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The Human Side of Knowledge Networks: Why Individual Connections Drive Educational Change

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In the complex landscape of educational improvement, the most powerful forces for change often lie not in formal structures but in human connections. While organizations often focus on institutional partnerships, research reveals that their effectiveness depends heavily on something more fundamental: the personal relationships that underlie organizational success.

The Power of Personal Networks

Recent research examining six equity-focused intermediary educational organizations¹ demonstrates that successful knowledge mobilization often flows through the personal and professional networks of individual team members. Social network theory suggests that actors gain access to vital resources through these networks of relationships². Previous studies have shown that strong relationships are particularly important for transferring complex knowledge³, while relationships with multiple connection points tend to be stronger and more effective⁴.

Sources of Organizational Success

Individual team members maintain distinct "micro-networks" aligned with their roles and expertise. These personal connections create multiple pathways for organizational influence and learning:

- Professional histories drive partnerships, with many successful collaborations originating from staff members' previous roles
- Individual relationships enable faster, more candid sharing of information
- Multiple connection points between organizations create more sustainable partnerships
- Staff members can quickly access solutions through their networks when challenges arise

Making it Work: Strategic Applications

For organizations working to improve education, this human-centered perspective suggests several key approaches:

Invest in Relationship Building

Organizations benefit from supporting team members in building and maintaining their personal networks through conference attendance, dedicated networking time, and collaborative opportunities.



Map Network Assets

Understanding the professional connections your team members bring and how they complement each other allows organizations to leverage their full relationship potential.

Plan for Evolution

While long-term organizational partnerships provide stability, the dynamic nature of individual relationships allows for adaptability and growth. Organizations must maintain core partnerships while remaining open to new connections as priorities and personnel evolve.

Organizations engaged in knowledge mobilization work might benefit when team members actively build, maintain, and nourish their personal networks, and are well-served by creating conditions that allow their team members to cultivate these relationships.

The Leadership Challenge

This reliance on personal networks creates both opportunities and challenges. While individual relationships enable deep collaboration and trust, they also make organizational partnerships potentially vulnerable to staff turnover. Leaders must develop strategies to maintain valuable relationships during transitions while building institutional connections that can survive personnel changes.

Additionally, strong personal networks can sometimes create "enmeshed" ecosystems where new information struggles to enter⁵. Organizations need to actively seek out new partners and different sources of information to avoid becoming echo chambers of familiar ideas and approaches.

Looking Ahead

For educational organizations seeking to maximize their impact, understanding the human side of knowledge networks opens new possibilities for strategic growth and sustainable change. Success depends not just on what organizations know, but on who their people know and how they nurture those relationships over time.

DO YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE? THIS HANDOUT IS BASED ON A JOURNAL ARTICLE THAT YOU CAN FIND HERE: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.3389/FEDUC.2024.1441832](https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1441832)



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.
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4. Brass, D. J., Butterfield, K. D., & Skaggs, B. C. (1998). Relationships and unethical behavior: A social network perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 23, 14-31.
5. 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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