Connect and adapt:
How network development and transformation improve retention and engagement in employees' first five years

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INTRODUCTION

Your best employees are the lifeblood of your organization. Highly skilled and sought-out by everyone for ideas, help and advice, they help jumpstart innovation and drive change in even the most conservative firms. But many organizations struggle to keep their best employees, especially in scientific and engineering sectors. For example, a Teksystems 2015 survey of more than 400 IT leaders found that two out of five (42%) struggle to retain IT talent, and 67% report that retention is a challenge across all the skill sets they manage.

When your best talent leaves, it's often more expensive and disruptive than you 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. PriceWaterhouseCoopers has found that turnover costs can represent more than 12% of pre-tax income for the average company, and for those with higher-than-average turnover, costs can be nearly 40% of earnings. Unfortunately, it's 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.

Many leave quickly — a recent study by Equifax found that almost half of those who quit do so within the first year of employment. But the tech leaders we've interviewed also witness a second, more costly wave of attrition that happens in years two through five. By this point organizations have made deep investments in these employees' development, investments it loses along with the disruption to networks and work processes that employee 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."*

So how do you keep your best new employees from leaving? Most managers and organizations we've studied employ what we call a *human capital* approach to retention. They start by carefully and thoughtfully hiring skilled employees who fit the organization's workforce planning needs and culture. Then they deliver orientation and training to develop new talent into productive contributors. Finally, they use compensation, promotion, and new challenges 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.

This human-capital approach is important and beneficial. In a survey of 454 organizations, Bersin by Deloitte found that large organizations with more comprehensive 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 well-designed, comprehensive programs had 13 times higher mean cash flow than their similarly-sized peers.

But it's not enough. Over the past 20 years we've been studying the challenge of retention in dozens of organizations. Many of them do an excellent job of on-boarding and training, and reward their employees better than the competition. But they still continue to lose their best employees. What is missing in their approach? We've come to realize that in addition to a *human capital* approach to retention, organizations need a network or *social capital* approach too.

We've been using a technique called *Organizational Network Analysis* to study how the network of employee relationships inside organizations impacts retention (see Fig. 1).
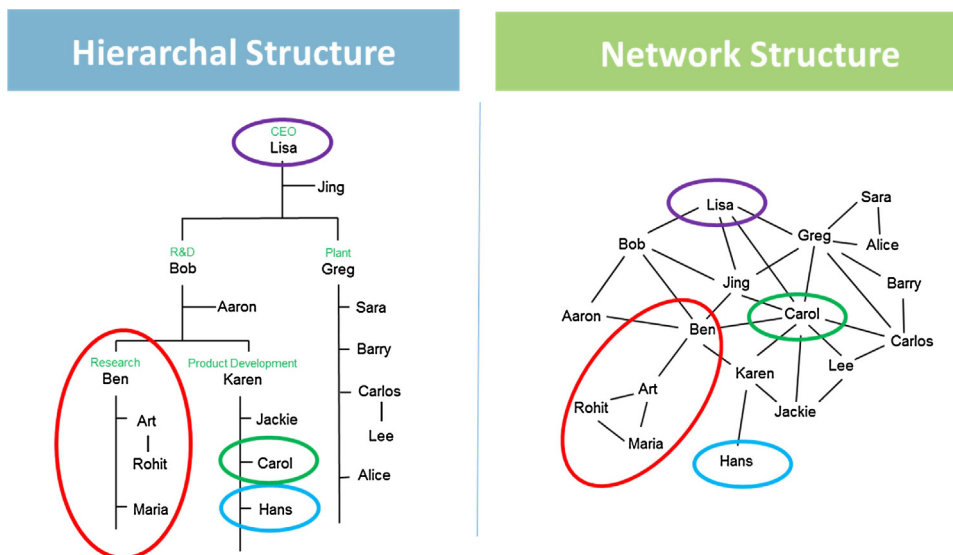
Figure 1 The Power of Organizational Network Analysis (ONA)

In our first phase of research, we conducted social network surveys among thousands of employees at 15 large, well-known organizations. We surveyed entire divisions, business units, or departments, asking each employee to identify those colleagues in their organization with whom they worked closely, gave or received advice, trusted, and other relationship-oriented variables. We also asked individual workers to evaluate their level of job satisfaction and their likelihood of quitting in the near future. Then we combined the survey information with monthly attrition data, and found that the size, range, and type of networks that employees have do impact organizational commitment and voluntary turnover. Of course, we did find that some people left for other reasons — poor fit, bad bosses, unsatisfactory rewards, etc. — but even in those situations network factors often were involved in creating the conditions that influenced people to quit.

Our 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. 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 identified 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.

Overall, through our research we found that when it comes to retention *bigger networks were not better networks*. In fact, large networks were often related to turnover. We also discovered that the qualities of an individual's network that were associated with low turnover in an employee's first year were different than the qualities that ensured retention in years two through five. The most successful and loyal employees were able to evolve their networks over time to stay engaged, motivated and committed.

In other words, what matters is helping employees develop the *right network at the right time*. We found that in their first year 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 proclaiming intelligence or touting their experience from a past working life).
- Engage with similarly-tenured employees for acculturation and a sense of belonging.
- Connect with key opinion leaders in networks for information to help do their job and, just as importantly, benefit from the reputation and legitimacy that accrues through these ties.

In years two through four/five, employees need to transform their networks in ways that drive *collaborative efficiency* and generate a *sense of purpose* in their work. 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.

These insights have proven 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 augment their traditional people-development efforts with network-development activities that helped employees replicate the

networks of similarly-tenured colleagues who had high organizational commitment. In turn, many companies saw significant reductions in turnover, especially among their most talented employees.

For example, based on understanding the role networks play in retention, the software company Workday revised their orientation programs to 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 began hosting 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 more integrated into the organization. And the investment has paid off in terms of higher employee engagement and lower turnover.

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 later, leaders can play an important role in making this happen.

AN EMPLOYEE'S FIRST YEAR: BUILDING NETWORKS FOR PRODUCTIVITY AND INCLUSION

The idea that new hires need to build networks is not new. Researchers studying newcomer socialization have 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. (See the Bibliography at the end of this article for more information on social network analysis and newcomer socialization.)

But what kind of network do they need to develop? One experienced hire in our study nicely described the challenge and its eventual impact on retention:

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.

Through our research we have found that in their first year new employees have two overriding needs: to *be productive* and to *feel included* by the organization. Both of these needs

Table 1   Network-Based Ideas to Increase Retention of Your Best Employees

Employee tenure	Year 1	Years 2—5
Overriding employee goal Employee needs Network-based ideas to help your best employees meet these needs in *your* organization (instead of someone else's)	Striving Productivity and inclusion 1. Create opportunities to help newcomers become valued resources that are "pulled" into the network by choosing initial assignments that give them justification to set up exploratory meetings and allow them to highlight their expertise through supporting the efforts of others. 2. Help newcomers quickly develop relationships with highly-connected key influencers through strategic introductions, informal mentor relationships, and insights about informal work networks. 3. Leverage the power of newcomer cohorts and company affinity groups (e.g. gender, ethnicity, professional focus, outside interests, etc.) to build diverse cross-functional relationships.	Thriving Efficiency and purpose 1. Teach employees how to manage collaborative over-load and create efficient network interactions through prioritization, delegation, polite "no's", and improved online communication habits. 2. Help employees find increased meaning and purpose in their work by connecting them to end-users and visionaries, creating opportunities for them to mentor others, or get them involved in company-sponsored community service efforts. 3. Help employees build strategic boundary-spanning ties that enable and inform four areas — innovation, efficiency and best practice, professional development and insight into the political landscape.

are primarily satisfied through the set of relationships new hires establish with managers, experts, peers, mentors and other newcomers throughout the company. We found three critical strategies to help newcomers build the right network in their first year:

1. *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 to their organization. As a result, they had established onboarding processes that exhorted newcomers to build networks they could tap into to get their work done. In Organizational Network Analysis terms this means that managers told newcomers they 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*.

   For example, in one of the organizations we studied we assessed connectivity across more than 40,000 people and then related network position to voluntary turnover. We discovered that among new employees with less than one year of tenure, the number of out-going ties they had to other people did not predict turnover. Instead, what mattered was the degree to which others in the organization sought out the new employee for help and advice, or in Organizational Network Analysis terms the number of "in-degree" ties.

   In other words, rather than promote or "push" their expertise into the organization, the most successful, engaged newcomers started by finding opportunities to help others in ways that established the newcomers' reputation and legitimacy as a useful resource, which in turn caused newcomers to be "pulled" into new opportunities. Through our interviews we found that the best strategy to make this happen was for newcomers to have exploratory meetings with co-workers where they asked questions to understand others' expertise, and then find ways to use their own expertise to help others achieve their goals.

   Leaders can not only help make these exploratory meetings happen through strategic introductions, but also they can jumpstart in-degree "pull" through initial assignments. 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.

2. *Help newcomers quickly connect to highly-connected co-workers*. Organizational Network Analysis also helped us uncover another aspect of networks that decreased the likelihood of early departure: While the absolute size of a new employee'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., colleagues 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).

   Not only did these relationships give newcomers access to more diverse information and expertise across the organization, these new relationships helped newcomers augment their own credibility, 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 need 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" the credibility of others.

   How do people find these key connectors if the organization has not done an Organizational Network Analysis? Obviously managers can use their own implicit knowledge of who-knows-who to introduce newcomers to highly-connected people. But through interviews we found other subtler strategies that newcomers can use. One person explained, "I pay a lot of attention in meetings regarding who listens to whom, who defers to whom, and who is called on 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."

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—either through cohorts in large entry classes or through 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 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 new-comers (and everyone else) build mutually-beneficial connections across the organization and help people associate more of their identities with the organization.

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.

ILLUSTRATION FROM OUR RESEARCH: A FIRST YEAR SUCCESS STORY

Let's take a more personal look at a successful entry process that relied on the first two of these network strategies. Just four months into his role as director of learning and organization development, Rick already had the network and visibility of someone who had been in the role for years. The scope of the role included 12 direct reports and a team of 50 responsible for the onboarding, leadership development, and/or training of 5000 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.

How did Rick quickly gain influence and create work he truly loved? He started by finding ways to be helpful to others. For example, 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 explained that "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*?" He found that if he approached them in a way that acknowledged their time and preferences, people were more open to helping and collaborating. 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 result of these meetings, Rick jumped in to run two events for senior leaders, a tangible deliverable tied to one of his top priorities. The success of these events helped establish him as an important resource.

He also spent time understanding who were the highly-connected, credible influencers and decision-makers across the company. In his meetings, Rick said that "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." 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. Looking back, 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."

YEARS 2—5: BUILDING NETWORKS FOR EFFICIENCY AND PURPOSE

Once new hires have become productive and integrated, the objective shifts from "striving" to "thriving" (see Table 1) which 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. Through our research we've found that collaborative overload and lack of purpose are two of the biggest reasons why highly performing (and often highly connected) employees leave organizations.

The challenge is that networks designed to satisfy needs for productivity and inclusion are not especially good at satisfying needs for efficiency and purpose. In terms of efficiency, 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 collaborative technologies has only made this worse. Eventually, overwork causes burnout and unwanted turnover. In fact, through our network 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 for purpose, in an employee's first year they often find meaning in the simple challenge of getting up to speed and becoming a productive member of the organization. But once they have mastered their role and established themselves as a valued member they need something more to get them out of the bed every morning. Being a valued, in-demand resource isn't enough — they want to feel that what they do has meaning beyond just getting work done. Unfortunately, incessant demands for their help and expertise leave them little time to reflect and see the broader impact of their efforts. 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-based strategies in years two through five:

1. *Help employees develop and maintain collaboratively efficient networks*. The rise of matrix structures, globalization, and especially email have created collaboration intensities that can overwhelm some of your best performers. Through our network analyses we have found that typically 3—5% of employees absorb 20—35% of the collaborative activity in organizations—quite often at the expense of burning out and departing. Helping them develop not only productive but efficient networks in years two to five is critical to retention.

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.

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 their 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.

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.

2. *Help employees find purpose through collaboration*. In our organizational network analyses 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. We found statistically significant results showing that people who derived a sense of purpose from their network interactions were much more likely to stay. In other words, while people say it is the work that yields purpose, more often than not it is the *interactions around the work that matter*.

Again, there are ways managers can help their direct reports find meaning in what they do. One way is connect employees with customers and end-users of their work so they see how their efforts are improving the lives of others. For example, this could be through 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 managers can invite employees to product launches, trade shows, and award ceremonies that promote and celebrate the end result of their efforts. 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."

Another way is connecting employees to 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."

Giving back also has a lot to do with how people derive a sense of purpose in networks, and to make this happen some leaders helped their best employees become 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."

Finally, another way to use collaboration to generate purpose is to get employees involved in company-sponsored service activities. While employees need a sense of purpose to stay committed to an organization, not all of that purpose needs to come from their job responsibilities. 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, cohesion "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 also 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 in the community."

3. *Help top performers build boundary-spanning networks that increase employees' efficiency, innovation and impact*. Decades of research have shown that high performers are distinguished by their 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 creatively and efficiently over time and drive innovation and impact, which helps with meaning, purpose and ultimately retention.

The challenge is that project-based work tends to create more insular networks and, as a result, people have to be more proactive in developing broader, more diverse networks. In particular, we've found through our research that top performers need to be more strategic in developing ties that achieve four specific goals: 1) ties for efficiency and best practice gains; 2) ties for innovation—often to adjacent areas of expertise; 3) ties that help in terms of professional development and 4) ties that yield insight into the political landscape.

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."

ILLUSTRATION FROM RESEARCH: A SENIOR LEADER'S SUCCESS IN EVOLVING HER NETWORKS FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Let's take a look at another leader who revised her networks in year three 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, stating that incessant demands " . . . just sap your energy. You don't have time to reflect or think ahead when you are just dealing with the fires."

So she started by delegating tasks and diffusing ownership early to others in her network. She set expectations, but then made it clear she did not want or need to be involved. This made a big difference. She explained that "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 ownership. It's surprising how quickly they will un-involve you if you let them." Her ability to step back came from the realization that she does not need to be part of every project, decision or conversation to feel valued and important.

She also learned to say no to excessive requests, and found that polite push back when necessary rarely had negative consequences. She came to understand that "People say *yes* or *no* because they feel they have to do so. 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."

Finally, she also adjusted her work and communication routines to avoid burnout and stay energized. For Sofia, this entailed a couple of simple rules she now 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 flow over to the full weekend.

Sofia also ensures she finds meaning and purpose in what she does by proactively planning for purposeful activities. "Every Sunday night I update my calendar a week or two in advance," she says. "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."

She also invests in outside 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 work-life balance, you come to work with a different point of view; people get refreshed by that and uplifted by working with you . . . What started as something I was doing to buffer work demands ended up being a powerful source of success."

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 used these network-based insights to revise its entry

program. This rapidly growing firm was onboarding roughly 150 people a week; they realized that reducing the attrition rate by even one or two percent would result in a multi-million dollar impact for the company. They began by embedding 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 also 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 during entry and delivered just-in-time to support their needs. 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 helped individuals get feedback on their emerging 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, strategic approach to network development 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 their onboarding program actually declined.

Of course, not all organizations have the resources to create this kind of program. But leaders can have a tremendous impact by focusing on their employees' networks in three simple ways. First, have employees *periodically assess their networks and ensure that they are connecting to the right people*. 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, engaged and balanced.

Second, *make network discussions part of the employee development process*. 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 and inspired))?"

Finally, help your best employees understand the value of building relationships beyond their immediate project responsibilities. These relationships include:

1. *Up the hierarchy* to better understand organizational goals and context, gain resources and build political support for initiatives.
2. *Across to peers* in other functions for brainstorming and best practices.
3. *Outside to experts* for fresh perspectives and new insights.
4. *Over to customers* to see the impact of their work on others.
5. *With energizers* who give inspiration, encouragement, and motivation.

Ultimately the goal is 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 straightforward once this mindset is established.

IT COMES DOWN TO CONNECTIVITY

In their 2016 Global Human Capital Trends Survey, Deloitte Consulting found that only 12% 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 the 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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