

## **Social-Network Analysis: Is It the Next Big Thing?**

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Would you believe the next big thing in learning got its start 76 years ago? That's when Jacob Moreno invented the sociogram, a diagram of points and lines designed to illustrate relationships and social interactions among people. From this start, social-network analysis has continued to attract the attention of philosophers, sociologists and statisticians who look for ways to analyze human relationships. The term "social-network analysis" was coined to refer to "the mapping and measuring of relationships between people, groups, organizations, computers or other information." Some of the research on social network analysis has made its way into popular culture, such as the notion of "six degrees of separation," followed by the rise of social networking sites such as Friendster, LinkedIn, MySpace and Dodgeball—all raising the profile of social-network analysis. It is now being used by a growing number of organizations to turn social networks into a tool for innovation and knowledge management.

### **Getting Started**

One way to start social-network analysis is to take a small community of workers and interview them to understand where the expertise resides.

The interview process can start with simple questions such as: Who do you most frequently turn to for advice? Who do you most frequently collaborate with and how often? Who do you most frequently mentor and in what areas?

Masterfoods USA has reported using social-networking analysis to understand how a group of scientists network with each other to improve their innovation process. In an online survey, Masterfoods asked the scientists to name the 15 people they work with most closely and to whom they go to for advice. Then, Masterfoods was able to map this network of scientists and examine how they were working and how to increase innovation.

Perhaps the biggest value of social-network analysis might be as a knowledge-management tool used to identify how knowledge flows through the organization. What enterprises really need to know is: who are the organization's go-to people in various knowledge domains, how often are these individuals tapped for their knowledge, and how is this knowledge currently shared and accessed throughout the organization?

This potential brain drain will increasingly become a major issue. Global Insight, an economic think tank, estimates that 25 percent of the working population is expected to retire over the next decade. Although the e-mails of this baby boom generation are stored and backed up, the knowledge residing in their heads is treated in a cavalier fashion.

Social-network analysis is attempting to change this. There is a growing

recognition that what makes employees successful at work is their personal expertise combined with their networks of professionals inside and outside the organization. Capturing both best practices and employee networks creates the gestalt of how work really gets done within an organization.

### **Enterprise Learning**

Chief learning officers should begin to think of social-network analysis as one component of a knowledge-management solution. For example, when an aircraft manufacturer was concerned about the potential loss of intellectual capital of its senior engineering staff, the company used social-network analysis to identify the community of product design engineers “at risk for retirement in the next five years.” This led to the creation of a formal mentoring network based around various domains of expertise. The effort increased the rate of advancement of the most talented engineers by roughly 50 percent over existing mentoring programs and helped alleviate the risk of lost institutional knowledge.

How did the program get off the ground? It started with a business owner who was able to estimate that the dollar value of the lost knowledge among soon-to-rotate product-design engineers was more than \$1 billion. That got the attention of C-level executives who approved the development of a pilot program.

Social-network analysis is just one tool to help solve the brain-drain dilemma increasingly facing all organizations as the first baby boomers turn 60 this year.

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