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The Network Paradox:

Balancing Breadth and Depth in Educational Change

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A Surprising Pattern

Intermediary educational organizations often celebrate their strong, lasting partnerships - and with good reason. But research reveals an unexpected paradox: these very strong relations might sometimes limit their ability to drive meaningful change. Understanding how to balance broad networks with deep partnerships could transform how organizations approach improvement work.

Knowledge brokers' greatest strength (i.e., strong ties with diverse partners) may also be their greatest challenge.

Go Wide or Go Deep

Research examining six equity-focused intermediary organizations¹ that broker knowledge across the education landscape reveal the importance of both depth and breadth in inter-organizational relationships.

Strong Partnerships Enable Impact

Successful organizations maintained just 3-13 close partnerships that received significant time and attention. These deep relationships enabled:

- Complex knowledge sharing and collaboration³
- Higher levels of trust and risk-taking
- More frequent and candid communication
- Sustained, long-term initiatives

Wide Networks Drive Innovation

Social network theory has long recognized that while strong ties enable sharing of complex knowledge, weak ties (those less frequent) often provide crucial access to novel ideas². These same organizations maintained wider networks of 15-61 partners, and these broader networks create several key advantages:

- Regular exposure to new ideas and perspectives
- Faster identification of emerging trends and opportunities
- Access to diverse resources and expertise
- Connections to unexpected opportunities



Finding the Right Mix

The research suggests successful organizations maintain relationships at different levels of intensity:

Core Partnerships

- Daily or weekly interaction
- Multiple types of engagement
- Shared long-term initiatives
- Deep trust and understanding

Broader Connections

- Periodic check-ins
- Single-focus collaborations
- Information sharing
- Professional networking

Even when brokers maintain heterogeneous relationships, strong ties may create an 'enmeshed' ecosystem in which new information is not likely to enter.

Strategic Approaches

For organizations seeking to optimize their impact, this research points toward several key strategies:

Map Your Ecosystem

Regularly assess both the breadth and depth of your network to identify gaps and imbalances. Consider the number, types, and frequency of interaction with partners at different levels of engagement.

Plan Intentionally and Rebalance

Decide which partners need deep engagement and which work better as lighter connections. Create clear systems for engaging partners at different levels of intensity and rebalance as needed.

Monitor Resources

Ensure staff have enough capacity to maintain both broad and deep relationships effectively. Consider time allocation and relationship management strategies.

Design for Discovery

Create intentional opportunities to engage with new partners and ideas, even when existing relationships feel sufficient⁴.

Knowledge brokers must proactively and strategically cultivate relational ecosystems and adapt them to evolving needs and challenges while being conscious of long-term goals.



Leading for Balance

Managing this balance requires sophisticated leadership and strategic thinking. Organizations must invest in maintaining strong relationships while simultaneously remaining open and accessible to new partnerships. This often means making difficult decisions about time and resource allocation.

Successful organizations approach this challenge by:

- Regularly assessing and rebalancing partnership portfolio
- Creating explicit strategies for new engagement
- Maintaining flexibility in partnership approaches
- Balancing stability with innovation

Charting a New Course

For educational organizations seeking to maximize their impact, understanding and actively managing the balance between network breadth and depth is crucial. Success depends not just on building deep partnerships, but on maintaining the flexibility and openness to embrace new relationships and ideas.

Endnotes

1. This research examined six equity-focused knowledge broker organizations that create and mobilize resources across different levels of the education system, from K-12 schools to state-level policy contexts in the United States.
2. Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78, 1360-1380.
3. Reagans, R., & McEvily, B. (2003). Network structure and knowledge transfer: The effects of cohesion and range. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 48, 240-267.
4. Tortoriello, M., McEvily, B., & Krackhardt, D. (2015). Being a catalyst of innovation: The role of knowledge diversity and network closure. *Organization Science*, 26, 423-438.

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