

Understanding your social network and how to use it

Visualizing your social network will help you understand your position in a company and whether it is consistent with your short- and long-term objectives.

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Drawing a picture of your personal social network — or ego network — and the social network in your company could have benefits beyond simply finding out who your friends are.

In this [technical note](#), IESE's [Fabrizio Ferraro](#) and Marco Tortoriello say that by mapping your networks, you will be able to see much more clearly how everyone in your company is connected and where you sit within that matrix.

Visualizing your network

The simplest form of social graph is to use circles to represent individuals and lines to represent relationships. Relationships could be friendships, alliances, mentors or advice among individuals.

Create a spreadsheet and list the names of colleagues with whom you speak the most or have a strong relationship.

You should also consider those individuals who help you to achieve your objectives. These could be people with formal power or authority, informal gatekeepers, and opinion leaders whose advice is highly sought.

When designing your social graph, ensure you have visual ways of depicting different relationships and different roles. For example, use thicker lines to show stronger or more

frequent connections.

Interpreting your network

Once you have drawn your social graph, the authors recommend that you analyze the following attributes:

- *Size*. This is the number of contacts you have. In this case, bigger is not necessarily better. The larger your network, perhaps the smaller your set of critical connections, because it is very difficult to maintain efficient, meaningful connections with hundreds of people.
- *Reach*. Do your connections help you to reach different parts of your company or are they concentrated in only one area? Do you have access to all the areas of the organization that you need to get your job done? What is the best way to reach the people you need?
- *Diversity*. Diversity of contacts — for instance, in terms of functional background — is usually a sign of a healthy social network. It means that you have contacts from across different areas of the company, such as marketing, finance or operations. Having a diverse social network allows you access to different areas of knowledge and resources. The downside of an overly diverse network, however, is the time required to maintain these relationships.
- *Density*. A dense network is a close-knit set of ties. While this allows less access to varied information and knowledge, it does provide a solid base for cooperative and trustworthy relationships that can help and support you in times of need.
- *Subgroups and Factions*. Most social networks are divided into subgroups of some kind. Your company may be fragmented into internally cohesive subgroups that might lack cross-group connections. This means departments are densely connected but externally disconnected, making communication and collaboration across departments difficult.
- *Brokers*. These are individuals in your network who connect areas that are otherwise disconnected. Becoming one of these brokers is a source of informational advantage and power.

Leveraging your position

Your social graph will also help you to visualize your position in the company, and whether this is consistent with your short-, medium- and long-term goals.

You may discover paths to an important power broker that you had previously not been able to access. You may also find that you are a broker yourself, connecting areas of the company that would otherwise be disconnected, and can use this to your advantage.

The authors recommend a number of software packages available to help readers analyze and visualize very complex networks.

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