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## Improving the value-of-input for ideation by management intervention: An intra-organizational network study

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### ABSTRACT

A discretionary social network in a firm is where individual employees voluntarily share new, innovative knowledge – activities in this network are essential to firm innovation. Drawing on a unique field study we quantitatively compare the situation before and after a ‘simple’ management intervention aimed at increasing discretionary social network activity. We submit that both the network position as well as the formal role of an individual both needs to be taken into account to understand the antecedents to the voluntary exchange of valuable inputs within an organization. We find empirical evidence that someone’s structural position in the network prior to intervention positively contributes to the value-of-input exchanged. Contrary to expectation, however, those employees whose task it is to professionally share valuable, new knowledge attributed the input for future innovation – ideators – fall short in leveraging a favorable position in a firm’s discretionary, informal social network.

### 1. Introduction

To successfully innovate, firms need to generate, grow and implement a sustained flow of ideas (Boeddrich, 2004; Katila and Ahuja, 2002) requiring an active involvement of their labor force with innovative activity (Blundell et al., 1999; Chaney and Devinney, 1992). The research literature on organizational networks highlights how an organization’s social infrastructure can help the exchange of innovative knowledge (Cross and Cummings, 2004; Björk and Magnusson, 2009; Henttonen, 2010; Ahuja et al., 2012). Network theory significantly enhanced our understanding of which collaboration patterns between individuals are favorable to innovative activity within the firm (Allen, 1977; Cross and Cummings, 2004; Boeddrich, 2004; Perry-Smith and Mannucci, 2015). Recent literature has vindicated the role of formal structures in an organization, highlighting that someone’s formal position in an organization can allow someone to engage in particular activities (better) than others (McEvily et al., 2014). We therefore submit that the network position as well as the formal role of an individual both needs to be taken into account to understand the antecedents to the voluntary exchange of valuable inputs within an organization.

Network literature assumes that the social structure drives such phenomena as intra-organizational knowledge exchange and has tended to disregard the actual content of what is exchanged (cf. Ensign, 2009). Creativity scholars, however, point to perceived value of knowledge that is exchanged as an important indicator of the potential for new knowledge to emanate from the knowledge exchange (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Amabile, 1996; Smith et al., 2005). Value-of-input exchanged also is a key focus for managers (Zheng, 2010; Kratzer et al., 2016). Academic research has neglected to study how the value of inputs exchanged affects social relationships. Since individuals exchange and accumulate knowledge, based on which they create new, innovative knowledge, their

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subjective valuation of the knowledge that is exchanged is most relevant (Casciaro and Lobo, 2015). We define the organization's discretionary social network as the social relations within a firm in which individuals voluntarily, informally, discuss new, innovative ideas and knowledge about improvements regarding products and services the organization offers (Rodan, 2010; Aalbers et al., 2013). This study examines the effects of what Okhuysen and Bechky (2009) call a 'simple intervention', building on insights from network research that deals with individuals' network characteristics as predictive of creative outcome as well as on recent insights from creativity scholars that address the importance of perceived value of the content exchanged in relation to the undergirding social infrastructure. We empirically study the actual micro-processes (cf. Foss et al., 2010) management purposefully intervened in. We contribute to the understanding of how managerial intervention affects the voluntarily sharing of new, innovative knowledge in an organization (Zheng, 2010; Kratzer et al., 2016). Managerial intervention is central to what managers inside organizations do, yet, surprisingly, the actual effect of an intervention on the inner working of an organization has not been empirically studied using a proper before-and-after research design (Balkundi and Kilduff, 2006; Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009).<sup>1</sup> The intervention studied here is 'simple' in nature as it differs from more complex interventions – such as downsizing. The particular management intervention was intended to stimulate the informal sharing of ideation related inputs and focusing on the associated discretionary social network within an organization. No formally established organizational configurations were altered (Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009; Fisher, 2017). As such we build on recent work in the *J. Eng. Technol. Manag.* that highlights managerial capability to influence individual motivation to formally partake in corporate ideation by providing organizational support (Pihlajamaa, 2017). Our contribution, however, focus on the consequences of such organizational support on the organization's discretionary social network activity instead.

While an intervention may be primarily directed at a specific target population of individuals central to ideation, because of expected benefits of such a focus, it can also affect others. Chuang et al. (2016), for instance, suggest that a managerial intervention aimed at stimulating behavior core to the activities of some individuals may by what they refer to as collective identification enhance what is extra-role behavior for others. Sharing knowledge, even of the tacit kind, is what Chuang et al. (2016) focus on. Following this logic, we differentiate between employees whose primary activity concerns ideation (referred to here as ideators – those employees that are formally part of the NBD operations of the organization) and employees who do not have ideation as their core functional responsibility or capability (referred to here as realizers – those employees formally associated with other functional areas such as IT, operations or marketing). Realizers are only secondarily engaged in the exchange of new, innovative knowledge (cf. Song et al., 2011). We focus on ideation as the exchange of new ideas has been found to form the bedrock to a firm's future competitive advantage (Subramaniam and Youndt, 2005; Wu et al., 2014). Ideation, the process of generating and exchanging creative ideas, constitutes the foundation of problem solving and decision making within many organizations, and forms the foundation for future competitive advantage (Nijstad and Stroebe, 2006). To tap into the creative potential available within an organization, organizations can rely on individuals to collaboratively produce creative ideas, yet the literature on corporate creativity stands to benefit from insights into the condition under which such creative and collaborative climate can be achieved. Thus, while to distil organizational creative potential organizations may decide to organize ideation formally, our understanding of how an organization's social infrastructure responds to such intervention still remains rather understudied. This is interesting, as ideation is increasingly being stimulated by management through internal competition to enhance organizational exposure (Marino and Zabojnik, 2004; Baer et al., 2010; Whelan et al., 2011).

This paper contributes first to the literature on creativity (Girotra et al., 2010; Sosa, 2011), shedding further light on the conditions under which when individuals engage in ideation. We show that a simple intervention can substantially grow an organization's discretionary social network: employees become significantly more engaged in innovative knowledge exchange, exchanging new ideas relevant to the scope of the organization. Our study points out that careful orchestration of ideation is a task for management that floats on social interaction and benefits from management lowering the threshold to partake in such activity. More importantly, we argue, and find, that the stronger one's position in the discretionary social network prior to an intervention the more valuable ideas one is likely to exchange after a managerial intervention suggesting reputational effects at play based on one's prior social interaction patterns. Interestingly, and contrary to our initial expectations we find dedicated R&D employees (ideators) *not* to be more likely to offer more valuable value-of-input after an intervention compared to those who functionally are only secondarily related to innovation (realizers). An intervention can thus make those who earlier were not engaged with ideation become much more involved. Our findings further suggest prior ideation exchange capacity not to per se signal future ideation exchange capacity. Our study thus indicates that, contrary to what is generally believed (Ahuja et al., 2012; Ghosh and Rosenkopf, 2014), social networks can change relatively rapidly, in unexpected and possibly unintended ways. Management can create an orchestrated window of opportunity for newcomers to enter the ideation arena. Insights presented help managers in deciding on how to best tap into the untapped creative potential of their employees.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

Organizations may be seen as places in which individuals display a common purpose and cooperate based on compatible capacities to reach shared objectives (Foss and Lindenberg, 2011). An important objective for firms is to be sustainably innovative. Firms that successfully innovate develop and implement more and in particular better ideas than their competitors, gaining

<sup>1</sup> Studies of exogenously engineered network development are rare in general, and restricted to inter-organizational networks (Ahuja et al., 2012; Ferriani et al., 2013; Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013).

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