Network Thinking

Idea In Short

Organization charts show who reports to whom, yet work rarely follows those lines. Information, advice, and influence travel through informal networks that no chart records. Network thinking makes these connections visible and asks how their pattern shapes performance. Rob Cross and Andrew Parker studied informal networks in well-known companies and found that critical knowledge often flows through a few people. Ronald Burt showed that managers who bridge gaps between groups tend to have better ideas and better careers. This article explains how to map a network, what the patterns mean, and how to use them without turning colleagues into data points.

A company launches a cross-functional initiative and gives it a clear chart, a steering group, and a plan. Months later, progress depends on three people whom everyone calls for help, and one of them is about to leave. The chart never showed this dependence. Network thinking puts it on the page. It treats the people, teams, and ideas in an organization as nodes, and the relationships among them as the structure that deserves study.

Beyond the organization chart

Rob Cross and Andrew Parker based their book The Hidden Power of Social Networks on a study of informal networks in well-known companies. The publisher's description says that the work shows how social network analysis can map how work really gets done and reveal where knowledge and collaboration break down.1 Their central point is that formal structure and actual patterns of interaction often differ.

A University of Virginia news article on Cross, who teaches there, describes his research on how connections shape performance and collaboration in organizations.2 His work encourages leaders to see collaboration as a resource that can be overloaded, wasted, or well used.

The core move is simple. Instead of asking what a person's title is, ask whom they turn to for help, whom they trust, and whom they avoid. The answers form a map, and the map often surprises senior leaders, who tend to overestimate the importance of the formal hierarchy.

Brokers and structural holes

Ronald Burt of the University of Chicago added a second idea. The theory of structural holes begins from the observation that information, ideas, and behavior are more homogeneous within a group of people than between two groups.3 A gap between groups that share little is a structural hole, and a person who spans it is a broker.

His 2004 article studied managers in a large American electronics company. The abstract reports that compensation, positive performance evaluations, promotions, and good ideas are disproportionately in the hands of people whose networks span structural holes, and that brokers are more likely to express ideas and less likely to have them dismissed.4 The mechanism is exposure. A broker sees how different groups think, so they carry a richer set of options.

A Chicago Booth Review article summarizes the practical lesson: managers who build bridges, and not cliques, tend to earn more, get promoted faster, and report greater job satisfaction.5 The article also warns that the benefit depends on context, since some settings reward closeness and trust more than novelty.

Reading a network map

A network map has a few features worth learning. A hub is a node with many connections. An isolate or small cluster has few links to the rest. A bridge connects groups that otherwise barely interact. A dense cluster contains many mutual ties, so ideas circulate quickly inside it.

Each feature suggests questions. If a hub receives many requests, is that person overloaded, and what happens if they leave? If a team sits at the edge, does it receive information late? If two departments share only one bridge, what happens when that bridge is busy? Mapping turns vague worries about silos into specific, checkable facts.

Cross and Parker's approach also shows hidden experts. Some of the most valued advisers

hold no senior title, and some senior people seldom get consulted. Recognizing the first group allows a company to protect and reward them, and recognizing the second helps leaders see where their own influence is thin.

How to build a first map

Choose a bounded group, such as a project team or a department. Ask each member three short questions: whom do you go to for information, whom do you go to for advice on difficult problems, and who gives you energy at work. Keep the survey brief, so that most people reply.

Draw each answer as an arrow from the asker to the person asked. Many free tools can do this, and a whiteboard works for small groups. Then look for people with many incoming arrows, for pairs of clusters with few arrows between them, and for people with none.

Share the map with the participants, and discuss it in a neutral way. Ask the group what the pattern means and what they would change. People often propose better fixes than outsiders, and involvement makes them more willing to act.

Acting on what you see

Several remedies follow from common patterns. If a hub is overloaded, redistribute some decisions, document common answers, or add a second expert. If two groups are isolated, create shared projects, rotate staff, or appoint a liaison with time set aside for the role. If a valuable broker has no formal recognition, adjust roles and rewards.

Avoid the temptation to connect everyone to everyone. Too many ties create overload and meetings that consume the day. Target the few links that matter most to the work, and review the map after changes to see whether the pattern improved.

Closure and brokerage together

Burt distinguished two ways in which a network helps. Closure, where people in a group all know one another, builds trust and makes it easy to enforce shared norms. Brokerage, where a person links separate groups, brings fresh ideas and practices across the gap. Neither one wins every time.

The Chicago Booth Review piece cited above, and Burt's book Neighbor Networks, treat both as sources of advantage that structural holes make possible. The practical reading is a balance. A team that must execute a precise plan benefits from tight bonds, while a team that must find new options benefits from people with outside links. Leaders should ask which task they face before they decide how to shape the network.

Networks of ideas and systems

The method does not stop at people. Analysts map links among products, suppliers, customers, and topics, and the same questions apply. Which supplier connects many others, so that its failure would spread? Which customer segments overlap in what they buy? Which skills cluster together, and which ones bridge teams?

Mapping ideas can also support strategy. A firm that charts how its patents, projects, and partners relate may see a cluster of work with no ties to the rest of the business, which suggests either a hidden opportunity or a distraction. In every case, the principle holds: structure shapes flow, so study the structure before you push on the flow.

A hypothetical example

Consider a hypothetical consulting firm with offices in three cities. The formal chart shows equal collaboration among them, yet a survey reveals that nearly all cross-office advice flows through one senior manager in the largest office. When she takes leave, requests pile up and projects stall.

The firm responds by pairing junior staff across offices on shared engagements, creating a monthly exchange of case lessons, and naming two additional liaisons. Six months later, a repeat survey shows more links among the offices and a smaller share of requests routed through the original hub. The example is invented, yet it shows how a map can turn a hidden risk into an action plan.

Cautions

Network data concerns people, so handle it with care. Explain the purpose, protect individual responses, and avoid using maps to judge or punish. Trust drops quickly if employees suspect surveillance.

A map is also a snapshot. Relationships change with projects and moods, so repeat the exercise and treat the results as a prompt for conversation. Finally, remember that numbers describe structure and not quality. A person with few ties may be a valuable specialist, and a person with many may simply be loud.

- 1The hidden power of social networks
- 2Rob Cross on organizational networks
- 3Structural holes
- 4Structural holes and good ideas
- 5Networking differently could increase your salary

Summary

Network thinking treats an organization as a web of relationships and asks what the pattern allows or blocks. Cross and Parker's mapping work reveals bottlenecks, hidden experts, and isolated teams, while Burt's research shows that people who span structural holes gain access to more varied ideas and are rewarded for it. Leaders can act on these findings by relieving overloaded hubs, connecting isolated groups, and valuing bridge builders. Handle the data with care and share maps with the people in them. Pick one cross-functional project, ask ten participants whom they turn to for help, draw the result, and look for the person everyone depends on.