



The Conversation



Th

The Most Valuable People in Your Network

10:06 AM Tuesday March 8, 2011

by Rob Cross | [Comments \(16 \)](#)

Too often new collaborative technologies — though intended to connect employees seamlessly and enable work to get done more efficiently — are misused in ways that impede innovation and hurt performance.

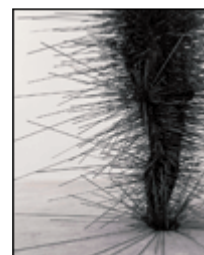
Age-old wisdom suggests it is not what but **whom you know** that matters. Over decades this truism has been supported by a great deal of research on networks. Work since the 1970s shows that people who maintain **certain kinds of networks** do better: They are promoted more rapidly than their peers, make more money, are more likely to find a job if they lose their own, and are more likely to be considered high performers.

But the secret to these networks **has never been their size**. Simply following the advice of self-help books and building mammoth Rolodexes or Facebook accounts actually tends to hurt performance as well as have a negative effect on health and well-being at work. Rather, the people who do better tend to have more ties to people who themselves are *not* connected. People with ties to the less-connected are more likely to hear about ideas that haven't gotten exposure elsewhere, and are able to piece together opportunities in ways that less-effectively-networked colleagues cannot.



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If bigger is not better in networks, what is the actual impact of social media tools in the workforce? The answer: They are as likely to actually hurt performance and engagement as they are to help — if they simply foist more collaborative demands on an already-overloaded workforce. In most places, people are drowning in collaborative demands imposed by meetings, emails, and phone calls. For most of us, these activities consume 75% to 90% of a typical work week and constitute a gauntlet to get to the work we must do. In this context, new collaborative technologies, when not used appropriately, are over-loading us all and diminishing efficiency and innovation at work.

One study conducted by my colleagues [Peter Gray](#) of the University of Virginia and [Sal Parise](#) and [Bala Iyer](#) of Babson College that will soon be published in *MIS Quarterly* suggests that the same kind of networks important in face-to-face interactions also matter in social media. Peter, Sal and Bala studied a social-bookmarking system in a major consultancy. These applications, increasingly used in many knowledge-intensive work settings, allow employees to search on website bookmarks and tags other employees have made to their favorite websites and so see what these colleagues have been reading lately. It turns out this is a low-cost way of sharing information and knowledge that is rapidly overcoming many of the drawbacks of older generations of knowledge-management systems.

Peter, Sal, and Bala sought to discover whether these systems could help employees be more innovative at work by helping them connect ideas from different contexts. What they found was that innovativeness had nothing to do with the number of bookmarks accessed or even the number of people an individual connected to through the bookmarking system. Employees that were rated as more innovative didn't have bigger networks; rather, they had more *bridging ties* — ties that connected them to other employees who were themselves not connected.

The better-rated employees had networks that looked like Susan's — not Richard's — below:

Practically, this means we need to think about where our electronic links are taking us. If we are circulating too much with people we have known forever or people who themselves are all spending time in the same meetings and interactions, then we are not getting the performance impact we can from social-media tools. Bigger is not better. The magic lies in [the new ideas and perspectives](#) that can come from connections into different networks.

Rob Cross is an associate professor of management in the McIntire School of Commerce at the University of Virginia. His research focuses on how relationships and informal networks in organizations can be analyzed and improved to promote performance and innovation.

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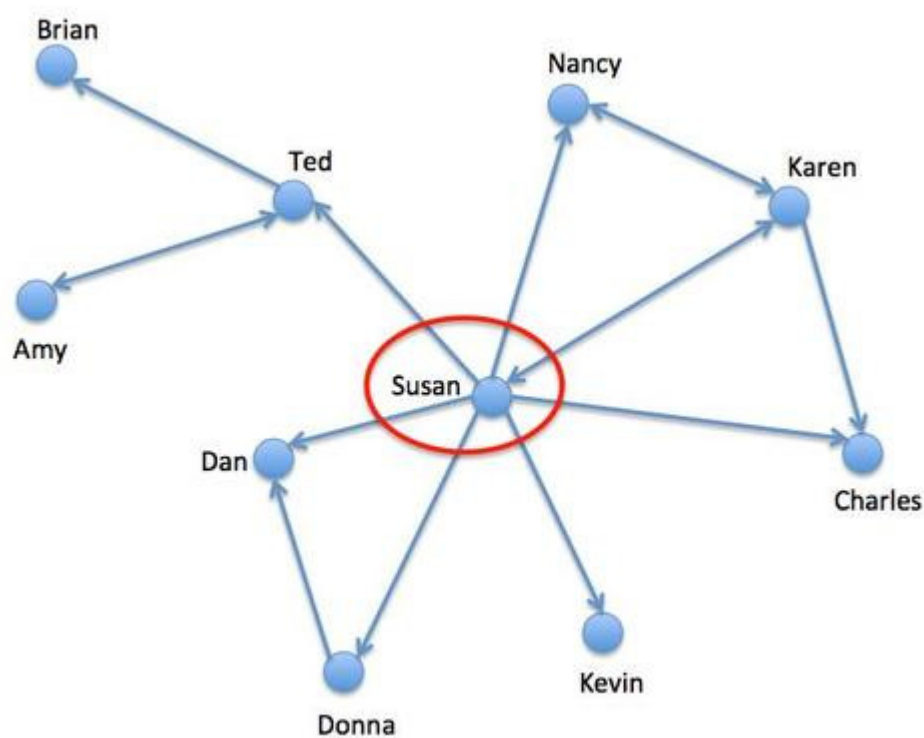
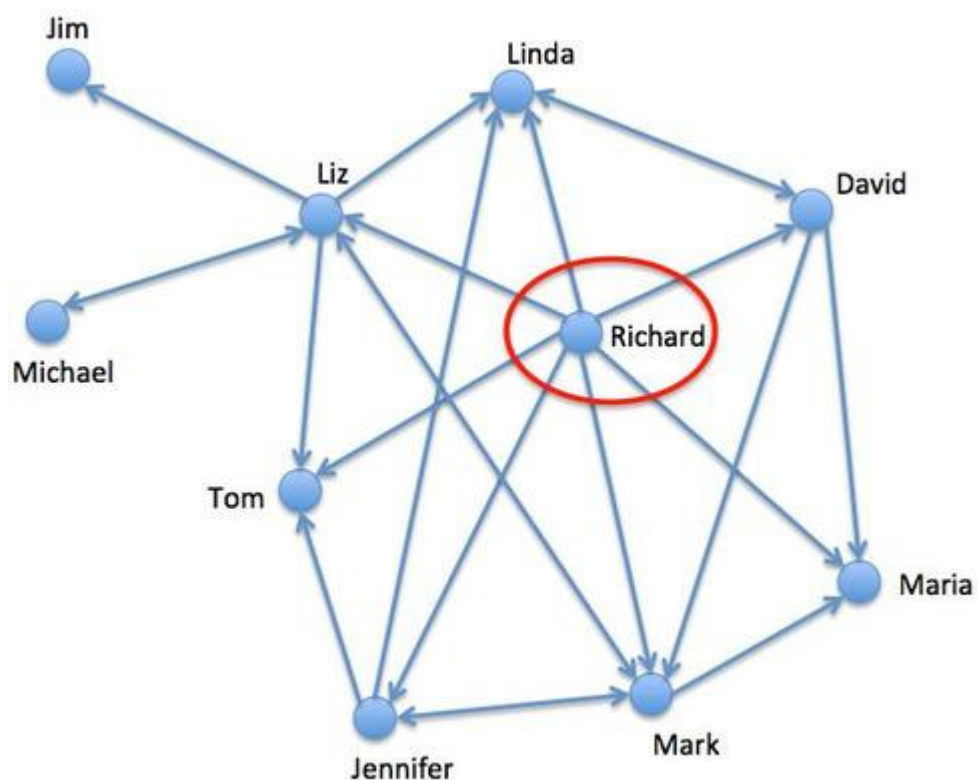
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John Kwijuka 4 hours ago

This is marketing in a nutshell. "We can not be all things to all people" springs to mind. Connecting with people that add value is crucial, as well as steering clear from the 'distracters'.

1 person liked this.



susan borst 1 day ago

Interesting view - makes a lot of sense. On Twitter, I've done a good job connecting with like minded marketing/advertising people, and am now working to expand into other networks of interest outside of marketing. It's interesting that my tweets that get the most traction within my marketing universe (e.g., the ones that garner the most retweets, or @ messages) are those that were inspired by ideas/learning from outside of that universe. This Susan seeks to be more like the above Susan model.

1 person liked this.



Candace 1 day ago

This is an extremely helpful article and drives home a very important message. I'm sharing this on my blog today as well, thank you!

It's so important to consider who is in your network, and continue to stragically expand and nuture that network - not only to produce more creative, higher quality work product, but also to keep yourself connected and aware of new opportunities before they are made public.

<http://StrategicExecutiveConne...>

1 person liked this.



Rob Cross 0 minutes ago

We have found that another aspect to consider with collaborative technologies is not just who you collaborate with but also what you get. In a lot of our network research we have found people certainly need work related things from colleagues -- information, expertise, resources and help. But interactions with colleagues at work also provide a range of more personal benefits -- our peers can provide career advice, developmental feedback, personal support, political coverage, they can energize us or give us a sense that our work

matters.

When we overlay network maps on these different benefits we find that work-related interactions often occur pretty well via collaborative tools. Yet when we look at the more personal benefits – which really matter for engagement, job satisfaction and performance – we see a significant drop off in networks that do not have some face to face component. Many of the more personal dimensions of interactions just don't seem to move well in purely virtual relationships despite state of the art collaborative technologies – and this of course has great impact for telecommuters, virtual teams and global work.

Like Reply



John Maloney 7 minutes ago

Thanks Rob, good blog. Here's the next NorCal leadership retreat on this critical theme --

<http://networksingularity.com/...>

-j

Like Reply



Brad Palmer 1 hour ago

Makes sense -- within enterprises the huge value lies in sharing expertise and understanding across silos. Important to deploy social tools within the context of the organization, so as to complement rather than challenge its structure, culture and decision making traditions. Simply deploying a systems that allows everyone to broadcast to everyone brings little value on its own. Focus on facilitating teamwork and finding hidden expertise.

Like Reply



azeemazhar 2 hours ago

Hi Rob

Great post - we see this in data across twitter. The pattern of people who are hyperactive in their following tends to lead them to a very undifferentiated positioning. This is particularly the case for people who engage in mutual following games. Large numbers of connection lead to lower quality interactions.

By contrast, people with fewer 'friend' connections (that is people who follow fewer people) tend to exhibit the tendencies of more focus & more authority.

Hardly surprising - but it shows the limits of unbounded connectedness.

If you'd like access to data we have, happy to arrange it.

best

Azeem

Like Reply



Dan Olson 5 hours ago

Rob - Thank you for the article. I agree with you premise. Too often we rush to send our ideas to everyone, when it is best to strategically map out our course.

Like Reply



Stefano Pogliani 5 hours ago

Very very much real life. Think to when you travel. If you travel and visit unknown places or meet with complete new cultures... this makes you unique and springs a lot of new ideas and enthusiasm. Great article

Like Reply



Thomas Sadtler 6 hours ago

One also has to take into account the purpose of the network. In a recent study we did with older job seekers in the Concord Professional Network, people from 45 through 75, we found that a key to overcoming age bias was in networking with people who know and can attest to the quality of the job seeker's work. This was typically people with stronger ties than weaker ties.

Like Reply



Michael Dekner 11 hours ago

I think it needs to be seen in different lights. If you are trying to establish collaboration it helps if people share a common context. If you are trying to solve problems or trying to improve inovation people from different contexts are helpful.

This is also more or less described in "Strength of weak ties" <http://ow.ly/4aEMX>

Like Reply



Slafferty 12 hours ago

Very interesting Rob, thank you. This has given me a completely new perspective for a paper that I'm writing on building and managing influence networks. Love your work!

Like Reply



Rick Spratley 13 hours ago

Intriguing and it makes sense to me the value of being connected to people with different interests. Afterall, aren't dinner parties much more fun and entertaining when the host invites people to attend that are in professions much different from your own?

I would love to learn more about this study. In particular, how did they determine which employees were the most innovative? Peer Perception?

In an organization like Susan's which appears to be have multiple silos, it would make sense that her colleagues would rate her the most innovative, because more people know her and because she is connected to more people, she has more knowledge to be more innovative.

In Richard's organization, he wouldn't stand out quite as much as Susan, because there are many more people with many more connections. But I'd imagine Richard's organization is more knowledgeable and effective because they are better networked. Or does the research conclude that too much collaboration and networking with too many people harms innovation?

Like Reply



Annmaria 1 day ago

Reminds me of the book Consequential Strangers - she found these loose ties to neighbors, local businesses, casual acquaintances etc to be effective precisely because they didn't know the same people you knew.

Like Reply



Gunter Soydanbay 1 day ago

This is a very helpful article. I remember The Art of Woo (<http://goo.gl/XbjJ7>) has a chapter dedicated to the same topic. Cheers

Like Reply



KareAnderson 1 day ago

I found these insights so helpful - both in considering how organizations can leverage the talents of people inside and outside their "wall" and in increasing the capacity for meaningful work - with others. Those with "bridging ties" spark serendipity. They enable collaboration among diverse people, as well as spurring insights into innovation. Thus they must amplify the power of disparate people working, perhaps a new way to understand where the wisdom of crowds effect can apply. A complementary book to these findings is The Difference.

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