MANAGING TRANSITIONS

Connect and Adapt

How Network Development and Transformation Improve
Retention and Engagement in Employees' First Five Years

Rob Cross
Babson College

Greg Pryor
Workday

Tina Opie
Babson College

Keith Rollag
Babson College

* Order of authorship is alphabetical as this was a fully collaborative effort.

Introduction: Relationships Matter

If talent is the lifeblood of every organization, employee turnover is like bleeding. Bleed a little and all you need is a Band-Aid. Bleed too much and you're dead. Yet, while leaders focus on recruitment and development strategies to improve retention rates, a robust economy and increased job mobility make it increasingly difficult to keep top talent from leaving. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics announced that almost 25 percent of people in the U.S. workforce voluntarily quit their jobs in 2015, and an additional 37 percent were considering leaving. More people, especially recent graduates, are job-hopping with higher frequency. A recent study by LinkedIn found that "over the last 20 years, the number of organizations people worked for in the five years after they graduated has nearly doubled." Tightening labor/skills markets and growing pressure from business leaders, especially in key industries, are driving new strategies for recruiting. PwC's 2017 Annual Global CEO Survey found that 77 percent of CEOs say they see the availability of key skills as the biggest business threat.

As a result, many managers are facing serious retention issues especially in technical, scientific and engineering sectors. For example, a Teksystems 2015 survey of more than 400 IT leaders found that two out of five (42 percent) struggle to retain IT talent, and 67 percent report that retention is a challenge across all the skill sets they manage. Unfortunately, voluntary attrition is often more expensive and disruptive than leaders realize. The typical cost of replacing employees is about 1.5 times their individual salaries, and this only includes the expenses of finding, hiring and training their replacement. Less visible, but just as impactful on productivity, is disruption of the invisible networks where work and innovation happen today. When employees leave, it is not just their expertise that walks out the door. The critical relationships and networks they had cultivated internally and externally to get work done also disappear.

In today's network-based organizations turnover costs can represent more than 12 percent of pre-tax income for the average company, and for those with higher-than-average turnover, costs can be nearly 40 percent of earnings. Conversely, improving retention can reap significant financial benefits. In a survey of 454 organizations, Bersin by Deloitte found that large organizations with more mature talent development strategies had 2.3 times higher cash flow per employee over a three-year period. With smaller organizations, the impact was even larger; those with mature retention programs had 13 times higher mean cash flow than their similarly-sized peers.
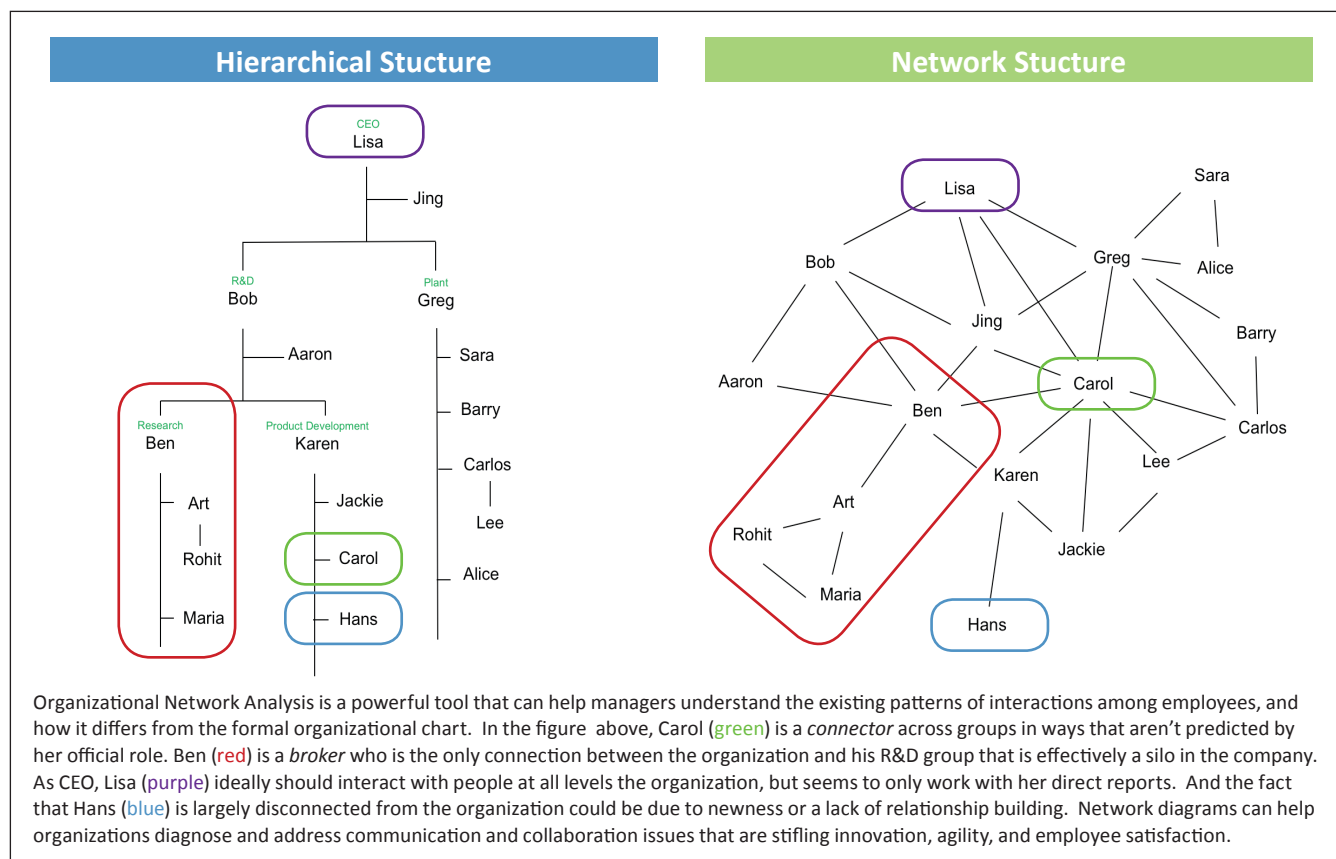
Managing entry well is a critical first step to stemming costly attrition. A recent study by Equifax found that almost half of those who quit do so within the first year of employment. Less discussed, but perhaps even more troubling, is a second wave of attrition that often occurs for companies in the 2- to 4- or 5-year tenure band. Most organizations experience a spike in attrition in this tenure range that in many ways is even more significant than turnover in the first year. The organization has made deep investments in developing those employees, investments it loses along with the disruption to networks and work processes that the departures create. In the words of one human resource leader in our research: *If we can get them by the first two to three years, we are likely to keep them for eight to ten. It is huge to get them past that timeframe but we don't invest a lot of effort on this after onboarding.*

Leaders and human resource professionals often employ a *human capital* lens when approaching retention. They focus on hiring skilled employees who fit the organization's workforce planning needs and culture. They invest in various ways to develop new recruits through orientation and onboarding. Then they use compensation, promotion and work design/staffing to engage, motivate and (hopefully) retain critical talent. All of these human capital-based retention practices focus mostly on developing the *individual's* knowledge, skills and role clarity, and then rewarding him or her for performance and loyalty.

These practices are clearly critical. But they often do little to cultivate networks—a significant component of peoples' experience in organizations that can either promote performance and engagement or inhibit personal effectiveness and thriving. Through our research applying organizational network analysis (ONA) over the past decade,

Figure 1: Formal v. Informal Network

Organizational Network Analysis is a powerful tool that can help managers understand the existing patterns of interactions among employees, and how it differs from the formal organizational chart. In the figure above, Carol (green) is a *connector* across groups in ways that aren't predicted by her official role. Ben (red) is a *broker* who is the only connection between the organization and his R&D group that is effectively a silo in the company. As CEO, Lisa (purple) ideally should interact with people at all levels the organization, but seems to only work with her direct reports. And the fact that Hans (blue) is largely disconnected from the organization could be due to newness or a lack of relationship building. Network diagrams can help organizations diagnose and address communication and collaboration issues that are stifling innovation, agility, and employee satisfaction.

we have found that the best organizations also employ a social capital approach to retention that leverages the power of these networks. ONA is a powerful tool that assesses the often invisible web of relationships among employees. Its strength is its ability to make visible network structure and specific interactions like information flow, decision-making, trust and purpose (see insert). Rather than focusing solely on developing individuals, ONA enables leaders to also cultivate those individuals' networks on dimensions that matter for performance and well-being.

Contrary to popular wisdom, a bigger network is not usually a better network when predicting retention or performance. Rather, what matters is helping employees develop the right network at the right time. In year one our research across 15 organizations showed that new hires need networks that jumpstart *productivity* and inclusion by helping them:

- Become valued resources that are sought out and "pulled" into the organization (rather than "pushed" in by the new hires demonstrating intelligence or what they have done in a past working life).
- Engage with similarly-tenured employees for acculturation and a sense of belonging.
- Connect with key opinion leaders for information to help do their job and, just as importantly, the reputation and legitimacy benefits that accrue through these ties.

Once employees are through the first year, the network story becomes even more interesting. One significant key to improving retention is helping employees develop strategic networks that *morph with their evolving needs*. In years two through four/five, employees need to transform their networks in ways that drive collaborative efficiency and a sense of purpose in their work. They also need to be able to accomplish results through enterprise-wide collaborations and boundary-spanning relationships. In this tenure window employees need to:

- Craft collaboratively efficient interactions that reduce overload and create time and space for people to build enterprise-wide networks.
- Engage in collaborations that yield a sense of purpose in one's work.
- Build non-insular networks rich with boundary-spanning ties that make employees more innovative and impactful in the organization.

In short, the strength of applying network analysis to the question of retention is that it helps leaders be more precise about the kinds of relationships that matter. As you'll see, this more strategic, transformational approach to network development that emphasizes social capital has major implications for how leading companies onboard, connect and integrate employees for long-term productivity and retention.

Human and Social Capital Approaches to Retention

Many organizations address retention issues by first revising and improving their talent acquisition strategies. They find and implement innovative ways to identify, evaluate, interview and recruit new employees who both have the requisite skills and also fit with the organization's culture. But while recruiting is necessary and important, a greater focus on it doesn't necessarily address the underlying retention issue. Sometimes an excessive focus on recruiting can even make retention worse. If a company spends lavishly to attract and impress prospective new hires, it can set up unrealistic expectations that lead to disappointment and frustration later on. To be sure, retention often is based more on what you do with employees after their arrival. But few companies have well-developed strategies to welcome and integrate new talent (e.g., a recent Aberdeen group report revealed that only 32 percent of companies polled had a formal onboarding program, and most of those programs lasted less than a month).

Even those organizations employing multi-day on-boarding programs struggle if they are not targeting specific dimensions of network development. The human capital approach is necessary but not sufficient to keep the best employees in the company. One experienced hire in our study nicely described the challenge:

"So I came in on the first day and [the company] had a comprehensive two-day onboarding program. They had HR come in and do a quick team-building activity and provide a company overview as well as a session on the history of the organization. Then two speakers came in to talk about transitioning into a new company and what we should think about. And they had several of the company's leaders come in to welcome us and give us advice on how to be successful, along with a panel of people that were at our level but a couple of years further along. A key theme in all of this was learning how things get done and building a network quickly. Over and over, people used different words to emphasize the importance of this.

But then the comedy of it all is that you go from that session to your real job with absolutely no help in understanding who to connect with or what matters. And all the forces work against building a good network. You are focused in your silo, have to produce results quickly, have a hard time getting established people's attention to know who to network with, have to build trust, and on and on....It is a great organization but there really is no wonder it has such a hard time keeping experienced hires."

Newcomer socialization research has repeatedly shown that relationships matter in new employee onboarding and performance. Through relationships newcomers get the information, advice and support they need to get up to speed quickly. This leads to higher productivity and early successes that help new hires build a solid reputation and position themselves for more challenging, impactful and visible work. In general, researchers have found that new hires who establish connections not only to those on their initial project team but also to resources across the organization tend to perform better and report higher levels of integration and satisfaction. (See the Bibliography at the end of this article for more information on social network analysis and newcomer socialization.)

ONA enables organizations to target specific dimensions of connectivity that have a proven impact on retention as they craft on-boarding and engagement programs. For example, software company Workday builds activities into its orientation programs that help new hires understand the kinds of diverse relationships that successful people develop in the firm and how to become more comfortable and proactive in developing a robust network. The company also hosts a series of events that helps newcomers meet and connect with more experienced colleagues across the organization. They have found this approach helps empower new hires to build the set of connections that help them gain more control over their work, become more influential, and feel like a more integrated part of the organization. Building these cross-functional relationships before they need them sets newcomers up for later success.

We put ONA to work to understand how employee networks impact retention. In the first phase, we conducted research at 15 large, well-known organizations. We combined ONA with monthly attrition data to identify: 1) the relational predictors of turnover and 2) what kinds of networks employees needed to develop over time to increase the odds of staying. These insights proved to be very beneficial to participating companies. By being able to specify what successful "low flight risk" networks looked like—rather than rely on the false assumption that simply a big network is what mattered—these organizations were able to dramatically adapt their onboarding and career planning/

leadership development processes to help people replicate the networks of employees with high organizational commitment, and thereby reduce turnover.

The second phase of work entailed interviewing 160 high performing leaders (80 men and 80 women) across 20 well-known organizations in financial services, software, consumer products, retail, professional services, manufacturing and life sciences organizations. These interviews captured rich stories of how leaders had successfully built and adapted their personal networks to better manage transitions in their careers—both entering an organization and transitioning to a new role in the existing organization. While the first phase of our work helped us identify the kinds of networks that produce loyal employees, the second phase helped us understand how these individuals built, maintained and transformed their networks over time to stay productive, satisfied and committed.

Our biggest insight was that the most successful and committed long-term employees are the ones who can transform their network from an initial focus on productivity and inclusion to a focus on *efficiency and purpose* (see Table 1). And, as we will describe, leaders can play an important role in making this happen.

Table 1: Evolving Needs of Employees on Entry

	Year 0-1: STRIVING		Year 2 - 5: THRIVING	
Human Capital/ Talent Processes	**Orientation and Onboarding**		**Career Planning and Performance Management**	
HCM Practices	• "Download" lots of data • Process & practices	• New joiner speed dating • Trail & error experiences	• Typically focus moves to individual performance and development without any support and practices for deepening connections	
Unintended Consequences	• Incompetence amplified • "Exclusion" highlighted	• Slow time-to-contribution • Lack of confidence	• Collaborative overload • Diluted Impact	• Burnout • Min commitment / attrition
Social Capital	**Inclusion**	**Productivity**	**Efficiency**	**Engagement (Purpose)**
Social Capital Opportunity	**Speed Inclusion:** Rapidly develop connections for performance and sense-making purposes.	**Reduce Time-to-Productivity:** Build connections for productivity and influence.	**Create Network Efficiency**: Promote collaboratively efficient interactions and boundary spanning ties.	**Build a Purpose-Fueled Network:** Craft interactions and build a network that yields purpose and energy.
Modern Network-Based Practices	Develop robust experiences to connect cohort or similar tenure employees. Teach behaviors to get pulled into the network (versus push strategies communicating expertise)	Connect newcomers on entry with formal and informal opinion leaders	Teach employees how to manage collaborative over-load and create efficient network interactions. Employ staffing, career and performance management processes to build boundary-spanning networks.	Help leaders create contexts of purpose (e.g., establish the "why"; co-create, etc.). Teach employees how to build networks that yield a sense of purpose.

Year 1: Building Networks for Productivity and Inclusion

New employees have two overriding needs: to *perform and prove themselves* to others and to acculturate and feel accepted by the organization. Both of these needs are primarily satisfied through the set of relationships new hires establish with managers, experts, peers, mentors and other newcomers throughout the company. Our quantitative and qualitative results indicate three critical focal points in a newcomer's network in the first 9-12 months:

❶ *Create contexts that "pull" newcomers into the network.* Each of the 15 companies in the quantitative component of our research proclaimed that networks were critical in that organization. In fact, most—if not all—proclaimed with great assurance that networks mattered more in their specific organization than any other. As a result, they had established onboarding processes that exhorted newcomers to build a network but never provided data-based insight on what a good network looked like in their context. The underlying assumption behind many of these programs was that people needed to build connections that they could tap into to get their work done. In ONA terms this means more successful newcomers should have high "out-degree" scores—in essence, networks where they had many connections to reach out to for help. This intuitively makes sense but, as it turned out, was *completely wrong*.

Rather than building a network by seeking information from many others to ensure more successful entry into an organization (i.e., decreasing time-to-productivity and increasing likelihood of staying), it was *being sought* that predicted these outcomes. For example, a network analysis we did as part of a company's engagement survey process allowed us to assess connectivity within more than 40,000 people and then relate network position to voluntary turnover. Here, and in many other cases, we discovered that having new hires with less than one year of tenure "push" or reach out to lots of people (i.e., have a high number of outgoing ties in network terms) didn't increase the likelihood of staying. But there was a strong correlation between retention and the number of *incoming* ties to the newcomer. In other words, rather than promote or "push" their expertise into the organization, the most successful newcomers started by finding opportunities to help others in ways that established the newcomer's reputation and legitimacy as a useful resource, which in turn caused the newcomer to be "pulled" into new opportunities.

This is not a trivial difference. The qualitative component of our work showed that "push" strategies—commonly taught in onboarding—entailed very different behaviors than "pull" tactics. Push often meant going out and, in essence, trying to prove your expertise and worth quickly. Yet too often these tactics created mistrust; in many strong-culture companies we found that talking about prior experience or work in another organization was almost a death knell for credibility. Rather, the more successful newcomers set up a number of exploratory meetings by initially asking their boss for introductions (and then meeting with those people). Importantly, successful newcomers did a number of specific things in these interactions:

- asked many questions and *slowly* morphed their capabilities to the incumbents' needs
- gave status and recognition in the conversations
- created energy behind possibilities of mutual value
- often engaged, surprisingly, in behaviors that created synchrony in the interaction (e.g., matching body language)

The newcomers set up a number of these meetings, knowing that although four out of five might not lead anywhere immediately, the fifth might propel them into a career-defining opportunity.

A part of creating pull is obviously the job of the newcomers and how they choose to engage. But leaders can also help by ensuring everyone is aware of knowledge and skills newcomers are bringing into the organization, and assigning new hires projects that cause them to further develop specialized capabilities. For example, in one organization we studied, a manager asked his new hire to initially focus some of his efforts on mastering

a newly purchased software tool. Soon others began coming to the newcomer for help and advice on the tool, and the new hire quickly gained a strong reputation as a knowledgeable, supportive co-worker. A number of simple practices, ranging from staffing to rotation to even how periodic meetings are run, can all have a significant effect on the degree to which the network is aware of and leverages the newcomer's expertise and energy.

❷ *Help newcomers connect to key network influencers early.* ONA also helped us uncover another aspect of networks that decreased the likelihood of early departure: While the absolute size of someone's network did not matter, who they connected with did. Specifically, people who became productive more quickly and were more likely to stay were adept at identifying and engaging people who were well-connected themselves—i.e., incumbents who either had a lot of connections (i.e., high degree scores in network terms) or more bridging ties across sub-groups and organizational lines (i.e., high measures of brokerage in network terms). These relationships significantly benefitted the newcomers by giving them indirect access to information and expertise across the organization. And perhaps just as importantly, these relationships gave credibility to the newcomers, as they in essence rode on the coattails of the more established and connected members. Rather than the 3-5 years we see most newcomers require to replicate the networks of high performers, people who connected with key opinion leaders early tended to build a robust network in under a year by "borrowing" others' credibility.

How did people find these key connectors if the organization had not done an ONA? Generally, our interviews revealed a number of subtle approaches these people took. One person explained, "I pay a lot of attention in meetings regarding who listens to who, who defers to who, and who is called out as a trusted source in a given area. If you stop focusing on yourself and what you want to say and pay attention to the dynamics, you can pick up a lot that helps you very quickly." Another person said, "I turn to my boss early on for network insight. This is one way they can always help, as they have more visibility and knowledge into broader parts of the organization. And in my experience they always want to help and appreciate your proactivity." Finally, another person revealed, "I always end a meeting asking who else I should speak with, and for an introduction. In more than 20 years of all sorts of transitions I have found that this process has always worked magic to get me to the key players in the organization that I wouldn't find by following the org chart."

Of course, some of these high-quality connections will come about naturally through a newcomer's initial project work, but managers can also help newcomers proactively identify and connect to these key resources. If the organization has undertaken an ONA, then they

have a rich data source to dramatically streamline integration by connecting newcomers with opinion leaders in the network. Specifically, we advocate an approach we call Smart Mentoring as a more formalized approach to ensure these key relationships get developed. One organization that took this approach not only helped its newcomers become more productive but overall saw a 14 percent increase in helping relationships, a significant increase in energizing interactions, and an 18 percent movement toward a more decentralized, flexible culture based on engagement survey results. Generally,

across all of the organizations in our research who employed this approach with some set of employees, we saw a significant increase in connectivity. Typically, the people who received these informal, key opinion leader mentoring ties tended to see their connectivity triple in comparison to similar tenured colleagues who did not get these introductions. Importantly, this tripling of ties was on the newcomers' in-coming ties—meaning they were being pulled into the network and leveraged in ways our research showed to be important.

CASE STUDY: A FIRST YEAR SUCCESS STORY

Let's take a more personal look at a successful entry process that relied on these three network dimensions. Just four months into his role as director of learning and organization development, Rick already had the network and visibility of someone who was in the position much longer. The scope of the role included 12 direct reports and a team of 50 responsible for the onboarding, leadership development, and/or training of 5,000 people each year. His broad goal—to transform people development into a model of self-enabled learning—was ambitious. Plus, he was rebuilding his group, which had undergone significant turnover and challenges.

Rick started by getting to know both formal and informal influencers as he transitioned into his new role. He also identified a few visible, early wins to pursue. For example, Rick jumped in to run two events for senior leaders, a tangible deliverable tied to one of his top priorities. His boss also had prepared a list of 47 people for him to meet within the first few weeks on the job. Some people were business leaders and formal influencers, but many were internal clients and functional managers whose teams he would rely on over time. By initiating this network on entry—rather than when he needed help—he was better informed and more successful at getting things done later. Building the network and creating a reputation for execution simultaneously wasn't easy, but it proved to be critical

for Rick's performance and longer-term success.

Rick reached out to different people in different ways. With the heads of the firm's practices and regions, he sought to understand the business environment and how his team could be an asset. He also knew these people were key for political support and his reputation. "These are the people who can really make or break anybody in a corporate function. The narrative I want to hear is, Rick's team supports my business; they are helping to drive my growth strategy." As a practical matter, Rick's reputation was tied to results, so he took some of his meeting time to figure out who else he should work with to get things done. "My question for each of those people was, Who's your trusted deputy for all matters of human capital? Who do you want me to work with? This saves their time. And, it boosts my credibility when I deliver something— they know I didn't just come up with it alone in a closet somewhere."

He gave equal attention to people managing corporate functions, such as finance, legal, IT, marketing and security, even though there was no immediate need for collaboration or resources. "These teams are the arms and legs for getting our work done … They can either be tremendously helpful or they can be blockers." Knowing he would be in a position of needing their support in the future, he wanted to establish a relationship before he had to ask for anything. "When I met with these

people, the conversation was, Help me know what you do and how you operate. When people need something from you, what approach works best?" When approached in a way that acknowledges their time and preferences, people are more open to helping and collaborating.

With his peers and other newcomers Rick was "just focused on the human connection … It's informal and a really good, noncompetitive team … People come to me when they hear noise in the system; we give each other a heads-up when something needs attention." As for the relationships within his team, Rick is focused on the "how" of work. He let people know that building relationships within the group and externally is how they would get results. He flattened his team, "sending the signal that rank doesn't matter to me." Based on a pulse survey of the team, he held small, group discussions. Team meetings, monthly social events and encouragement to collaborate on projects created greater trust and engagement.

Flash forward one year and we saw that Rick's results exceeded expectations despite stepping into a turnaround situation. Thinking about his first months on the job, Rick was clear: "You can be much more successful if you can build relationships designed to create pull for you and your team. It takes a little bit longer, but there is less re-work and it dramatically speeds execution."

3 **Leverage the power of cohorts and affinity groups.** Through evolution, we are hardwired to seek out and deeply value relationships with people with whom we share common interests, values, experiences and backgrounds. These relationships tend to form easily; people are more comfortable approaching similar others for help, advice and support (and are more likely to reciprocate with help, advice and support of their own). Researchers have repeatedly shown that organizations that create and nurture *cohorts* of recent arrivals reap huge benefits. Our work confirmed this. Newcomers who established connections with similar tenure employees— cohorts in large entry classes and similar tenure people where there were no large entry classes—were more likely to stay.

Orienting, training and socializing newcomers as a group tends to create more satisfied, committed newcomers. Cohorts help newcomers quickly become productive because having connections to other recruits across the company gives them ties to people who quickly possess knowledge, insights and perspectives they wouldn't normally have access to through project work. By sharing the common challenge of entry, cohorts also tend to become a ready-made support group that helps satisfy people's needs for belonging. Affinity groups serve a similar purpose. Whether they are organized around

demographics (e.g., gender, race, age), family needs, volunteer interests or hobbies, they help newcomers (and everyone else) build mutually-beneficial connections across the organization and help people associate more of their identities with the organization, thus feeling more connected as a whole person.

For example, Workday has leveraged cohorts and identity-based affinity groups during onboarding to help with both productivity and retention. Besides general orientation programs, the company holds multi-week "boot camps" with newly arrived cohorts to deepen the capabilities and connections within and across engineering, product management, sales and consulting. On top of these, Workday layers identity-based development activities. For example, they onboard their new university hires with a carefully stewarded two-year program called "Generation Workday" that addresses the needs of digital natives born since the creation of the Web. Generation Workday employees (or GW's, as they call themselves) proudly self-identify with GW tee-shirts, host Friday afternoon cantinas, take field trips to the beach, hold hackathons, and even "graduate" from the program at a company-wide meeting. This deep sense of belonging even extends after the program, with employees identifying themselves as GW Alumni.

Years 2-5: Building Networks for Efficiency and Purpose

Once new hires have become integrated the objective shifts from "striving" to "thriving" (see Table 1), and we've discovered that this requires a corresponding evolution of the employee's social network. After the initial push to establish themselves in the organization, employees want a more efficient network that avoids collaboration overload and burnout. They also want their work to be impactful and meaningful, in effect contributing to something bigger than themselves. Overload and lack of purpose are two of the biggest reasons why highly performing (and often highly connected) employees leave organizations. And when these indispensable employees leave, they not only take with them critical knowledge but also create holes that immediately disrupt work flows and lower morale.

The challenge is that networks designed to satisfy needs for productivity and inclusion are not especially good at satisfying needs for efficiency and purpose. As new employees establish themselves as a highly valuable resource, they inevitably get over-utilized. Everyone approaching them for help and advice sees their own individual request as relatively small, but collectively these requests overwhelm the employee. New top performers may still feel successful and an accepted part of the team, but they become harried, frenzied and exhausted. And the rise of email and collaboration technologies has only made this worse. Eventually, overwork causes burnout and

unwanted turnover. In fact, through our research we've found that the most sought-after employees often end up having the lowest engagement and career satisfaction scores if they are not proactively addressing collaborative overload.

As with year one, leaders have the ability to help their best employees navigate these challenges and remain committed for the long term. Our quantitative and qualitative results suggest three critical network strategies:

1 *Help craft collaboratively efficient networks.* The collaborative intensity of work has exploded over the past decade due to matrix structures, increased complexity of products and services, globalization, and—especially— the proliferation of email, collaborative tools and social media. An unmanaged and significant consequence of both complexity and technology-mediated work is the degree to which collaborative demands overwhelm some of your best performers. Our work showed that typically 3-5 percent of the people absorbed 20-35 percent of the collaborative activity in organizations—quite often at the expense of burning out and departing. Crafting collaboratively efficient interactions that reduce overload and create time and space for people in the 2- to 5-year window to build enterprise wide networks is critical to success.

One step to counter this is to help employees *prioritize not only their work but their work relationships.* Top talent often have the ability to add value everywhere, but it clearly comes at a price. Help top performers identify the activities and relationships through which they provide unique, high impact value, and make these a daily priority. Then help them learn to delegate, defer or politely deny requests that either could be completed by less-burdened co-workers or identified and eliminated as tangential, "nice to have" work that has low organizational value. These top performers may also need to have critical conversations with co-workers who over-rely on the top performers' expertise and help, to adjust expectations about how they collaborate.

Also, help top performers fight the tendency to help everyone because they like to help others, get a sense of identity by being the expert, or worry about mistakes by co-workers. As one overworked manager explains, "Of course it feels good to help others and be the expert, but I need to get my reports to carry the ball more. They should get credit when they do something good, but be responsible if they make a mistake or something drops." If delegated work has errors, help delegators avoid giving excessive feedback or cues that they are overly disappointed with the outcome (e.g., slumping shoulders, sighs, frowns). These reactions will drive excessive approval-seeking that only adds to stress and overload.

In addition, help top performers *optimize their communication habits, especially online.* Email and modern collaboration tools are particularly problematic for top performers. These tools make it easier for the entire organization to make 24/7 requests for help and advice. As well, we have found that valued employees tend to get copied on a disproportionate amount of group emails and included in countless distribution lists. Couple this with the common compulsion among top performers to quickly read and respond to every email (no matter the time of day), and it's a recipe for overload. Help new employees set clear time boundaries and expectations (with themselves and others) around their online communication. Teach them to become more succinct in their replies. Encourage them to unsubscribe from "nice to know" mailing lists, and refrain from providing input to discussion groups and cc lists unless they can provide unique value to the conversation. More importantly, help them condense their coordination activities into a fewer number of regular group meetings. This creates a team-based routine for project updates, scheduling needs and resource demands. It's an opportunity for everyone to get a snapshot of the whole, reducing the number of one-off, isolated questions and requests that distract and delay important work.

Opportunities also often existed in our research to *redistribute work, redefine work roles, and make expertise more visible.* Much of top-performer overload comes from poorly designed role structures that do not factor in the collaborative intensity of the work. Look for opportunities to redefine job responsibilities to better balance work efforts, and if needed declare your most in-demand employees "off limits" for certain kinds of extraneous requests. Another simple trick is to have an overwhelmed person review select email threads and calendar entries four months back (not last week as they can justify everything that is proximate). Push them to identify: 1) information requests that they do not need to be involved in; 2) routine decisions they are getting consulted on that others could address and 3) portions of their role they could let go. Then use these categories of interaction to create other go-to people in the network—in essence, a process that de-layers the overloaded person and helps to draw less-connected talent into the network.

Finally, make the time to *ensure that top performers recharge and refresh.* One effective network-centric way to reduce burnout is to get your best employees to periodically disengage from these networks. Through extended vacations and sabbaticals, employees can reconnect with family, pursue other activities that bring them energy, or simply rest and get caught up on lost sleep. These sojourns have an important organizational benefit too; by temporarily removing "nodes" in the company network, you can quickly determine where there are over-dependencies and workflow bottlenecks and adjust roles and responsibilities accordingly. Ideally, when top performers return, they find that the organization isn't as reliant on them to get things done, and they have greater balance in their work.

❷ *Develop contexts where employees find purpose through collaborations.* In our quantitative work we not only mapped information flow but also asked people to indicate interactions that created a positive sense of purpose or meaning in their work. The statistical results were extremely significant in showing that people who derived a sense of purpose from their network interactions were much more likely to stay. And, interestingly, these networks could create purpose even in the face of pretty boring work. In our interviews, we had some organizations that were involved in very noble work and yet had devolved to debilitating cultures due to infighting, excessive focus on quantitative goals, or lack of transparency. In contrast, perhaps the most boring company in our pool had the most energized context; from top to bottom they had convinced themselves they were solving the world's problems through what to most outside observers was a boring product. The lesson in this was striking and clear. While people say it is the work that yields purpose, more often than not it is the interactions around the work that matter. Again, using ONA to map these relationships (i.e., which people provided

others with a sense of purpose in their work) enabled us to develop the importance statistically of predicting retention, and target interviews to identify behaviorally what was happening in these interactions.

When it comes to finding meaning in work these days, we face a paradox. With new communication technologies employees now have never-before-seen opportunities to transform their work and their networks in a way that provides them with a sense of purpose and engagement. But too often people let the collaborative demands of a given context mold what they are doing and ultimately lose the opportunity to create more purpose-driven work. Still, there are ways for leaders to help employees find purpose and engagement in what they do, which in turn can decrease their chances of leaving. Much of this involves helping employees establish the why in their work before the what or how, and spending 50 percent of one-on-one meeting times discussing career, life and development goals and efforts instead of project tasks and deadlines. These and other simple efforts pay back enormously in engagement. But it's often too easy to let project demands squash any attempt in making work more meaningful.

Leaders in our interviews employed a number of strategies to avoid this trap:

- **Connect employees with customers and end-users of their work.** This is often one of the most powerful and energizing strategies because it helps employees see how their efforts are improving the lives of others. For example, this could be connecting health care engineers with people saved by their drugs, devices and services. Or ensuring designers and production engineers see satisfied customers happily using their products. Or inviting employees to product launches, trade shows, and award ceremonies that promote and celebrate the end result of their efforts. For example, one senior manager in a pharmaceutical company has found interacting with patients extremely motivating: "When patients have years of a journey behind them, a debilitating disease, their whole life is impacted.… When they are on your product and doing well, those stories get me emotional and are where I get my energy."

- **Connect employees to passionate visionaries.** Many successful products and services were created and grown as the result of a compelling mission and vision, but without effort these motivating ideas rarely move beyond the original champions and founding teams. Vision statements on company walls aren't enough, and in large organizations new employees are often far removed from the inspired creators. Helping employees build relationships with visionaries and existing product champions has several benefits. Not only can some of the founding energy rub off on these employees, but they can also better understand why their work exists in the first place. As one manager we

interviewed said, "I would so much rather work with the hardest working person and the most passionate person rather than the smartest person.…I thrive more when I interact with people who are super into what they are doing and very encouraging."

- **Make employees mentors, coaches or buddies.** Since most employees often gain a sense of purpose by helping others, having employees mentor newer employees can add meaning to work. Even better, have young employees become "reverse mentors" to senior managers (often around technology use); this simultaneously gains them visibility and influence. One manager we interviewed got involved with internal career coaching. She said, "I was surprised how gratifying I found it to have people tell me you changed my life or career, or helped me see possibilities. I had pushed down how much deep satisfaction I got in the past out of helping my employees grow in their careers."

- **Get employees involved in company-sponsored service activities.** While newcomers need a sense of purpose to stay committed to an organization, not all of that purpose needs to come from their job responsibilities. Many successful companies use volunteer and community service projects as a way to add meaning to workers' lives as well as build and strengthen relationships with co-workers. For example, as one high-tech company grew to thousands of employees, it used community service as a means to maintain cohesion. One senior executive noted, "It was a simple job when everybody knew everybody. We were like a small town.… People don't have that daily interaction any longer, but we brought back that cohesion through the work we do in the community." He appreciates the shared purpose these activities create for employees and he gains personal satisfaction, adding, "It is so cool to go out and represent us. I am the face of the company and that is very energizing. I get to recharge when I'm out talking to people and out in the community."

❸ **Build non-insular networks rich with boundary-spanning ties that make employees more innovative and impactful in the organization.** Decades of research have shown that individual performance is not necessarily enhanced by a big network—in fact, quite often network strategies that simply create a big network end up de-railing careers due to overload and lack of innovation. Rather, what distinguishes high performers are non-insular networks rich with ties bridging into different networks. These can be boundary spanning relationships inside an organization—such as ties reaching across function, expertise domain or geography. Or they can—and often are—ties to different sources of expertise outside an organization. The critical idea is that less insular networks help people see and solve problems more innovatively over time and so fuel performance.

CASE STUDY: A SENIOR LEADER'S SUCCESS ADAPTING NETWORK STRATEGY FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Let's take a look at another leader who adapted network development strategy and principles in her third year of entry to reduce overload and build purpose in a demanding role. Sofia was a C-level leader of a Fortune 500 company involved in a large-scale change. She had become acutely aware that the pace and complexity were overwhelming. "We're giving the same level of energy to keeping the current business running and developing something brand new at the same time … It just saps your energy. You don't have time to reflect or think ahead when you are just dealing with the fires." Even with such intensity of work, Sofia chose to operate with a clear sense of choice and confidence, gaining energy and perspective from her internal and external networks and building habits to counter collaborative overload.

One of Sofia's strengths lies with a clear understanding of the unique value she adds in a situation and an ability to diffuse ownership early to others in her network. While this helps her manage her workload, the larger value comes from extending her network and drawing on a wider pool of expertise. Because of her role, she knows people across the organization. She'll ask people to get involved in a project or join a team, telling them why their unique capabilities matter to the success of the work. She explains to the group her rationale for involving each person—a process skill, knowledge of a part of the business, prior experience, etc. "That helps them appreciate each other and see why all of them together will be more successful than any of them alone." She sets expectations, but then says she does not want or need to be involved. "They are conditioned to think I should be involved, so it's important that I tell them clearly: *You can tackle this*. They need permission to take the

ownership. It's surprising how quickly they will un-involve you if you let them."

Sofia's ability to step back comes from clarity that she does not need to be part of every project or decision or conversation to be important. Her identity is not tied up in her current role and internal dynamics. Instead, she invests in building non-insular networks internally and then also focuses as much time on her external networks and activities. Most people do not do this and can become embroiled in, and defined by, the internal churn. She indicates: *"A well-honed external network makes you comfortable that if you need it, you have alternatives. So, I don't really worry about the internal politics and am not defined by it like some of my colleagues."*

This sense of confidence in her external mobility allows Sofia to chart her own course. Her more balanced view of what matters also benefits the company. "If you're not wrapped up in worrying about yourself, you can get wrapped up in other things, like what is most important for us to be doing for the business." Sofia sees that people get stuck when they become too focused on one unit or organization. They become defined by, and subject to, demands and politics of the system. "People say yes or no because they feel like they have to. Then, you're always playing defense, never offense, and it's a horrible feeling. You're always stressed and your calendar starts to look like someone else's idea of a good time, not your own."

Sofia manages purpose intentionally through diligent scheduling. "Every Sunday night I calendar a week or two in advance. If I see a week is going to be particularly difficult because I have three or four difficult or de-energizing meetings, I try to organize things to have a number of offsetting positives—things

that will make a positive difference to other people, even if I am overloaded. That is where I get purpose." Sofia brings that sense of personal choice to how she handles negative situations as well. Common reactions to toxic or de-energizing interactions are to lash out or to take less risk. Instead, Sofia focuses on what she can do. For example, a decision was made to move a role to another function, leaving a high performer without his primary assignment—a decision Sofia fought and lost. "*I tried to find the upside and move to higher ground.* I accepted the fact that I wasn't able to change it. Then I gave my attention to making it better for this person. By helping him, I got my head in a better place."

Like Sofia, people who derive a greater sense of purpose from their network do things to *buffer* their time and attention from the constant demands of work. For Sofia this entails a couple of simple rules she adheres to: 1) she does not do e-mail from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.; 2) she preserves one evening a week for herself and her husband and 3) she only works on weekends when in the office so that work gets done in a time-bound way and does not bleed over to the full weekend. She also invests in groups that *anchor* her in something other than work: a running club and teaching Sunday School despite her kids having grown out of the ages she teaches. "All the people that I know who are most satisfied and are also viewed as being successful have really strong interests and passions outside of work. They formed great networks and were infused with different ways of thinking … When you have this energizing outside life, you come in to work with a different point of view; people get refreshed by that and uplifted by working with you … What started as a buffering or anchoring activity ends up being a powerful source of success."

These networks constitute an important asset to people. As a result, non-insular networks fuel retention once people have invested in building this social capital that is not portable to a new context.

The challenge is that formal and informal mechanisms in organizations encourage more insular networks and, as a result, people have to be proactive in developing these more structurally diverse networks. Companies in our research typically accomplished this through network planning templates targeting four kind of important ties in the context of the employees work in the coming six months. The template helped the employee focus on: 1) ties for efficiency and best practice gains; 2) ties for innovation—often to adjacent areas of expertise; 3) ties that helped in terms of professional development and 4) ties that yielded insight into the political landscape. This focus yielded significant impact structured in through check-in discussions, career planning processes or leadership development efforts. A diverse, holistic set of work and non-work networks not only helps employees find meaning but actually helps them be more innovative in their job. One engineer who built a broad network noted, "If I get stuck with the data or building something, I have six or seven people I can talk to … If the problem is more cerebral, more strategic, there are other people I reach out to … There are so many smart people; if I talk to them, I will get something out of it."

A Network Approach to Retention: Implications for Leaders and Individuals

At a high level, the primary takeaway is that networks matter for retention in predictable ways that leaders can influence. For example, one organization in our research group revised its entry program. This firm onboarded roughly 100 people a week; reducing the attrition rate by even one or two percent resulted in a multimillion dollar impact for the company. Strategically, it embedded a half day of network development activities on the first day of newcomers' face-to-face orientation that taught people the critical dimensions they needed to focus on in their network. This included a rich activity that created cohort connections around upcoming work objectives, and a personal network action plan that was supported by a well-connected network influencer and that person's direct supervisor.

But the organization did not stop there. It developed a six-module virtual program that engaged the cohort once a month for six months. Each module was designed to focus on network challenges experienced at that tenure window and progressed in an order that equipped the newcomers with key network insights right at the point of need. The first module taught newcomers how to create pull-through behaviors that build trust and energy in interactions. The second taught them how to drive influence without authority to execute and to develop reputation more rapidly. This progression continued to the sixth module, which taught the cohort (then seven months in) the importance of addressing collaborative overload and specific actions the employees could take to do so.

These activities helped each individual address network challenges at critical points in their entry. Then the organization did a full diagnostic review at month nine that enabled the individuals to get feedback on their own network connectivity via an online tool. This process helped them identify strengths and re-set personal network goals. Between each of the sessions there were structured virtual activities that engaged cohort members in smaller sub-groups, as well as a social media platform deployed for the cohort to seek and provide help by making expertise transparent. Overall, the results of this more comprehensive approach to onboarding were significant on two levels. First, attrition and time-to-full-productivity measures improved. Second, by using a scalable platform to develop relationships that mattered (rather than using social activities that were expensive and did not have the targeted effect), the cost of the program actually declined.

Of course, not all organizations will have the resources to create this kind of program. In this case leaders can have tremendous impact by focusing on their employees' networks in two ways. First, have employees *periodically assess their networks and ensure that they are connecting to the right people.* There are online tools that can do this but they are not necessary. A simple task of asking employees to identify: 1) core work goals and 2) critical development goals for the coming six months will illuminate connection opportunities. Companies in our research group used a pre-printed grid to focus on categories of importance. But in reality a blank piece of paper will work fine too. The main goal is the conversation and then subsequent introductions. Armed with this data (along with discussions with their managers), employees can develop a network-based action plan to adjust and augment their set of relationships to become more productive, connected, motivated and balanced.

Second, *make network discussions part of the employee development process* in periodic check-ins and focus specifically on a set of critical practices in transitions. Most development discussions and performance reviews focus on what newcomers have accomplished, not on what kinds of relationships they have developed to make future success possible. Rather than focus on "What have you done?" and "What should you do next?" include questions like "Who have you met?" and "Who else do you need to meet (to be more productive, connected and motivated)?" Just as important, take the time to equip individuals with practices that can increase success through their own actions. To this end, our qualitative research on the transition stories uncovered

one critical truism. Networks dramatically affect success whether the transition is entering an organization, starting a new assignment or making a concerted effort to morph one's work and network. For every story of success we also heard at least one, and sometimes more, stories of failure. Very often the people telling these stories could finger poor network development strategies that caused the failure. But unfortunately, too often these network lapses were invisible. As a result, rather than leaders seeing the failure as due to connection strategy, they tended to label the person as not being capable. In many instances these labels stuck with the person to such a degree that they decided to transition to either another role or organization.

Table 2: Network-Based Transition Practices

NETWORK ACTIONS

Surge in first 45 days with proactive outreach.
- **External stakeholders/clients** – Understand needs and early win.
- **Formal leaders** – Mandate, motivations/interests and how to engage.
- **Peers** – Develop support and "sensor" network.
- **Team** – Understand capabilities and aspirations.
- **Support roles** – Connect before a need to understand work preferences.

Build network to supplement skill gaps.
- **Technical/functional** – Seek those with expertise required in a new domain.
- **Culture** – Seek prior leaders for political awareness and personalities.
- **Leadership and collaborative practices** – Seek those with similar roles; role expansion requires new enterprise network and approaches to collaboration.

Engage advisors and those who energize you.
- Truth tellers – Connect with those who know you well and will advise honestly.
- Emotional anchors – Connect with those who share values or re-energize you.
- Balance network development with early task execution.
- Establish early high profile win or prototype to build competence-based trust.
- Connect off task and give first to build benevolence-based trust. Employ your expertise judiciously. *People do not care how smart you are until you show you care for them or their interests.*

Engage network influencers inside and outside your unit.
- Gain accurate picture of the informal network and influencers.
- Engage positive and negative influencers early.

Sculpt role early to create engaging work with purpose.
- Stakeholders – Co-create goals and work products via partial agenda meetings.
- Team members – Identify career goals and work they aspire to.

Employ a "pull" (versus push) strategy in relationships.
- Ask questions, morph expertise to others' needs, give status, adapt communication style, seek win/win, reciprocate and connect off task.
- Do not over-rely on push (expertise or mandate), as it hurts engagement and future ability to de-layer.

Re-frame interactions that create purpose for you (e.g., move from direct contribution to creating context for others to thrive).
- Re-define success as developing and supporting others.

Play offense on collaborative overload...seeds you sow early help avoid career de-railing overload at 18- to 24-month mark.
- Use *every* opportunity to build network and capability of team.
- Maintain one-on-ones to build trust and delegate well.
- Hold weekly meeting that shares wins and losses to help team learn to connect around you.

In Table 2 we outline the nine most prevalent network actions culled from our 160 interviews. Most organizations in our research employ this as a simple checklist for new hires to reflect on what they need to do on entry. Let's take a closer look at three of these.

❶ Surge in first 45 days with proactive outreach. Successful leaders in a new role have a clear plan to be incredibly proactive in building new ties and learning in the first 45 days (or 60 or 90 days depending on the work at hand). Hold to the idea of building relationships quickly with a broad range of people to understand mandates, motivations, engagement practices, and the capabilities and aspirations of your team. Get to know direct reports, team members, external customers, influencers and experts. The people who were more holistic in building these relationships—especially when they were new and had a chance to use that newness well—had a much greater platform to work from.

To start this process in a new organization, leverage existing relationships. Ask your new boss and co-workers who have insight into the context, the people and the culture for introductions. Be mindful of cultural perceptions and aware of your own skill gaps, rather than coming into a situation overly relying on expertise that yielded success in your prior context. Having an on-entry plan to build your network is helpful for others and helps you build credibility and trust.

❷ Build network to supplement skill gaps. Experienced leaders must identify blind spots and skill gaps and build networks to fill in as they move into a new role or context. To avoid failure you need to create new ties to help you gain needed experience, expertise and perspective. More successful transitions were associated with a more holistic approach to understanding where networks could complement skill gaps on three fronts:

- Technical/functional – seek those with expertise required in a new domain
- Culture – seek prior leaders for cultural norms and political awareness
- Leadership and collaborative practices – seek those with similar roles to determine effective collaborative practices

Be transparent about what you know, what you don't know, and how you will rely on the skills and commitments of the team. This authenticity early on pays back enormously in creating trust and also not setting you up for failure by others' expecting you to have expertise in a domain you do not know well. It also enables others to be authentic around you and admit problems earlier, which helps avoid being blindsided. Periodically, engage special advisors or "truth tellers" to give you honest advice about how you are handling a situation—these are people who can tell you when you are over-reacting or handling something in a way that might not be productive.

They are typically one or two individuals you have known and trusted for a long time who provide candor but also support when you need it to get through the invariable points in transitions that do not go well.

❸ Engage network influencers inside and outside your unit. Engaging well-connected employees can require effort for newcomers, as these people are busy and already have a powerful network. But the pursuit is worth the effort, as almost universally it was a connection with a network influencer that led to early opportunities for newcomers to prove themselves and be drawn into future work. Throughout our interviews we heard people employ subtle practices to identify these influencers as outlined above. In addition, they tended to focus on some subset of five kinds of influencers depending on the nature of their role and work:

1. **Up the hierarchy.** Your boss and select formal leaders provide a breadth of information, context, resources and political support for your initiatives.
2. **Across to peers.** Lateral connections in the organization are important for brainstorming and best practices.
3. **Among energizers.** High-quality connections create your reputation, draw emerging high performers to you and engage subordinates in a way that yields greater effort.
4. **Outside to experts.** External knowledge and perspectives yield innovations and novel opportunities.
5. **Over to customers.** Ties with internal or external customers ensure satisfaction and fuel learning.

In particular, be an active external ambassador. Cultivate relationships with formal and informal stakeholders outside the group to get a variety of perspectives and a broader pool of resources to tap as needed in the future. Realize that there are often informal influencers who are as important, if not more important, than the formal leaders. But because the informal influencers may be harder to identify (they don't appear on an org chart), always ask, "Who else should I be talking to?" Often this will slingshot you into the informal influencers.

Overall, the importance of the specific actions in Table 2 will depend on the employee and their situation. The goal is not to do all things but rather to identify three or so high impact actions and, as a leader, to help instill a network mindset in your employees. If they understand the power of networks to make them more productive, efficient and fulfilled in their work, they are more likely to make the effort to proactively build (and transform over time) the set of relationships they need for long-term success and commitment. The tools and actions to accomplish this are fairly simple once this mindset is established.

It Comes Down to People

In their 2016 Global Human Capital Trends Survey, Deloitte Consulting found that only 12 percent of respondents felt they understood "the way their people work together in networks." But leveraging networks is one of the most powerful and impactful ways to develop and retain your best employees. You still need to provide training, coaching and all of the physical and online resources newcomers need to get up to speed quickly, but their longevity in your organization is largely based on the energy, challenge, inspiration and joy they get through their teammates, colleagues and managers. Using a network-based approach to ensure that employees satisfy their evolving needs for productivity, inclusion, efficiency and purpose will keep them motivated and committed to your organization for years to come.

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When developing this article, our thought process was primarily influenced by two streams of research. First, research on newcomer socialization has illustrated that organizations can develop socialization approaches that facilitate newcomer access to social capital and help newcomers use that social capital to enhance newcomer adjustment and career success. Classic work on how newcomer socialization influences social capital, newcomer adjustment and career success is J.D. Kammeyer-Mueller & C.R. Wanberg, "Unwrapping the Organizational Entry Process: Disentangling Multiple Antecedents and Their Pathways to Adjustment", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2003, 88, 779-794. More recent work has underscored that organizational insiders are critical for newcomers' access to, and mobilization of, social capital. For a review, please see R. Fang, M.K. Duffy & J.D. Shaw, "The Organizational Socialization Process: Review and Development of a Social Capital Model", *Journal of Management*, 2011, 37, 127-152. A critical contribution of our work is that we discuss the importance of socialization approaches for both newcomers *and* more seasoned employees. Seasoned employees are under-examined in socialization research despite the fact that the unintended loss of seasoned employees is detrimental to organizations. Further, given the importance of organizational insiders to effective newcomer socialization, it seems worthwhile to examine how organizations can enhance organizational experiences of more seasoned employees.

The second stream of research we referenced was social network research that has emphasized how employee performance is enhanced when employees use information gleaned from people in their social networks. Important works that detail how social networks and/or network structure influence the flow and dissemination of information include G. Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1950); R. Burt, *Structural Holes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); M. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology*, 1973, 78, 1360-1380; S.P. Borgatti & D.S. Halgin, "On Network Theory", *Organization Science*, 2011, 1168-1181; C. Phelps, R. Heidl, & A. Wadhwa, *Journal of Management*, 2012, 38, 1115-1166; Martin Gargiulo and Mario Benassi, "Trapped in Your Own Net? Network Cohesion, Structural Holes, and the Adaptation of Social Capital," *Organization Science*, 2000; Ajay Mehra, Martin Kilduff, and Daniel Brass, "The Social Networks of High and Low Self-Monitors: Implications for Workplace Performance," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2001; Joel Podolny and James Baron, "Resources and Relationships: Social Networks and Mobility in the Workplace," *American Sociological Review*, 1997.

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