Speaking with fellow professionals

**Session objectives**

* Postdocs reflect on any fears they have around speaking to others
* Postdocs taken through different situations and scenarios where fears might arise
* Postdocs introduced to some general fears that many people have around speaking to others and are asked for their thoughts
* Postdocs given some general advice (psychological and practical) on how to overcome these fears
* Postdocs taken through three specific scenarios: (1) Speaking to professionals with different expertise to their own (2) Speaking with professionals in more senior positions to themselves (3) Speaking with professionals in a larger group or public setting

**Sessions this links to/is preparation for**

The session is all about recognising fears that people have when it comes to speaking to others. By recognising and looking to address these fears, postdocs can start to become more comfortable with networking and reaching out to others. This is important in all working environments but is also central when exploring different careers. The more postdocs can reach out to people to find out about different careers and make new connections, the better. By first recognising any fears they might be harbouring that are creating barriers to networking, they can start to embrace it. The session links to many other sessions and portal resources including:

* Building self-confidence and overcoming self-sabotage
* Communication skills: storytelling, negotiating and influencing
* Growth mindset
* Thinking like an entrepreneur
* Networking resources: introduction to networking, in-person and virtual networking events
* Career exploration strategies
* Informational interviews

**Session format/s (inc. virtual/face-to-face/live or on-demand)**

* Live virtual session or in-person.
* A recorded on-demand video

**Maximum number of participants for this session (also ideal participant/facilitator ratio)**

This session has a few interactive parts but these are mainly contributions to chats or polls. The session is mainly delivering information and advice whilst asking the postdocs to reflect on what resonates for them. It could be delivered to an audience up to one hundred people

**Is this session scalable? If, so how many participants could it be opened up to?**

If the interactive elements were controlled or participants were split into smaller group for discussion, the session could be scaled to a few hundred.

**Session running time**

* 45 mins – 1 hr live virtual session or in-person.
* 17 minute recorded on-demand video

**Session overview**

Speaking with fellow professionals is important both within and beyond academia, as well as for making career moves. This session looks at barriers that people have when speaking with other professionals. These barriers and fears can prevent people reaching out for conversations or participating in meetings, conferences and other engagements. By overcoming these fears, postdocs can expand their network, open up new opportunities and improve their career prospects. This session focusses on some of the most common fears that people have around speaking with other professionals and provides tips on how to overcome these fears. Three specific scenarios are discussed. The first is when speaking with people who have different expertise to your own, which can be difficult when you feel that you know the least in the room about the subject matter. This is important when looking to conduct informational interviews in areas that you might be unfamiliar with.

The second scenario is speaking to people that are more senior than you, including your manager or the principal investigator of your research group. Many postdocs will be familiar with this scenario and some may struggle with this dynamic. Being able to speak with people in senior positions is an important skill that can be developed and improved. The final scenario is speaking up in a group or public setting. Again, many postdocs might be familiar with this in their research environment but they may struggle in these situations.

The session aims to get postdocs to reflect on their own fears and encourage them to overcome some of these fears through practice using some of the tips provided.

**Additional session tools/resources/links**

Full slide deck that can be modified

**Detailed session running plan**

See Appendix for full script.

* Introduce the session and speakers
* Take the audience though the learning objectives: look at common situations, fears and tips to overcome them
* Introduce general situations where speaking with other professionals is required (one-to-one conversations, networking events, meetings and informational interviews). Introduce specific scenarios that are challenging (speaking with people more senior, speaking with those that have a different expertise and speaking in a public setting or group meeting)
* Ask for thoughts of participants about when they are most comfortable speaking to others and what fears they have.
* Introduce some general fears that are relevant to all situations or scenarios
* Ask postdocs for their thoughts on the general fears, if any resonate with them and whether they have developed any tips or techniques to overcome these fears
* Provide advice and tips for managing fears around speaking with others
* Take postdocs through the scenario of speaking with professionals with different expertise. Highlight particular fears such as the fear of looking foolish, being judged or not using the right language. Promote tips such as presenting yourself as a fellow professional, using powerful introductions, active listening/questioning and preparing in advance
* Take postdocs through the scenario of engaging with professionals in more senior positions. Discuss fears around looking foolish, inferiority complex, being judged, confrontation and authority anxiety. Present some tips on how to deal with these situations: understanding your fears, positive affirmations, humanising the interaction, using positive body language, practicing and asking questions (or asking for advice)
* Take postdocs through the final scenario of speaking with several or many professionals in a larger group or public setting. Present common fears such as looking foolish in front of others, the need for self-preservation, culture of keeping quiet and assumptions being made. Present tips to help overcome these fears such as: taking time to identify concerns, writing notes, thinking about the format where you are most comfortable, easing into meetings, being active rather than passive and shifting your mindset
* Summarise the session, leaving the audience with a call to set themselves some goals around their own fears and situations/scenarios that they find most challenging
* Thanks the audience for listening and for their input. Leave contact details

**What does running the session ‘live’ add?**

Running the session ‘live’ allows peer interaction and peer learning. Although we attempt to address many of the most common fears, perhaps some members of the audience have additional fears that they would like to share. Or perhaps they have other tips/tools/techniques that could be useful to others. As a postdoc, being able to see that their peers share the same fears can be tremendously uplifting – it’s not just them who feels that way. A live session allows discussion and potentially for some participants to practice sharing their thoughts in a larger group setting, which is a fear that some have.

**Example copy to use to advertise the session on Eventbrite**

Event title (max. 75 characters) – Speaking with other professionals

Details>Description>

Summary (max 140 characters) – An overview of the fears people have when speaking with other professionals and how to overcome these fears. An opportunity to identify and tackle your own fears.

Description – Do you struggle in certain situations when speaking with other professionals around you? Do you have fears that are holding you back from giving your opinion, asking questions, sharing thoughts or networking with people that can help you in your career? If so, this is the session for you.

Many people have fears around speaking with fellow professionals. These fears could be present in all situations and scenarios or in just some of them. In this session we propose a few situations and scenarios where fears often arise. We name these fears and how they are common to many situations. We also look at ways to overcome these fears. A large part of the session focusses on three scenarios that many people have difficulty with. The first is when speaking to people who have different expertise to their own, which may be the case when you are exploring new career options. The second scenario is when speaking to people who are more senior to you. This presents particular challenges and can lead to specific fears. The final scenario is in meetings or larger group settings where the fear of contributing, commenting or asking a question can loom large.

Come along to find out more and give your own thoughts on speaking with fellow professionals

**Frequently asked questions/pain points for this session**

No specific questions, but be aware that people will have different fears. Some may be more comfortable in sharing them than others so make it clear that they don’t need to share anything in the session if they don’t want to.

In terms of exploring careers, perhaps the most important scenario is speaking to people with different expertise because this is often the case when approaching people for informational interviews. Be aware of this if you are running the session as part of a careers event rather than a general development session.

**Time and resource input level**

1. **Basic/Minimum/Lightest** – Signpost postdocs to the on-demand video of ‘Speaking with fellow professionals’. It sits well with the networking resources if people have barriers that are preventing them from engaging with others
2. **Intermediate** – (all of basic plus some of the following…) Run a similar session live, taking the time to engage with the audience and asking for input from them.
3. **Premium/Most intensive** (all of basic and intermediate plus any of the following…) Tailor the resource to your institution, with signposting to other local sessions. Explore possibility of running coaching sessions for those that are really struggling to communicate with their fellow professionals.

**Appendix 1. Live script for session**

Slide 1+2: Hello everyone, I’m Eamon Dubaissi, a research staff developer with Prosper. Many people have fears of speaking to others and it can be helpful to look more closely at these fears to see if you can address any of them. In this session, we will be looking at fears that you may have of speaking to fellow professionals, both within and beyond academia and in different scenarios and/or environments. As we move through the session, think about any fears that may resonate with you and ways in which you might challenge yourself to try new approaches.

Slide 3: In terms of learning outcomes for the session. We will take a look at some of the most common situations where people have barriers, many of which are psychological, when they are talking with other professionals. We will then look in more detail at some of these fears. Finally, we provide some tips on how you could take steps to overcome these fears.

Slide 4: Fears of speaking with others can arise in many different situations, such as 1-to-1 conversations, networking events such as at conferences, meetings - formal, informal, in-person and online - and of course informational interviews to understand more about careers.

In these situations, there could be different scenarios: you could be speaking to someone more senior to you, you could be speaking with someone with different expertise to you or you could be speaking up in a more public setting with many people (which comes with different pressures). You could have difficulty with all of these, or a combination. Some may be more difficult for you than others. This is your chance to reflect on which situations you struggle with the most. Even if this is not a problem for you, perhaps you could use some of our tips to improve your practice.

Slide 5: Before we get into the different fears, we would like to get you initial thoughts on speaking with fellow professionals. We have two questions that we would like you to consider. The first is what helps you to feel comfortable when speaking to others? This could be the type of environment, the type of people, the time of day, anything you can think of. The second question is what are your personal fears of speaking to others? When it comes down to it, what scares you or prevents you from approaching people?

We have opened up a Mentimeter for you to share your thoughts <<you can use a digital tool like Mentimeter, a chat window (if virtual), post-it notes (if in-person) or just get them to share with people around them or as a whole group>> so we can build a picture of what you are thinking.

<Allow 5-10 mins for this activity. Go through some of the thoughts and say we will touch upon some of these later in the session. Ask if anyone would like to expand on any of their own thoughts in front of the group>.

Slide 6**:** In many cases, the fears associated with the situations and scenarios have a common origin. It sometimes helps to name the fears so you can home in on what you might do to address them. Here are some of the most common fears:

1. In any situation where you are speaking, being questioned or putting an idea across, you may have a fear of looking foolish, embarrassing yourself or being humiliated. You may feel like this, even if it has never happened to you before. Many of the other fears come from this inside feeling that you may embarrass yourself.
2. Imposter syndrome is not so much a fear as a feeling, but it can prevent you from participating or pursuing something. You might say to yourself, ‘I’ll be found out if I put myself in certain situations – people will realise that I don’t actually know what I’m doing’. This is a common feeling and we touch upon it in greater detail elsewhere on the portal, so please check out those resources if it applies to you.
3. An inferiority complex - again not a fear, but persistent thoughts - can also inhibit you. It’s similar to imposter syndrome, but it’s not necessarily that you feel that you are no good or you don’t know what you’re doing, but that you feel that other people are more accomplished, capable or worthy than you. This can have certain benefits, if it motivates you to compete or drives you on to improve. This may have been important in our ancestral environment when survival was everything. However, when an inferiority complex goes too far and becomes all-consuming, getting stuck with those thoughts and feelings, it can diminish your confidence, leading you to withdraw socially and prevent you from engaging with others.
4. Perhaps a fear of being judged or criticized can stop you from sharing your views or engaging in certain situations. The very nature of academic discourse can be highly critical. For example, receiving reviewer’s comments for your grants and publications or having to defend yourself and your work at conferences, interviews or even in your local environment. This may have an impact on your actions
5. You might have a fear of making a bad impression. You may feel that the stakes are too high for you to fully contribute or be yourself in certain situations
6. Another fear is of consequences. In certain situations, there may be a power imbalance so you are afraid to give your views if you think they might not be well-received or could have an impact on you later down the line.

Other worries and fears include the fears around the very act of speaking. Do I actually have anything to say or ideas to contribute? Or are you worried that you might stumble over words or be unable to find the right words in the moment. Perhaps you’re not speaking in your native language and it’s more difficult to get over your point of view or create the right impression – this might stop you from contributing. Maybe you fear the unknown or it might be an unfamiliar environment, or you have a fear of failure, for example when you’re speaking in public. On the flip side, you might have a fear of success – for example, you might be thinking, what if this meeting leads to a new opportunity that I’m not ready for or distracts me from what I’m currently doing. There are a lot of fears and worries, but remember that most people have these and you can work on overcoming them.

Slide 7:Before we give you some advice on how you might overcome these fears, we first want to find out if you have any tips that you would like to share with everyone. Firstly, do any of these fears resonate with you? And if they do, do you use any (or have you heard of any) techniques for minimising their impact?

<<Go back to previous slide so that they can look at the different fears as they do the exercise. Link to Mentimeter/chat/post-it notes>>

We’ll give you a few moments to think and then if you post your thoughts we can read some of them out.

<<After a few minutes, start to read out some of the thoughts and ask audience members if they would like to elaborate or comment on any of the points.

Thank them for their input>>

Slide 8:Here is some general advice that we can offer for how to begin to overcome these fears. They may work for you, they may not, but it’s worth giving them a go and keeping them in mind as you go forward:

1. A lot of what this comes down to is developing your self-confidence. Now, we don’t want to trivialise this and make out like it’s a simple fix. Developing your confidence takes time and can be a slow process. When you feel confident in yourself, you will naturally approach situations in a different frame of mind - more positive and less anxious. Look back at times when you have felt more confident and contrast that to times when you have been low on confidence. Perhaps the same, or similar, situation looks very different.
2. Even if you don’t feel so confident, you still need to remember your self-worth. You have achieved things, you have something to offer or you wouldn’t be where you are. Approaching a conversation or engagement with the mindset that you can add value to others with what you know can help you to contribute. You might help others solve their problems or spark new ideas by speaking up.
3. If it works for you, you could practice positive affirmations. Say to yourself, I’ve got this or I’m a great communicator or I have a lot to contribute. Try re-framing negative self-talk. For example, thoughts about embarrassing yourself. Try altering this talk to people are, on the whole, not malicious - they want to help and even if you do stumble over words or appear shy, they will overlook this or not even notice. They may even have some of the same feelings to yourself.
4. Try humanizing your interactions and any conversations you have. Whoever they are, they are just humans too
5. Prepare and practice: whether you’re going into a meeting where you know everyone, or an unfamiliar situation with new people or organisations, you can prepare. For example, ask yourself: What is the meeting about? Who are the people that are attending? Do you know anything about the organisation? This helps you to feel more confident and might be a source of inspiration for questions and comments. Related to this, depending on the situation, you could practice the first line of what you would say or maybe even an elevator pitch if you want to get over who you are, and what you do, succinctly.
6. Surround yourself with people who are positive and supportive. Where you can, try to avoid those that are hyper-critical, at least until your confidence improves.
7. Understand and raise awareness of both your strengths and your weaknesses, but focus more on your strengths and keep reminding yourself of what you are good at. If you are more introverted as a person, embrace it, it doesn’t mean you have anything less to offer than your more extroverted colleagues. Introverts are often very curious, really listen to what is being said and prepare well. People respond better when it is clear that they are being listened to and when they are asked thought-provoking questions.
8. Consider your body language, it’s not always just about what you say, it’s how you actively listen: with an open body language, smiling, nodding. These all create a good impression. Conversely, be aware of crossing your arms, tapping your feet and your eye contact (either too much or too little)
9. Some tips to get heard with your voice, tone and language include replacing, ‘um’ with short filler words and phrases like now, you see, however. You can use silence as a means to lean into any points that you make and it also gives you time to take a breath. Tell a story with your words. We have more on storytelling techniques elsewhere in the portal, so take a look.
10. Understanding and adapting your own mindset is key. With a growth mindset you are aiming for progress, rather than perfection. You can improve how you engage with others over time. Meanwhile, by embracing an entrepreneurial mindset you might challenge yourself to take some sensible risks in situations where you are engaging with others. Both of these mindsets are expanded on elsewhere on the Prosper portal
11. When you are in conversations, deliberately look out for common ground, something you share or have a mutual interest in. This immediately builds rapport and helps the conversation to flow. If you’re prepared, you may even know something about them or their organisation that you can bring up
12. Exercise self-compassion. If you’re nervous, recognise it, but don’t be hard on yourself. Treat yourself as you would a friend and remember that everyone brings something unique and different to the table, including you.

Slide 9:So, now we’ll look at three different scenarios that you could encounter during any conversation or meeting, formal or informal.

We’ll start with speaking to those that have different expertise, skillsets or specialisms to yourself. In research, this could be in a one-to-one conversation or meeting with a collaborator, or an interdisciplinary meeting. You may feel apprehensive or intimidated because they know more about a particular subject matter than yourself. Another time that you may feel this is when you’re making career decisions and you want to reach out to others for help - for example, arranging informational interviews. By definition, you want to gain some information from them, perhaps about an area that you know very little about. This may make you feel a bit inadequate or uncomfortable. You may have some of those fears of looking foolish, being judged or not knowing how to converse using the right language.

In terms of tips for speaking with professionals that have different expertise to your own. Remember the key word is ‘different’, it’s not that you don’t have any. Aim to present yourself as a fellow professional. You also have value; you may not know about the specifics of the area under discussion, but you do know a lot. It can help if you prepare a powerful introduction. Remember the importance of an opening line and perhaps an elevator pitch that is short and concise. If dealing with someone you don’t know, remember that first impressions are important. So be friendly, smile, use an energising tone of voice. If you’re nervous, try to turn this into excitement - they’re similar feelings - so they can see that you’re keen to talk to them. Share why you called the meeting and why particularly them – it’s a chance for you to show that you know who they are and what they do. You could end the interaction with an action point; the next steps to keep momentum.

In other situations, like meetings where you are not very knowledgeable about the subject area, you can still contribute. You can support others when they make their points, nodding, reiterating the point or that you agree – ‘that’s a good idea’. Showing active listening and asking questions can keep you involved and show that you are interested. It also boosts your confidence. Also, if you have prepared enough to ask a few questions, this will help psychologically, enabling you to build rapport and relationships with others.

In all of these situations, where you feel like you are less knowledgeable than the person or people you are speaking to, keep in mind that you can also add value to them, maybe not at that exact point in time, maybe sometime in future. Or perhaps you can resolve to help someone else using your own knowledge and expertise.

Slide 10:Hierarchy and seniority can be a barrier to engagement, during conversations, and more generally. As well as the fears of looking foolish and being judged, you may feel inferior. You may have worries over consequences of speaking up. Or perhaps you are concerned about being disciplined or told off. Perhaps you have a fear of confrontation. When dealing with professionals in more senior positions, you can suffer with what is called authority anxiety – specifically around your one-to-one interactions with those in positions of authority.

If you want to address these issues, it might help for you to reflect on why you feel like this in the first place. Some factors may be external, for example how you have seen a colleague being treated by the individual that you have difficulty speaking with (or perhaps you have heard rumours that they can be difficult). Other factors may be internal, they may be deep rooted from your childhood in terms of respect for hierarchy or a particular situation you found yourself in when you were young. It can help to simply know where these things come from to then try to dissociate from the reality of the current situation.

Using positive affirmations such as ‘I’m doing fine’, repeating them and being consistent can help you change your association with authority figures. Even visualising yourself speaking to them and what you would say can help

Again, humanize them, focus on the person not the power. More often than not, they too have a boss and are more concerned about them than any small mistake you make.

It may help to have a plan when going into a conversation. Lead with your headline, share your thought process and ask for their advice – this can change the dynamic of the conversation.

Be aware of your body language and try to avoid being defensive.

If this is a particular concern for you, then practice. Find a leader that you know a little, you admire and respect and ask them for a meeting. They’ll probably be flattered. You also have the opportunity to think about how you can add value to them.

Keep firmly in your mind that people in senior positions, like your manager, want things to run smoothly. By asking questions and speaking up, they can see that you share that view.

Slide 11:The final scenario is speaking up in a public setting. So, we’re not talking about presenting or giving a talk as this is a different type of interaction. Prosper has resources on presentational skills elsewhere on the portal, so check those out if you would like to improve in that area.

Here, we’re talking about situations in meetings of several or more people where you might be invited to speak up, ask questions or contribute in some way. You might know the feeling, where you have a question or comment in your mind, but you feel nervous to share it. So, what could be some of the reasons you feel this way - what are the root fears

1. Like for the other scenarios, the fear of looking foolish may be a large contributor to you holding back from expressing your views. Saying to yourself things like, ‘this question is really stupid, I’m going to embarrass myself in front of everyone’. This feeling could be heightened further in a situation with several people in the room, rather than a one-to-one conversation.
2. Another one might be self-preservation: you might feel that the risks of saying something wrong or out of turn, even by mistake, could be very personal and immediate. Whereas the broader benefits to others – or the organisation - of speaking up is less clear. On balance, you might not see it as a risk worth taking
3. There may also be a culture of myths about the work environment. You may think ‘keep your head down, I don’t want to be a target’, or ‘this happened to so and so when they spoke out’. Or perhaps, you don’t see people at your seniority level contributing, so you feel like you shouldn’t either.
4. There may be lots of assumptions being made. For example, that your boss would not like it if you said something or it might cause issues for somebody else or create extra work for yourself

But there are lots of benefits to speaking up at work:

* It helps to build relationships with co-workers that are mutually beneficial. It gives topics for further discussion and debate
* It shows you care about the topic, the person and the outcome

But do consider the context you are speaking up in and the audience you are speaking with. Weigh up the pros and cons. Ask yourself if it is helpful for people to hear from you

The fear of speaking up, in a meeting for example, can be completely paralyzing. When you want to say something, you rehearse it in your mind, but then you overthink it and don’t ask your question or make your comment. Afterwards, you might be frustrated with yourself, making things worse in terms of your self-confidence. Many high achievers in academia are also highly sensitive to criticism. This can cause them to stay silent, even though they are an asset to teams and workforces because they tend to think very thoroughly about ideas and solutions to problems.

So, let’s have a look at some tips for how you could approach these public meeting scenarios in a different way

* Like with the previous scenario, taking the time to reflect on why you fear these situations can help. Identify areas of concern or ideas you have before the meeting and think about ways you could share them. If the pros outweigh the cons, then it’s probably worth sharing. Bring notes into the meeting with you - or write notes during the meeting - if that’s helpful. If you can, choose a format that is most comfortable for you to share your views
* Ease yourself into the meeting. It might help arriving early and speaking to one or two co-workers to help you feel more comfortable
* When you’re ready, make a commitment to yourself to say something when the opportunity arises early in a meeting. If you don’t do it early, anxiety can build up and put you off from doing it all. It can help to surround yourself with supportive colleagues. Remember, if you’re nervous before making a contribution, it might be because it’s something really important that could make the difference to someone else
* Don’t focus on the number of contributions you make, focus on asking thought-provoking questions and useful comments. You can follow up with ideas after the session too – it shows you are listening and that you care
* When you first start contributing, it doesn’t need to be a lengthy input, say something short and concise just to help you feel comfortable in taking part
* Perhaps take on some task for the next meeting so you are being active rather than passive. Over time, this will help to reduce any fears or anxieties you have about these engagements
* Aim to shift your mindset. For example, if you’re telling yourself ‘my idea is incomplete, so I’ll keep it to myself’, change it to ‘it could be the inspiration that someone else needs, so I should share it’.

Slide 12: Let’s end by summarising what we’ve touched upon in the session.

If you find certain situations when you are speaking with fellow professionals difficult, take time out to really think about why that is. What are your worries or fears? It’s often the same root fears that underpin many of these situations. However, addressing these fears is not simple, it requires deliberate practice. Consider setting yourself some goals around some of the situations and scenarios that are a particular challenge for you. Perhaps use some of the tips provided to frame these goals.

The content in this session relates to many other Prosper resources. This includes those on building self-confidence and overcoming self-sabotage, as well as improving your communication skills. Other resources on switching your mindset from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset and developing an entrepreneurial mindset may also be useful in this context. So please, check them out.

Slide 13:We hope you have enjoyed today’s session and thank you for your contributions