

Uncovering the Unconnected Employee

8 ways
employees
who don't
network can
hurt your
business.

By Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon

Engineers at an Ohio firm were told, “30 percent of your annual bonus will depend on your discovering new business from your clients.”

Of the 35 consulting engineers, working every day at the clients' sites, only three found new business opportunities. Neither their own bottom line nor the firm's could incite these engineers to talk with their clients to find possibilities for new or expanded work.

They probably would answer “yes” to engagement questions such as

- Are you proud to work for your firm?
- Would you recommend your firm as a good place to work?
- Are you planning to stay with the firm?
- Are you willing to give more than is required in your job description?

So were the engineers who left bonus money on the table unwilling, or unable, to bring in the business?

We coined the phrase “unconnected employees” to describe employees who lack the skills to build effective business relationships. As experts in business networking, we've been convinced for many years that network-



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Those leaders who fail to nurture their networks miss out on a fundamental aspect of their role. What if managers understood how to forge more effective relationships up, down, and across the organizational chart?

ing is the overlooked and underestimated professional competency. How then, is building networking competency among employees a solution to many of the negative outcomes of lack of engagement?

As we have reviewed recent management literature, we have been gratified to see other researchers and experts citing networking as critical as they point out the problems that unconnected employees create for their organizations. The engineers provide one example of unconnected employees failing to see themselves as part of the business development team.

A *Harvard Business Review* article titled, "How Leaders Create and Use Networks," states, "Strategic networking to help uncover and capitalize on new opportunities for the company puts the tools of networking in the service of business goals." Here are eight additional ways that unconnected employees affect their organizations.

1 They get off to a slow start as new hires.
A Salveson Stetson Group survey on onboarding asked for the biggest reason newly hired managers fail. In their responses, two-thirds of companies admitted

that they don't do a good job of integrating new hires into their culture. For example, it's critical that they are helped to build good working relationships with bosses, direct reports, and peers within their functional areas and departments and in other areas of their organizations.

A Deloitte Research report on talent management echoes that idea: "Rather than aim a fire hose of information at recruits, organizations must help them create the right relationships."

What if orientation programs focused on helping people connect?

2 They are less productive.
"[Social networks] put people in the thick of information flows and are a good predictor of productivity," reports the Social Network Practitioner Consensus Survey in *Computerworld* magazine. And an article in *Trendwatchers* notes that ideally, employees use networking to connect with colleagues, share best practices, ask and answer questions, and get to know customers and suppliers.

There are several more specific and practical uses for internal networks:

- learning the strategic direction of the organization and aligning yourself with it
- bolstering the bottom line by finding ways to contribute to the organization's success, regardless of title or position
- venturing into the white spaces on the organization chart to do away with silos
- collaborating across departmental or functional lines to solve problems
- expanding knowledge base and rounding up talent
- knowing who has the expertise you need
- knowing who has the budget, technology, or staff to help you complete a project
- tapping the grapevine to find out what's coming down the pike, before the official announcement.

What if all employees knew how to create, cultivate, and capitalize on their internal networks?

3 They don't make it their business to recruit.
Studies show that recruits referred by employees are more likely to be a good fit than people hired in other ways. An article in *HR Magazine* acknowledges that for some time, HR professionals have tapped their own employees as referral sources to pinpoint good candidate leads.

But these programs typically wane due to lack of employee participation, no matter how much bonus money is offered," the article notes. People hired through employee referrals cost, on average, a mere \$900, according to a Society for Human Resource Management Referral Networks Study.

What if employees consciously made it their business to encourage their contacts to apply for openings?

4 They don't know how to make their expertise known so it can be used, and so they can advance in their careers.

According to *Survival of the Savvy* authors Marty Seldman and Rick Brandon, many employees are underestimated and pigeonholed. They found that today's "typical derailment coaching candidate" lacks organizational savvy—including a network of allies and advocates.

In his book *The Importance of Managing Visibility*, George Dudley maintains that "managers who make themselves visible get higher raises and more promotions." And in today's volatile economic climate, employees need to create a safety net by identifying other jobs within their organizations that they could move to, and by connecting with peers who could refer them and employers who could hire them through professional associations.

What if employees knew how to raise their visibility and showcase their talents and interests so the organization could get maximum use of them?

5 They are less successful as managers.

"Successful managers spend 70 percent more time networking than their less successful counterparts," says an article in the *Academy of Management Journal*. A report from The Conference Board further indicates that "relationship or network builder" is one of the key essential leadership roles.

The Center for Creative Leadership has also found that leaders who are also skilled networkers can access the people, information, and resources needed for creating solutions and opportunities. Those leaders who fail to nurture their networks miss out on a fundamental aspect of their role.

What if managers understood how to forge more effective relationships up, down, and across the organizational chart?

6 They make poor decisions.

"The significant difference between high-quality and poor-quality decisions is how the decision-makers engage stakeholders," says an article in the *Harvard Business Review*.



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Is Your Organization Network-Friendly?

- 1 | Do corporate initiatives mention relationship-building in any way? Is there recognition at the top that building “social capital” is valuable?
- 2 | If there is pressure for “billable hours,” is there also recognition that networking is a money-making activity.
- 3 | Are employees who are expert networkers held up as good examples?
- 4 | Is networking training offered?
- 5 | Are employees encouraged to belong to professional associations and, even more important, are they accountable for bringing back valuable information and contacts?
- 6 | Are employees encouraged to volunteer in the community, and do they know how to make these activities pay off for the organization?
- 7 | Is it easy—and expected—that employees will collaborate with people in other parts of the organization and up and down the hierarchy?
- 8 | Are networking activities included in employee performance plans?
- 9 | Are people rewarded for networking successes?

Building support for ideas is critical to selling ideas. Getting up-front buy-in helps to avoid resistance to change.

What if vetting ideas with all those affected became the norm?

7 They aren't as creative and innovative.

An article in the *California Management Review* states that organizations that foster community achieve a shorter technology cycle time. And as UC-Davis professor Andrew Hargadon states, “Companies often have diverse network connections in different markets and across a wide range of customers, suppliers, and competitors.

Yet their strategies, work practices, and reward systems rarely support, and more often undermine, peoples’ ability to tap these networks for innovation.”

What if people reached out into their diverse networks and sought innovative ideas to import into the organization?

8 They fail to bring back business intelligence from conferences.

“Determining the benefit and [return-on-investment] to the conference provider is easy, and it isn’t new. What is missing, however, is the ROI for those who make the conference successful, particularly the participants and the organizations that fund their trip,” says Patti Phillips of the ROI Institute.

What if organizations could count on employees to bring back new ideas and valuable contacts from conferences and meetings?

Why employees aren't better relationship builders

It seems obvious that if employees were more skillful in relationship building, organizations would benefit. So why aren't employees better at building relationships?

Americans are becoming more shy. In 1972, when Stanford University’s Shyness Clinic’s research began, 40 percent of their subjects said they were shy. By 2008, that number had increased to more than 50 percent, and the youngest subjects were approaching 60 percent. Gen Y employees, then, are the shyest.

A *Kansas City Star* business columnist shared this comment from one 20-year-old’s resignation letter: “In 18 months on the job, I was never invited to a meeting or even a meal with my work group.”

Technology is partly to blame. Ruth Sherman says, in her *Fast Company* blog, “Dependence on remote forms of communication has left many younger workers bereft of interpersonal skills.” These are the same employees organizations are worried about retaining.

Layoffs, mergers, and acquisitions—these and other organizational earthquakes damage internal networks. Companies, however, rarely help people rebuild them.



No matter what they are teaching, organizations may be inadvertently discouraging networking in their corporate culture.



Even a growth spurt can be detrimental. An HR director at a PR and communications firm had this to say: “Our organization, at one time, had a very effective internal network that enabled us to find top notch talent very quickly. However, as a result of our overwhelming growth in 2007, the internal network deteriorated, resulting in a disconnected workforce. And that’s a dangerous problem for our organization.”

This director is now instituting brown bag lunches to train and bring together the younger workforce.

Organizations may believe that because they have conducted training programs on communication skills, they have taught employees how to connect. But our research on some basic networking skills shows that 97 percent of employees have trouble remembering names.

When asked, “What do you do?” 67 percent give answers that are inadequate and fail to generate conversation or even understanding. We have found that only 15 percent of employees in our workshops over the last 18 months say “yes” to the question, “Do you have the network you need?”

Some HR professionals may assume that you can’t teach relationship building. They may have bought into the idea that people are either born with the gift of gab or not. Recent books by authors who tell stories about their own outrageously successful extroverted networking imply that introverts are doomed.

Organizations may be put off by the word “networking.” That term can have negative connotations. It’s sometimes seen as sleazy, manipulative, or only for job-hunters. We have noticed that companies often retitle the concept.

One of the competencies now required for entry into the U.S. government’s Senior Executive Service is “building coalitions and communication.” At the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, it’s “connectivity.” At Lockheed Martin, it’s “horizontal integration.” At the Environmental Protection Agency, it’s “collaboration.” Others call it “relationship management,” “social acumen,” “silo-busting,” and “social capital.”

No matter what they are teaching, organizations may be inadvertently discouraging networking in their corporate culture. Workplace attitudes toward networking, we find, are a continuum.

There may be, in some organizations, a power grab going on between HR and corporate communications over who is going to manage internal “social networks”—software to promote connecting. These corporate adaptations of Facebook and LinkedIn have great potential, but one must be careful not to assume that just because employees are plugged in, they are connected.

Ideally, all the people who have a stake in the outcome of creating networking competency would come to the table. That includes people in charge of recruitment, training, executive coaching, leadership and employee development, career development, orientation, business development, corporate communications, marketing, affinity groups, and employee alumni.

They might jointly answer the network-friendliness questions (see page 64), discuss the benefits of “connected employees,” and plan a concerted approach of training and support.

Few organizations, as yet, have taken this kind of collaborative approach. Most assume that relationships are being built without any encouragement, or that such an effort would not affect the bottom line. We believe that creating networking competency is essential to support employee engagement, alignment, and inclusion. **T+D**

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