

Human resources and organizations

## Social connection in organizations: the effects of local ties on job engagement and performance

*Conexão social nas organizações: efeitos dos laços locais no engajamento e no desempenho no trabalho*

*Conexión social en las organizaciones: efectos de los vínculos locales relativos al intra organizacionales y rendimiento en el trabajo*

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Received 29 May 2014; accepted 12 February 2016

### Abstract

This study examines the effect of local ties of organizational actors on their degree of job engagement and performance. The study carried out a survey with 249 respondents and analyzed the effect of local ties (i.e., ties of the ego) through degrees of intra-organizational social connections. Engagement was measured in physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Performance was represented by the degree of achievement in tasks. The results show that only cognitive engagement and performance are influenced by degrees of intra-organizational social connection. These results are explored in the conclusions of the article.

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**Keywords:** Social connection; Engagement; Performance

### Resumo

Neste artigo, teve-se como objetivo examinar o efeito dos laços locais dos atores organizacionais em seu grau de engajamento e desempenho no trabalho. O estudo foi realizado por meio de um *survey* com 249 respondentes. O efeito dos laços locais (i.e., laços do *ego*) foi analisado por meio do grau de conexão social intraorganizacional. O engajamento foi mensurado nas dimensões física, cognitiva e emocional. O desempenho foi representado pelo grau de consecução das tarefas. Os resultados apontam que apenas o engajamento cognitivo e o desempenho são influenciados pelo grau de conexão social intraorganizacional. Tais resultados são explorados nas conclusões do artigo.

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**Palavras-chave:** Conexão social; Engajamento; Desempenho

### Resumen

El objetivo del presente trabajo fue examinar el efecto de los vínculos locales de los actores organizacionales en su nivel de compromiso y rendimiento en el trabajo. El estudio fue realizado por medio de un *survey* con 249 encuestados. Se evaluó el efecto de los vínculos locales (o sea, vínculos del *ego*) por medio del grado de conexión social intraorganizacional. El compromiso fue medido en las dimensiones física, cognitiva

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Peer Review under the responsibility of Departamento de Administração, Faculdade de Economia, Administração e Contabilidade da Universidade de São Paulo – FEA/USP.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rausp.2016.07.005>

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y emocional, y el desempeño fue representado por el grado de cumplimiento de las tareas. Los resultados indican que sólo el compromiso cognitivo y el desempeño están influenciados por el grado de conexión social intraorganizacional. Se detallan estos resultados en las conclusiones del artículo. © 2016 Departamento de Administração, Faculdade de Economia, Administração e Contabilidade da Universidade de São Paulo – FEA/USP. Publicado por Elsevier Editora Ltda. Este es un artículo Open Access bajo la licencia CC BY (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

*Palabras clave:* Conexión social; Compromiso; Rendimiento

## Introduction

The search for a sense of cohesion is a key characteristic of the behavior of social actors (Friedkin, 2004; Kadushin, 2001). This meaning is constructed by connecting with other individuals or even anthropomorphized non-human elements (e.g., artifacts, religious agents) (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008; Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012). The reasons for this search for connections are centered on the basic need for security and avoidance of isolation, loneliness, and anguish (Castano, 2013). Walton et al. (2012) claim that a sense of relating and belonging to a group considered familiar centrally represents the characteristics of that conceptualized in the field of psychology as a social connection. Kadushin (2001, 2012) points out that this need to belong to a collectivity creates a sense of safety that characterizes one of the main motivations for the formation and maintenance of social networks.

The main implication of this basic need of the individual when taking into account the organizational context is the creation of social norms of acceptance and inclusion. This kind of social norm is the positive expectations that a focal agent (ego) has in relation to their contacts (alters) in intra-organizational networks, with regards to their inclusion. The focal agent creates an expectation of their role in relation to other social actors of an organization in the sense that their contacts, especially their strong ties (with whom they have more frequent interaction) (Granovetter, 1973), behave in a manner that makes them feel included in an organization. Studies on expatriates are among the clearest examples of the negative effects generated by newcomers faced with co-workers who do not perform this social role—i.e., they do not act in a way that tries to make the new member feel part of the organization (Pruetipibultham, 2012; White, Absher, & Huggins, 2011; Yamazaki, 2010).

The expectation of being welcomed and accepted by colleagues, or even treated intimately like a member of a family (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Okhuysen, 2001), has effects on the behavior of organizational actors. Especially in Brazil where people are typically characterized as welcoming, typified in Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's *Cordial Man* (2008, p. 146), there is a continuous reconstruction of the expectation of being accepted by peers. It is particularly important, therefore, that the effects of this phenomenon are investigated in more detail. In this line of reasoning, the concept of intra-organizational social connection (Maciel, 2015; Maciel & Camargo, 2015) is employed in the present study. Intra-organizational social connection reveals to what extent a focal agent (ego) notices that their local ties (alters) behave in a way that makes them feel part of an organization. Thus, it is relevant to examine the influence of this perception on behavior at work.

To evaluate this type of relationship the following objective in this study was defined: Examine the effect of local ties of actors embedded in intra-organizational networks on engagement and performance at work. These dependent variables were chosen as they represent some of the key behaviors in formal and informal evaluations at work (Downing, 1994; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). Engagement is treated as a construct composed of physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. These dimensions correspond to the degree to which a worker employs his or her physical strength, attention, and emotional energy in activities (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Kahn, 1990; Zhu, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2009). Task performance refers to the degree to which an individual fulfills the obligations associated with a particular function (Ng & Feldman, 2009).

The main contribution of this work is that it goes beyond research that only emphasizes the effects of a job's nature (e.g., autonomy), dispositional variables, and sociodemographic variables in engagement and performance, and therefore examines the importance of relational resources in greater detail. Moreover, this study overcomes the limitations of strictly structuralist studies, which are almost invariably restricted to examining the influence of the structural characteristics of intra-organizational networks, such as centrality, reciprocity, and structural holes in behavioral variables (e.g., Perry-Smith, 2006; Raider & Krackhardt, 2001). Thus, it is possible to consider with greater care social actors' reflexivity in the performance of their local ties and examine the effects of this evaluation at work, since this phenomenon has been addressed only peripherally in previous research.

## Intra-organizational social connection as a relational resource

This work presents the intra-organizational social connection construct as an alternative to traditional measurements of social network analysis (Hanneman & Riddle, 2011; Kadushin, 2012) or as a type of relational resource (Freeney & Fellenz, 2013; Grant, 2007). In classical structural analysis of social networks (Freeman, 1977) reflexivity of social actors is disregarded (Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994). The idea of evaluation and attribution of meaning by a network agent is totally ignored because behavior occurs directly in accordance with—for example, the number of incoming ties (in-degree centrality), outgoing ties (out-degree centrality), similarity in the pattern of ties (structural equivalence), or the proportion of non-redundant ties (structural roles). In such studies, the interpretation that a focal agent (ego) makes about their own centrality or any other property and action of their contacts (alters) is ignored, peripherally pointed to, or even assumed as bias (Brands, 2013).

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