

Chapter 100

Managing Government Agency Collaboration through Social Networks

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Category: Social Aspects of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

Public and private-based organizations are increasingly relying on collaboration—the coordination of two or more individuals, groups or companies working together to achieve a common goal or to create mutual value—to meet customer and market needs. Collaboration requires “rich” employee communication mechanisms that involve both people finding and interacting with subject-matter experts inside and outside their organization as well as people tapping into and incorporating

structured information (e.g., the latest market research reports) and “unstructured knowledge” (e.g., expert opinions discussed at conferences) as part of their work projects. Today’s collaboration needs require *networks* of employees, often with different areas of expertise, organizational affiliations, job levels, or company tenure, to coordinate in near real-time to perform knowledge-based work. Organizations with a focus on the acquisition, interpretation, and sharing of intelligence information can benefit by understanding the barriers to collaboration and how fostering social networks among employees and key stakeholders results in more effective collaboration. This article provides an illustrated example involving a government intelligence agency of how *social network analysis* can be used to understand social networks. A framework composed of three compo-

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nents, collaborative IT tools, talent management and networked work processes, to enable and apply social networks is also introduced.

BACKGROUND

Critical work in businesses today requires the tacit knowledge of experts, which includes their subject-matter expertise, previous work experiences, and institutional memory (Polanyi, 1983). The “half-life” of knowledge is shrinking rapidly, which puts a premium on immediacy and relevancy. This is readily apparent in foreign policy agencies such as the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The DIA has a particular need to collaborate both within its organization and with other government agencies as it deals with the creation, sharing, and application of foreign military intelligence. Collaboration is needed across multiple stakeholders including analysts and collectors within the agency, military officers, as well as defense and foreign policy makers and planners. During the Cold War, the U.S knew who its enemies were and what were potential threats, crisis situations, or opportunities before they emerged. Intelligence gathering, in a sense, was easier to do since we knew *what* intelligence to gather, including information on specific countries, operations, and issues of the day. In this context, *structured knowledge*, such as country and military reports, could be created and then stored in repositories for decision-makers to access. However, in today’s dynamic, complex environment, it’s much harder to predict what the next international crisis might be, and where and where threats might emerge. Often, *unstructured knowledge*, such as a military planner’s 30 years of experience, institutional knowledge, and relationship building with diplomats, is needed to make critical decisions. Therefore, the ability to quickly locate and assemble subject-matter experts wherever they might reside to acquire, interpret and act on unstructured knowledge is needed.

Unfortunately, there are many barriers to collaboration that exist in today’s organizations, with some barriers more visible than others. Some of these barriers are structurally-based, such as site location (Becker, 2004) or divisional affiliation, while some barriers are harder to identify, such as the culture, beliefs, and values of a particular segment of workers (Johnson-Cramer, Parise, & Cross, 2007). The result is *collaboration silos*, as people tend to work mostly with others who share a common physical location, functional area, or level of tenure, but there is little or no collaboration across these boundary lines.

One way to overcome these barriers and to enable collaboration is through the development of *social networks*. Social networks are the people-to-people relationships which exist in any organization (Cross & Parker, 2004). People in your social network are those you turn to for work-related information, decision-making help, career advice, and institutional memory (Gubbins & Garavan, 2005). People can become part of your social network for a variety of reason: you could have previously worked with them on a project, they could have been assigned to you as a mentor, you could have known them from a past company or college, or you could be friends with them outside the workplace. Brass (1995) identified several antecedents of social networks in organizations including homophily among employees, formal hierarchy of authority, workflow requirements of the organization, and physical and temporal proximity.

Companies across many industries are now utilizing *social network analysis* (SNA) to analyze employee social networks within and across their organizational boundaries (McGregor, 2006). There has been SNA research in the government sector, for example, to study such contexts as inter-agency collaboration, terrorist activity, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons among countries (Krebs, 2002; Bender, 2007; Ressler, 2006). SNA is a structured methodology to analyze the relationships among nodes in a network,

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