Enrich your social capital with the right networks

Networking is not all that it's cracked up to be; in fact it can even be downright harmful, so says Martin Gargiulo, an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and expert on social network analysis.

"We know today that networks are an asset that helps you get things done … (but) networks can also be a liability." At best, networks can be a window to the world that allows you to understand and work with the diversity and the complexity of that world. At worst, they can be 'blinders' that prevent you from doing so.

"If your network is composed of people like you, people who all talk to each other – what scholars call a "dense" network – you're pretty sure you understand what's going on in the rest of the organisation, but in fact you're recycling the same information … The illusion of multiple views confirms your own views. But, at some point, you find out to your surprise that what you thought was obvious to everybody, is only obvious to you and the people you talk to," Gargiulo explains.

That is not to say that all dense networks are bad. At work, for example, Gargiulo says that if you have a team that forms a dense network of like-minded individuals, it will be an important resource towards achieving your professional goals. But you also need a sparse network to bridge outside that team into the larger organisation. Otherwise, your team may become isolated and unable to get the support it needs to get things done.

"You need to understand the trade-off between a dense, homogenous network, which can be very comforting and very helpful in a moment of crisis for example, and a sparse network that allows you to reach throughout the organisation and beyond. You do want to have that closely-knit support network around you when you're facing bad times. But it can also be a liability unless you combine it with a sparse network that goes beyond that close support group."

Strong versus weak ties

One key to making networking work for you, according to Gargiulo, is to differentiate between what network scholars call "strong ties" and "weak ties".

"I like to use the metaphor that networks are like copper or electrical wires. The thicker the wire, the more power it carries; the more you can help people, the more people will be willing to invest time and energy in helping you out."

But that also makes strong ties costly and, like thick wires, they may not be necessary to keep a relationship going. Gargiulo cautions against having too wide a network because maintaining all those

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relationships can detract from the ones that truly matter. He recommends distilling one's network to a core group of "between 20 and 30 … and sometimes even smaller; 15 or 20" depending on how sociable the person is. These people may change over time (some ties become stronger, some weaker), but there is always a core network that matters, and you need to nurture those ties.

"When you look at websites like LinkedIn, which can be extremely useful, you very quickly see that some people that have huge networks of 400-500 contacts. When you study what's going on in those networks, in fact only a very small number of ties are active, in the sense that you actually exchange things with them because maintaining relationships takes time."

A systematic approach

To help people better understand the complexities of networking, and subsequently calibrate their own networks to optimal levels, Gargiulo has developed a tool in the form of a social capital questionnaire. You answer the questionnaire online and can get a personalised report comparing your network with a reference group of your choice.

He explains: "The report walks you through the composition, the strength of your relationships, and how your contacts relate to one another, discussing the pros and cons of different types of networks. It also analyses what kind of resources you get from these contacts – how important, how critical those people are for you."

"One of the things that we learn very clearly in the network analysis research is that those relationships are as consequential for what happens to you, for your ability to get things done and for how you think and how you view the world, as the relationships that you have with each other."

For example, Gargiulo says you may think you have a relationship that does not seem to be very important. But before relegating that relationship to the backburner, you can, with the help of this questionnaire, evaluate if that person is well connected to everybody in your network. If so, you will then be pre-empted to keep this 'critical' relationship alive, because whatever you don't do in that relationship may affect the rest of your network.

Ultimately, no one is an island. "You have your own abilities and experience, but you also have – and this is crucial for today's jobs – all the experience, ability, knowledge that resides with people in your network."

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