

Place matters. We all know this. Yet, how much it matters for innovation is startling. In a recent systematic review of 23 peer-reviewed, scholarly articles on networking in food innovation districts, 16 of the 23 strongly suggested that the operational environment (place) was the most important aspect of networking in an innovation district.

Innovation districts combine economic, physical, and networking assets within a place, allowing for the creation a synergistic relationship between people, firms, and place (the physical geography of the district). This facilitates idea generation and accelerates commercialization.

Networking, as one of the three key assets, is an opportunity for innovation district members to share information, access resources, face challenges, and improve their competitiveness, along with other benefits. Networking in innovation districts is at its best when it occurs in the right place. This includes the physical environment and the governance of the network.

The physical environment is the geographic location of the overall network and the specific location of networking activities. It was identified through the research that most networking in innovation districts is done informally, within public spaces initially, and organically. This makes places where random meet valuable innovation spots. The obvious examples of are locations such as bars, museums, coffee shops, meetup groups, higher ed institutions, country clubs, etc.

Yet, there are some non-traditional places that have a unique edge as networking environments. Workout facilities, houses of worship, daycares, elementary schools, hair salons and barbershops are not necessarily top of mind when you think of creation spaces. Yet, they are places where different people (innovative or otherwise), who have no other reason to interact, visit on a regular basis. This frequent and consistent mixing of people creates the opportunity for ideas to be shared, connections to be made, and collaboration to occur.

However, place is more than just the physical location in which people meet and collaborate. It is also the intangible characteristics of the network that gives it the power of connectivity. Networking is less than systematic, but more than random. Thus, with regards to governance, place is a bit complicated.

Networking in innovation districts cannot be controlled by any one entity. So, leaders within innovation districts are best able to influence networking by impacting the availability and quality of the physical locations. Additionally, ensuring that the general dynamics of the community are inviting is key. In the research, it was discovered that concepts such as decentralized organizational structures, informality of participation, organic cultural development, non-competitive interactions and information exchanges, and frequency / availability of information sharing opportunities are important to effective networking within innovation districts.

Additionally, networking within innovation districts (or in any context) means having the right people in the network. Innovation district leaders seeking to improve the optimality of their networking asset should help to ensure that the opportunity to interact is being shared to key contributors who may not be currently connected. The key to governance is creating the opportunity for a high frequency and strong consistency of quality and varied interactive experiences amongst network contributors.

Place matters, and it really matters for networking. That makes it foundational for innovation districts. Place doesn't have to be perfect. Often the imperfections are what makes it desirable. But a healthy awareness of physical assets and an attentive, yet non-controlling, governance of the intangibles can make it the right place to innovate.