



## Network-building behavioral tendencies, range, and promotion speed



Andrew Shipilov<sup>a,1</sup>, Giuseppe Labianca<sup>b,\*</sup>, Valentyn Kalnysh<sup>c</sup>, Yuri Kalnysh<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> INSEAD, Boulevard de Constance, Fontainebleau 77300, France

<sup>b</sup> LINKS Center for Social Network Analysis, Gatton College of Business and Economics, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506, United States

<sup>c</sup> Ukrainian Institute of Public Health, Kyiv, Ukraine

<sup>d</sup> Ukrainian Academy of Public Service, Kyiv, Ukraine

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### ABSTRACT

We studied 459 Ukrainian civil servants to determine how career network-building behavioral tendencies relate to network range and promotion speed. We identify two main behavioral tendencies for initiating social relationships: (a) networking within formal structured groups organized around activities created specifically to encourage members to form personal bonds (structured foci) and (b) individually driven networking outside these structured foci. The study shows that individually driven networking is related to broader network range, while structured foci networking has an inverted-U relationship to network range. The optimal networking for range involves a moderate level of structural foci networking and high levels of individually driven networking. Broad network range is related to faster promotion speed to higher organizational levels. Extroverts have a tendency toward individually driven networking, while high Machiavellians have a tendency toward both individually driven and structured foci networking.

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Social network researchers argue that individuals' human capital only partly determines their career outcomes and that social capital, as reflected in networks of social relationships, can speed promotions within organizational hierarchies (e.g., Burt, 1992; Brass, 1985). One major research tradition, the networks-as-resources perspective, examines how social networks enhance career success, such as through faster promotions (e.g., Ibarra, 1995; Campbell et al., 1986; Granovetter, 1973). Rather than focus on the content that flows through social ties (e.g., friendship, advice), this perspective focuses on the structure of individuals' ties, specifically their personal network range. Range has been conceptualized in three ways (Campbell et al., 1986): personal network density, or the extent to which one's ties are themselves connected (e.g., Burt, 1992); size, or the individual's total number of ties; and tie diversity or heterogeneity (e.g., Seibert et al., 2001). According to the networks-as-resources perspective, individuals who have broader range can learn more non-redundant information from diverse groups than can others lacking that access in the organization. Organizations will value most those few employees who have access to diverse information because they potentially understand

organizational goals more broadly and may create unique solutions to organizational problems (Burt, 2004). We adopt the approach of conceptualizing personal network range in the most direct fashion – individual's heterogeneity of ties to diverse information clusters outside their focal group (Campbell et al., 1986; Seibert et al., 2001).

The main information clusters in an intra-organizational context are the units created by the formal organization structure, and range in this context refers to ties crossing these formal unit boundaries (e.g., Oh et al., 2004; Thompson, 1967). Such boundaries demarcate pools of knowledge necessary for the successful functioning of an organization as a whole, but which are separated due to specialization (Burt, 1997; Ibarra, 1995; Tushman and Scanlan, 1981). This separation creates an organizational need for integration, and individuals with broad network range are positioned to satisfy that need and to reap rewards in the form of faster promotions. Because any tie that crosses formal boundaries helps organizations to integrate knowledge and enhances employees' value, it is particularly relevant to examine the heterogeneity of individuals' contacts to understand how range affects career-related rewards.

What behavioral tendencies lead individuals to become embedded in diverse networks that are broad in range? What are the psychological determinants of these behaviors? The networks-as-resources perspective, although important to organizational research, lacks detail in describing the process individuals use to develop their network structure. Rather, the perspective creates prescriptions, such as suggesting that individuals should develop

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 859 257 3741.

E-mail addresses: [shipilov@insead.edu](mailto:shipilov@insead.edu) (A. Shipilov), [joelabianca@gmail.com](mailto:joelabianca@gmail.com) (G. Labianca).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +33 1 60 72 44 24.

networks with broad range, without suggesting how to do it or who is more likely to engage in the behaviors that maximize range. Our study contributes to the networks-as-resources perspective by elaborating existing theory, increasing understanding of the social contexts in which individuals meet others, and offering a more comprehensive understanding of both network building behavioral tendencies that maximize range and their psychological determinants.

We argue that individuals exhibit two main approaches when building network ties: meeting people through joint involvement in structured formal groups or associations organized specifically to encourage meeting others and developing norms of mutual obligation and reciprocity; or meeting network partners through individually oriented activities that are not driven by formal group membership, such as going to a friend's party and developing a relationship with someone met there by chance. Our main contribution will be to illustrate that individuals' tendencies to build network ties through either or both of these different approaches are related to differences in individuals' range in the workplace. Specifically, we use the theory of social organization (Feld, 1981) and group homophily theory (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1987) to argue that individuals' tendency to meet people through an individually driven approach increases personal network range in the workplace. We also argue that the tendency to meet people through membership in formal groups and other structured foci has a negative curvilinear effect on individuals' network range at work, with those engaging in an above average amount of networking in structured contexts suffering dramatically lower range. We suggest that there is an optimal combination of networking behaviors that maximizes range: moderate amounts of structured foci networking and high amounts of individually driven networking. This optimal combination leads to the fastest promotion speed to higher organizational levels. Finally, we show that these networking behaviors are tied to psychological characteristics rooted in personality, such as extroversion and Machiavellianism.

## 1. Theory development

### 1.1. Range and promotions

Network range is important because it is a major determinant of a critical career outcome: *promotion speed* (Seibert et al., 2001). Organizations divide labor into production specializations, so that individuals and organizational units focus on their most immediate tasks and exclude related tasks, which are then assumed by other individuals and units (Burt, 1992). This tendency toward unit specialization is particularly acute in large private and public bureaucratic organizations (Tushman, 1977; Tushman and Scanlan, 1981). Individuals in specialized units tend to lose track of what their colleagues in other units are doing, even though such knowledge can benefit the operation as a whole (March and Simon, 1958; Mors et al., 2008).

Employees with ties to numerous formal units outside their focal unit have networks with high range. Occupying boundary-spanning positions between formal units allows them to derive more personal benefits relative to their human capital, compared with others outside such positions. For example, boundary spanners can take ideas from other units and apply them to their own units, so that supervisors will see them as being more technically competent than their peers (Tushman and Scanlan, 1981; Tushman, 1977). Moreover, boundary spanners are thought to have the most innovative ideas (Burt, 2004) and can control resource flows between formal units in their organizations (Burt, 1997).

Studies that have directly measured personal network range as formal group tie diversity have generally found that it relates

positively to individuals' career outcomes. In a study of a contract research and development firm, Reagans and McEvily (2003) demonstrate that individuals with wide range can ease the transfer of information between units, which ultimately makes them more valuable because they are the integrative glue that keeps the organization learning and growing. Furthermore, Ibarra (1995) suggests that being connected to diverse groups allows individuals to hear about opportunities for advancement more quickly. She also finds that wide-ranging networks give individuals broad-based political support throughout the organization. Finally, Seibert et al. (2001) indicate that employees who have contacts with different functional units are better able to acquire needed resources from disparate parts of the organization; consequently, they are likely to be rewarded with faster promotion and experience greater career satisfaction.

Related studies that did not measure network range as formal group tie diversity, but rather examined how people benefit from having ties that span informal groups within organizations, also suggest a positive relationship between inter-group spanning and career outcomes. For example, Mehra et al. (2001) find that employees positioned between informal groups in a high-technology firm receive high supervisory performance evaluations. Brass (1985) finds that non-supervisory employees who span informal groups in their work units achieve not only high supervisory ratings but also fast promotions. Fleming and Waguespack (2007) find that members of an open source development community with ties spanning more working groups emerge as community leaders. Finally, Oh et al. (2004) show that units whose members have ties spanning other units exhibit high task effectiveness, while Tsai and Ghoshal (1998) suggest that those units are more innovative.

Thus, the existing literature suggests that individuals with contacts to many organizational units will be able to access heterogeneous knowledge residing in different organizational silos, will have informed perspectives on what is transpiring elsewhere, will control information flows across units, will enjoy broad political support in the organization, and will ultimately perform more effectively in their jobs. These positive factors will be associated with faster promotions for individuals with higher network range. While Campbell et al. (1986) suggest that range could also be conceptualized as the density of ties between contacts or as personal network size, neither approach is as proximal in capturing the potential resources available to individuals as is examining the spanning of formal inter-unit boundaries.

### 1.2. The theory of social organization

Although achieving range is important for promotion in the workplace, what factors determine an individual's range? Feld's (1981, 1982) theory of social organization is the main sociological perspective attempting to explain the origins of personal network diversity. Central to this theory is the *focus*—a legal, social, physical, or psychological entity around which joint activities are organized. Feld's focus concept is extremely inclusive: among the examples he mentions are formal and informal entities such as work organizations, formal and informal voluntary organizations, and kinship entities such as families or clans, physical locations such as “hangouts,” city neighborhoods, or courts in the middle of a housing project, and gatherings such as football games. “Foci may be many different things, including persons, places, social positions, activities, and groups. They may actively bring people together or passively constrain them to interact (Feld, 1981: 1018).”

Feld argues that individuals meet others either by networking in these foci or in more random, chance encounters, and this has a profound effect on the diversity of their personal networks. He proposes that if individuals build ties around a few foci, their personal networks are likely to be very dense, with many of their social ties

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