

Network Mapping as a Tool for Uncovering Hidden Organizational Talent and Leadership

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Introduction

Many factors influence the way we experience our work today, regardless of the sector or industry in which we work. Funding pressures, constant organizational restructuring, demographic shifts and technology are fundamentally reorganizing our workplaces. In our attempts to address these changes through our traditional organizational structures we often encounter decision making bottlenecks and critical communication gaps that can affect our ability to achieve our business goals. Identifying expertise, talent and leadership amongst staff becomes crucial to succession planning initiatives to support this new work reality.

One way around this is to move from the traditional hierarchical organization chart to a more fluid and adaptive set of relationships and connections that more accurately reflect how our organizations work. This article will focus on the practice of social network mapping within organizations to deliberately leverage and engage these intra-organizational sets of informal connections that are less “hard-wired” than formal organizational working relationships.

Although it is often used when organizations are planning for a large change initiative, network mapping can also be used to quickly identify and visually map internal linkages that have been established informally across organizations. In particular, the article will highlight the applications of the tool to identify hidden talent and leadership within the organization to support succession planning initiatives and diagnose internal communication and decision making blockages.

Why Networks?

Networks are everywhere. You probably belong to a few yourselves. Why all the fuss?

Networks are replacing the old ways of working, within our organizations and with other partners or stakeholder groups outside the company. This change in our working world is being facilitated by multiple converging outside trends: demographic, technological, fiscal austerity and legislative changes.

Visualizing Formal vs Informal Networks

Within most organizations, the sole formal observable structure or ‘map’ is an organization chart. These hierarchical reporting relationships, and how close you are to the top, tend to define your access to information, resources, knowledge and access to key influencers and decision makers.

If you believe my colleague, Jeff Mohr, Senior Developer of the SNA software KUMU, 'organization charts lie',¹ and are not truly representative of the way that work actually gets done or information gets shared within organizations. It is the illumination of these informal structures within organizations that can be made visible while undertaking a network mapping exercise with employees.

Think of it this way, if the only question you feel worth asking ask your employees is "to whom do you report?", the organization chart is the picture (or map) you will observe from the results.

But what if you asked a different question?

Shining a Light on Relationships

It's no wonder middle managers are so stressed in their roles and HR professionals are feeling pulled in multiple directions. Both have been tasked with translating, adapting and modeling this structural shift on the fly, while still needing to maintain an adherence to the org chart.

In particular, this singular map has often has served to reinforce the current set of management skills, rather than respond to key organizational challenges. These challenges and themes were identified and explored at the Queen's IRC 2015 Workplace in Motion Summit that took place on April 16, 2015:

- **Talent:** How do we engage, retain and motivate a new generation of workers?
- **Transformation:** How can organizations transform without trauma?
- **Making the shift:** What do organizations need to do to shift to new models?
- **Managing overload:** How do we keep up with evolving technology and trends?²

As we work cross-organizationally to achieve our business outcomes, more often than not, our hierarchical structures that once guided our work are being replaced with many more peer based relationships, shared leadership and accountability for outcomes. One upside to this trend is that the strength in engaging these different perspectives at the planning table introduces innovation, fresh thinking and opportunities. More often though, work sits and stagnates as employees are left struggling with waiting for the 'someone up the ladder to make the final decision.'

¹ Mohr, J. (2014, October 26). The Kumu Manifesto. Retrieved December 10, 2015, from <https://speakerdeck.com/jeffcmohr/the-kumu-manifesto>.

² Sheldrick, C. (2015, May). Getting Ahead of the Shift: Summit Inspires Thoughtful Conversations About the Changing World of Work. Queen's University IRC. Retrieved December 10, 2015, from <http://irc.queensu.ca/articles/getting-ahead-shift-summit-inspires-thoughtful-conversations-about-changing-world-work>.

Knowledge is no longer contained within one organization or within a one small team. Younger workers are used to continually data mining their own networks (social or otherwise) to inform their knowledge base. They are not afraid to voice their opinions and expect to be valued within the organization based on what skills and assets they bring (and are recognized for), not how long they have occupied a desk. Older workers may rely more on their past experience (both in depth and breadth) and outdated linear planning tools. The new employee expects to work collaboratively and across peer boundaries, wants work that is meaningful and challenging, learns by doing, and expects developmental feedback that will help with their anticipated 'career lattice.'³

The question of supporting new leadership models within organizations cannot be separated from how these new leadership skills are being identified, leveraged and supported from within.

Most critically, in hierarchical organizations, the leadership designates jobs and roles. The skill set to manage in this command and control environment are quite different than some of the skills required to nurture a networked way of working. These include an ability to catalyze, coach, connect & facilitate.⁴

In addition, "without the formal 'rules' of an organization, an informal network creates consciously (or unconsciously) a set of interpersonal practices that shape the way members build participation and cohesion around purpose, share information, are welcoming and inclusive and mostly critically build trust."⁵

How do you uncover these powerful connections?

What is Social Network Analysis?

In a key practice-based resource edited by Michel Martens, the focus of Social/Organizational Network Analysis (SNA) is to identify "key networks within organizational boundaries, understanding the structure of personal and group relationships within these networks, and using this understanding to make a difference to business performance."⁶

³ Ibid.

⁴ Adapted from: Holley, J. (2012). Network Weaver Handbook. Athens, Ohio: Network Weaver.

⁵ Struthers, M. & Scott, P. (2015, June 4). Netiquette 2.0: Moving Forward at the Speed of Trust. Retrieved December 10, 2015, from <http://events.tamarackcommunity.org/latest/author/marilyn-struthers-penny-scott>.

⁶ Atos Consulting. (2011, November). Using Social Network Analysis in Organizational Change. Atos. Retrieved December 10, 2015, from http://atos-client-innovation-forum.com/assets/atos_cif/pdf/UsingSocialNetworkAnalysis.pdf.

Data is collected by means of an electronic survey of internal staff. Two sets of questions are asked of respondents: demographic and relational.

Firstly, basic demographic information is collected (such as length of time with the organization, role, team/department). Specially designed relationship based questions are also asked of respondents. These questions focus on the type, frequency and strength of their interactions with other staff.

The data are uploaded into SNA software that creates visual maps of the survey results.

The generated maps can indicate not only the type of connections amongst staff (for example, routine interactions, project planning, support activities etc.) it can also map the strength or frequency of the interaction (every day, one a month, annually).

The connections and linkages now available visually, can then be analyzed by interpreting the patterns that have been generated in the maps. As a general rule, staff members who work closely with others versus infrequent interactions will appear closer to each other on the map.

Rob Cross et al.⁷ provided a visual example of this exercise when they asked the same respondents from an executive team about who they looked to for specific advice and expertise. The results from this question rearranged the traditional organization chart to show a relatively 'low on the totem pole' team member appearing at the centre of the map, with multiple connections across all levels of the organization.

But what do we really know about deliberately engaging in these network structures that are less "hard-wired" than formal organizational working relationships?

What Can the Maps Tell You?

Undertaking a network mapping exercise can provide many benefits to the organization. It can:

- Obtain a baseline visual snapshot of current levels of connectivity amongst staff across your organization
- Assess the strength of the current relationships across and amongst staff, middle management and leadership and external stakeholders
- Help identify teams and individuals who are well connected and those that may appear more isolated

⁷ Cross, R., Parker, A. & Borgatti, S.P. (2002). A bird's-eye view: Using social network analysis to improve knowledge creation and sharing, IBM Institute for Business Value.

- Identify 'hidden leaders' within the organization
- Identify internal communication and decision making blockages
- Provide a roadmap to facilitate the planning and implementation of process improvements

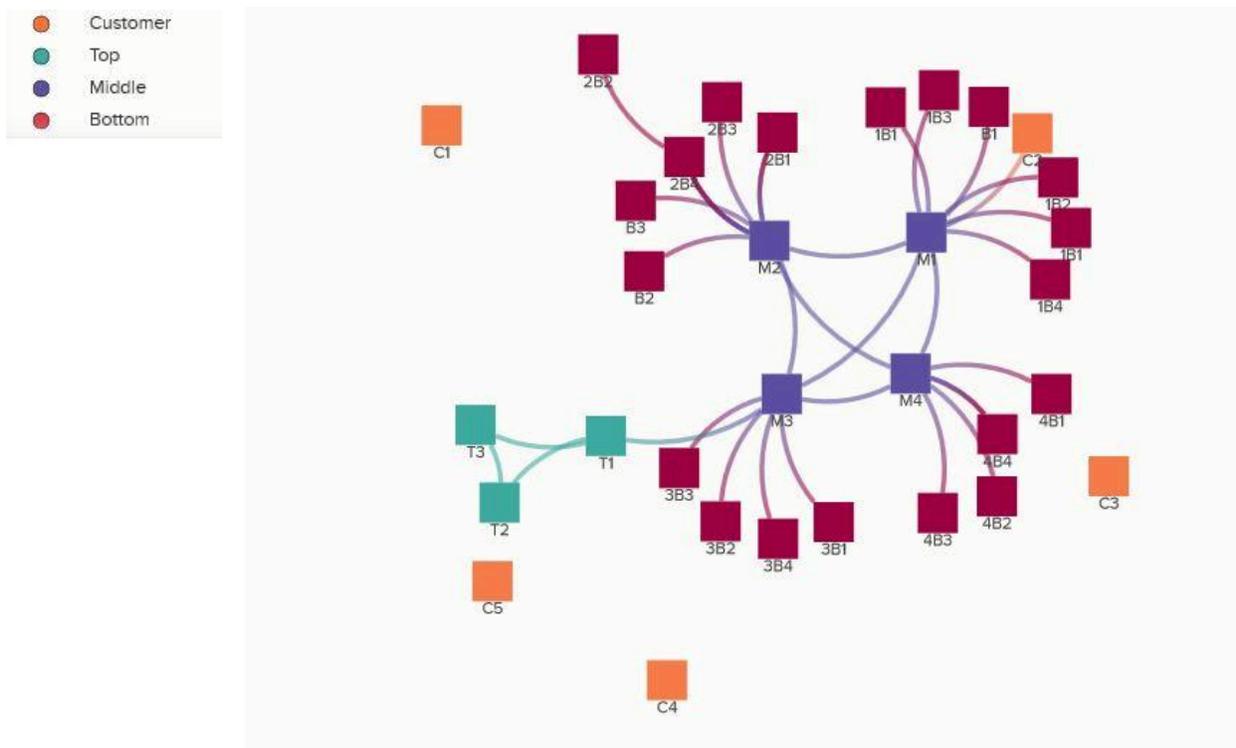
The following visuals can help to imagine more clearly the applications of the tool. The mocked up maps were originally developed in consultation with Queen's IRC and used to support a simulation exercise during an Organizational Design program.

In the simulation, participants take on a preassigned role with a fictitious company that was struggling with client satisfaction and engagement.

Customer (C)	new or existing
Top (T)	senior leadership
Middle (M)	middle management
Bottom (B)	client delivery team

At the end of the first day, we created a dataset that imagined we had asked the survey respondents the following question "Who do you go to with customer service issues?"

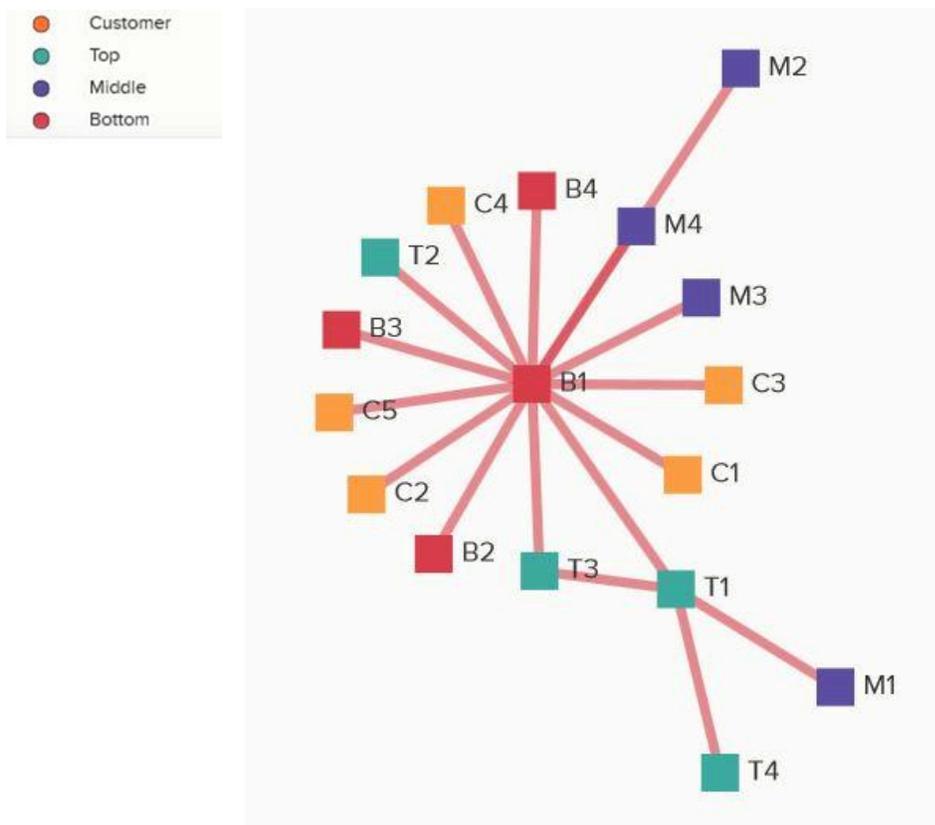
This 'before' map, revealed the following picture:



During the debrief, the picture reflected the feelings of all the participants, including:

- The frustration of new customers trying to find someone to talk to about their needs.
- Managers trying to manage the time and productivity of individual teams of bottoms with relatively no senior leadership connections.
- Senior leadership (including sales) in a small cluster and disconnected from the whole.
- Rising staffing costs as individual managers try to manage the ebb and flow of client work in isolation.

After working through reimagining the struggling company the next day, we once again created a dataset that imagined we had asked the same survey question. A new picture emerged.



- New customers are directed to a single point of contact with a bottom that was reassigned a client coordinator role.
- Managers were able to manage the time and productivity of individual teams of bottoms as the role of work scheduling became a client coordinator task.
- Senior leadership became more connected from the whole.

- With individual managers working closely with a central coordinator, staffing becomes a consideration of the organisation's overall needs. Flexible staffing allows bottoms to gain new skills and experience as they are assigned to different teams as work ebbs and flows and staffing costs have become more consistent.

Leveraging Your Existing Network Maps

By analyzing the patterns and linkages in the maps, different pictures emerge based on the questions you have included in the survey.

You can discover:

- Which staff are the most connected?
- How does information flow across the organization?
- Are there any linkages across teams and departments?
- Are there any 'hidden leaders' within the organization; those individuals to whom do people turn for advice, problem solving, innovative ideas, decision making, sales data or strategic direction?
- Are there staff that facilitate or impede knowledge creation and transfer?

Most crucially, when we need to begin to identify and nurture the future organization leaders via succession planning, it can help organizations uncover hidden talent and leadership within organizations that exist beyond the traditional organizational chart. Are some individuals already displaying the anticipated skills and behaviours of our future leaders to navigate and leverage these new work relationships?

The Silence in the Room: The Impact of Scenario Planning

Another key feature of using software social network analysis software is the ability to manipulate your data in real time and use the process in scenario planning. What happens if key network connections are removed from the map? What happens to the remaining connections? Are they connected enough to withstand the removal and stay linked together? This particular application can be used to create possible scenarios as organizations plan for anticipated changes such as restructuring, mergers or succession planning.

A recent engagement with a client provided a powerful opportunity to experience this application. We had mapped routine interactions, communication paths and existing relationships and connections amongst staff within the organization. Network mapping and analysis is a very participatory process and we generally work with a small working group or

committee to plan and implement the survey. One of the most exciting moments for us and the clients is the moment when we explore the maps live in the software with the data that was generated. There's usually a lot of chatter in the room as the patterns, clusters and connections are revealed and everyone looks to find themselves on the map.

In this particular engagement, we had included a demographic question asking for the age range of the respondents. The client was interested in seeing the connections amongst different age groups and roles, in particular within the senior leadership and middle management with an eye on future succession planning.

We were able to review the maps of the connections between all the individuals regardless of age range. There were multiple connections and linkages observed. Anticipating a high number of their staff would be approaching traditional retirement age, we included the information about age ranges of the respondents and reviewed the maps again using the litmus test of network health described above. When we removed those individuals from the map, the network connections in this 'what if' scenario disappeared and left the remaining individuals (age range 45-54) with very few connections to each other.

The chatter died out, and there was silence in the room. One of the HR partners at the table observed "Uh, oh, we might be in trouble." The vertical connections superseded the horizontal relationships.

Network analysis and this type of scenario planning can help identify these gaps and potential risks to the organization. It can also provide you with the map to begin to plan and mitigate these risks. This particular client used this experience to create stronger connections between the senior and middle management teams in order to strengthen itself for eventual succession planning.

Conclusion

As we busily build our networks, seamlessly integrating our social/personal/professional connections, we learn and engage with a global network of stakeholders that helps to inform, influence and expand our reach. We begin to see how these looser connections or relationships have value.

In addition to other employee engagement initiatives, network mapping and analysis offers organizations a tool to uncover, illuminate and deliberately leverage and engage these intra-organizational sets of informal connections that are less "hard-wired" than formal organizational working relationships.

About the Author



Penny Scott is a systems thinker, network practitioner and mapper and has a passion for supporting and measuring inter-sectoral partnerships and collaborations. As the Business Development Coordinator at Health Nexus, Penny brings her private sector experience to the non-profit world and is responsible for building diversified revenue streams for Health Nexus.

Currently she coordinates the fee for service Network Mapping and Analysis initiative. Penny holds a BA (Hons) from York University, completed the STIA+ Systems Thinking Certification Program and has received Certification from the Network Leadership Training Academy at the University of Colorado. Originally born in Montreal, she now lives in Kingston, Ontario.

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