domains.

#### Public Health

**Embedded knowledge brokers or researchers**, placed within health departments<sup>4-7</sup>

**"Buddying" programs**, which pair academic researchers with health policymakers<sup>12</sup>

#### Environment

**Embedded knowledge brokers** often facilitated through secondment configuration<sup>13, 14</sup>

**Boundary organisations** that function at the interface of science, policy, and regulation<sup>15-17</sup>

#### Climate Change

**Embedded researchers** within local governments, through formal partnerships between universities and policy institutions<sup>8</sup>

**Boundary organisations** at the interface of climate science and community engagement<sup>10, 18</sup>



Effective boundary spanning is less about formal organisations and more about the quality of these bridging processes and relationships

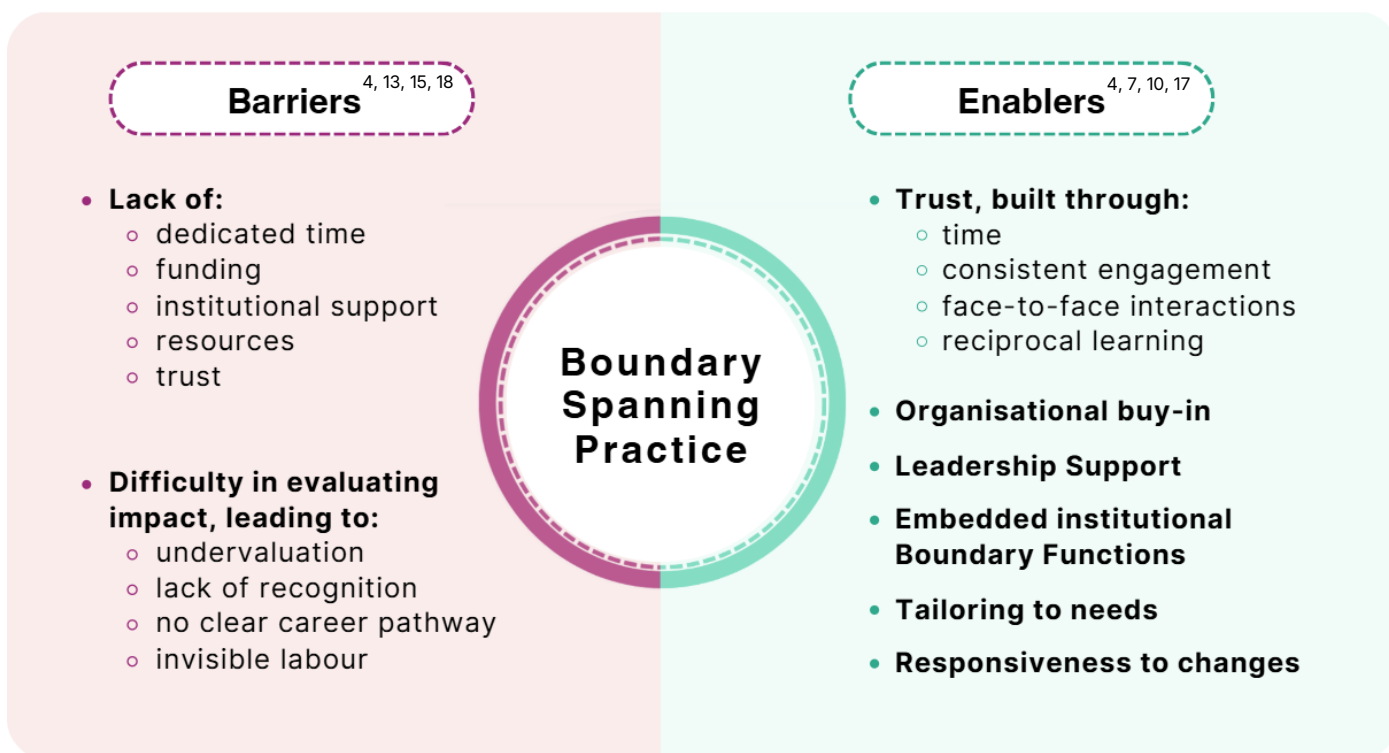
## Methods to ensure collaboration is sustained beyond an initial project include:

1. **Creating permanent or semi-permanent boundary spanning roles** to preserve the trust and relationships built.<sup>7, 15</sup>
2. **Integrating regular routines** such as ongoing meetings, mentorship sessions, or networks.<sup>2, 3</sup>
3. **Developing local ownership and capacity** by empowering stakeholders to take on the boundary spanning role themselves.<sup>10, 12</sup>



Sustained boundary spanning calls for continued support through institutional buy-in, stable funding or incentives, and leadership that values ongoing evidence-informed collaboration

## Enablers and Barriers to Boundary Spanning Practice



## Collective Wisdom

The Research-Policy Translation Community of Practice (RPT CoP) in collaboration with and guidance from boundary spanner and academic Dr Chris Cvitanovich of UNSW, aimed to define the **value** and **principles** of Boundary Spanning, as well as individual and organisational **strategies** to elevating their roles in academia and public policy making. This section will outline their collective wisdom.

## Value

**Guiding Question:** What do you see as the value of boundary spanners and boundary spanning?

### Break Down Communication Barriers

- Translate jargon into familiar language
- Find common ground and navigate tensions between different or competing interests

### Individual Skill Development for Boundary Spanners

- Enhance Social Skills
- Broaden professional network
- Develop deeper understanding of broader fields and perspectives

### Better Research to Policy Outcomes

- Speed up policy responses to emerging issues
- Create new opportunities for policy change
- More comprehensive, science-informed policies

### Network Creation and Strengthening

- Strengthen relationships across sectors and disciplines
- Support more sustainable, long-term cross-sectoral engagement

## Principles

**Guiding Question:** What do you see as the key principles and strategies that guide boundary spanning people/organisations?

### Individual Boundary Spanners must be:

- The right fit
- Good listeners
- Strong communicators with well-developed social skills, and high emotional intelligence
- Able to, or willing to learn how to 'speak the language' of other fields
- Able to handle and navigate tensions
- Bias free and impartial
- Able to spot emerging or existing opportunities and push for action

### Boundary Spanning Organisations must be:

- Safe spaces which allow for non-judgemental conversations
- Supportive of the 'invisible work'
- Involving more people in meetings to facilitate communication and share responsibility
- Looking specifically for boundary spanning skills during employment.
- Understanding of and committed to facilitating boundary spanning

### Both Individual and Organisational Boundary Spanning must be:

- Relational, flexible and adaptable
- Open-minded with a big picture thinking
- Dedicating resources to boundary spanning activities
- Willing to interact with and understand different perspectives
- Bringing people together

# Strategies to Elevate Boundary Spanning's Role in Academia and Public Policy Making

**Guiding Question:** What can organisations do to further support the practice of boundary spanning?

## **Employment: Organisations should employ specialist boundary spanners**

- Establish and identify which specific boundary spanner attributes are needed at the outset of a project
- When advertising for a boundary spanning position, create holistic and specific job descriptions

## **Understanding: Allow the time and flexibility required for boundary work**

- Give space and value the time that boundary spanning trust building takes
- Encourage breadth and intersection in boundary spanning and non-boundary spanning roles

## **Training: Prepare the future generation of boundary spanners**

- Incorporate boundary spanning roles and principles into research translation
- Incorporate the teaching of soft skills at university, including training in and increased understanding of research translation and boundary spanning
- Upskill professionals to improve their abilities in applying research

## **Research: Produce understanding of boundary spanning outcomes and impact**

- Calculate boundary spanning return-on-investment to demonstrate and legitimise the work
- Create university outcomes measures for researchers in boundary spanning roles to capture impact on influencing policy and practice

## **Opportunity and Encouragement: Cultivate people's motivation to do good boundary spanning**

- Provide researchers with more opportunities in boundary spanning, especially opportunities which have room for growth and which help, rather than hinder, their professional development.
- Encourage team members and colleagues to talk widely with other stakeholders

## **Structural Awareness: Check built-in system mechanisms**

- Be aware of existing mechanisms, or lack thereof, that are designed to bring people together and foster collaboration.
- Create, tailor or utilise cycles, checks and measures for boundary spanning activities to ensure proper function and create opportunities for optimisation.



# Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although more research is being done on boundary spanning there are still key gaps in the research.

## How is trust built?

It is known that trust is essential for successful collaboration, but:

- How is trust built?
- How is trust measured?
- What separates high-trust partnerships from those with less trust?



## How will the online world effect trust?

Informal in-person “coffee room” chats play a big role in building rapport, so:

- How will the shift towards working remotely impact how trust and relationships are built?
- Can digital platforms support the same depth of relationship-building as in-person meetings?
- What features help or hinder trust in virtual spaces?

## The need for better performance frameworks

- The benefits of Boundary spanning usually develop slowly through long-term relationships, they don't show up well in standard performance reviews.
- To ensure boundary work isn't overlooked or undervalued, **new tools or frameworks to evaluate boundary spanning efforts must be created.**
- These tools should track both immediate results and long-term partnerships and knowledge.

# Conclusions

Many professionals and organisations already engage in boundary spanning even if it's not always formally recognised or labelled as such. While the concept of boundary spanning is not new in practice, the term itself is relatively unfamiliar to many. This unfamiliarity can limit shared understanding and the ability to intentionally support or strengthen boundary spanning work across sectors.

**Boundary spanning offers a powerful approach to connect people and organisations that would benefit from working together but remain siloed.** By actively linking those who are fundamentally separate, such as academia and government, or health and environment sectors, boundary spanning can lead to more coordinated policy development, improved service delivery, and better outcomes for communities.

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