The social life of LAN

Its not important what you know but whom you know….

Move from knowledge sharing to collective knowledge

Once a week I sit with a Kaushal, a colleague of mine for about half an hour updating myself on everything that is going on in my company which is undergoing rapid change. Kaushal is all knowing and has his pulse on whatever is happening due to his vast network of colleagues which has been built up over a number of years. He is also my first point of inquiry whenever I am in need for introduction to a unknown person or understanding procedures and processes. He is part of my social network which is essential to my work and I assiduously cultivate this precious web.

Several types of networks exist in all organizations. The sacrosanct organization chart represents one through which instructions and decisions pass throughout the organizations and through which, it is widely believed that work gets done. The Local Area Network and its variation WAN represents another type of network which keep people connected within the organization electronically. However, another network exists within all organizations which is largely invisible but through which the 'real' work gets done, information, ideas, opinions are passed around and where organizational knowledge resides. This is the Social Network. It is acknowledged in many world class companies that the success or failure of organizations often depends on the patterning of their social structure. This assumes significance in the knowledge economy where most organizations are undergoing rapid change through mergers & acquisitions, globalization and onslaught of technology.

Everyone agrees that effective utilization of knowledge within companies would lead to improved innovation and competitive advantage. However, the approach to this goal is hotly debated. Some emphasize a technology driven approach while other emphasize creating a learning & knowledge sharing culture. No doubt, effective utilization of knowledge and learning requires both technology & culture. Data and some types of information can be codified and stored in databases. However, data is not where competitive advantage lies. The organization's real edge is often found in complex, context-sensitive knowledge which is difficult (if not impossible) to codify and store in information systems. This knowledge lies with individuals, their communities and their networks. ***Though company's data is found in computer systems, company's intelligence is found in its social systems.***

Social capital as distinct from intellectual capital of an organization is today being increasingly seen as an essential ingredient of the success of knowledge organizations.

Dialogue is key to effective networking

Effectiveness of knowledge is multiplied if it's in the form of a conversation where people can educate each other. When people have regular conversations about not only direct work-related problems, but also about more general discussions of the direction of the industry or the direction of the company, and other things which may otherwise seem to be totally off the topic, they create an atmosphere in which people are more likely to remember things that they want to share with other people. People who engage in this kind of knowledge exchange are also more finely attuned to what other people in the organization need to know. ***You don't share ideas with an organization; you share   them with other people***. Most
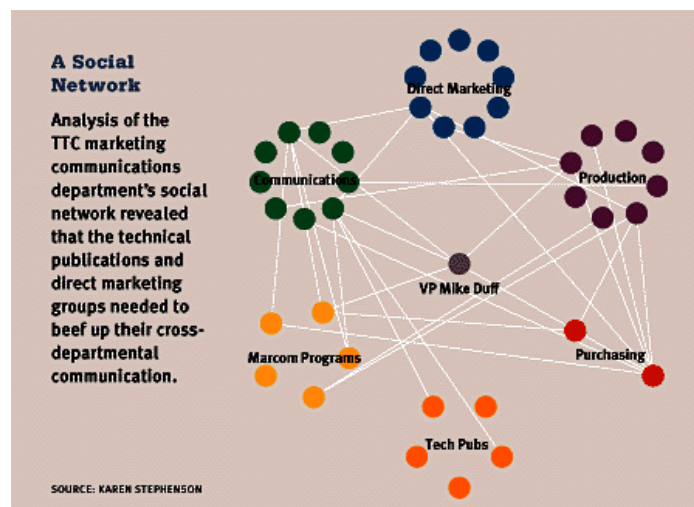
people find that it's easier to be open and share ideas with people after informal conversations; exchanges about books, cuisine, pets etc.

These social interactions lead to development of webs or networks. Due to transfers, changes in assignments, teams, projects etc. these members move around and continue to be part of the ever-increasing social network.

Within a company, a well-tuned social network can enhance the company's collective knowledge and sharpen its ability to act on what people know in time to be effective. We have long recognized that this kind of network is critical to an organization. Creating opportunities to connect is often the stated or unstated purpose of facilitated off-site meetings and other communication initiatives. Today, technology provides us with opportunity to span this network over time and space.

Measuring status & impact of Social Networks

 A new technique *Social Network Analysis*, pioneered by anthropologists like Karen Stephenson of UCLA and studied at over 200 large US Corporations, which uses specialized software focuses on uncovering the patterning of people's interaction. Network analysis is based on the intuitive notion that these patterns are important features of the lives of the individuals who display them. Network analysts believe that how an individual lives depends in large part on how that individual is tied into the larger web of social connections. It identifies individuals who act as hub, gatekeepers or pulsetakers, people who facilitate the functioning of social networks and whose positions can be leveraged in times of rapid organizational change.

Social Network Analysis reveals the true work profile

Through SNA software like *NetForm,* knowledge networks are mapped that uncover interactions within and across the boundaries of the organizations. These visulizations are like business x-rays of how things actually gets done. The management can use the insights to see its adaptability, capacity to learn, openness to the environment, ability to span boundaries, brittleness of its structure, probability of project success and efficiency of information flow. It can find emergent experts, opinion leaders, bottlenecks,

communication breakdowns and learning communities. You can see the forest and the trees and how they are related.

Benefits of understanding & leveraging Social Networks

Knowledge of its social networks can enable the management to derive several benefits, primarily:

- Create an early warning system.
- Make sure knowledge gets to people who can act on it in time.
- Provide contextual basis for knowledge exchange
- Attune everyone in the organization to each other's needs – more people will know who knows who knows what, and will know it faster.
- Multiply intellectual capital by the power of social capital, reducing social friction and encouraging social cohesion.
- Create an ongoing, shared social space for people who are geographically dispersed.
- Create a community memory for group deliberation and brainstorming that stimulates the capture of ideas, amplify innovations and facilitates finding information when it is needed.
- Improve the way individuals think collectively – moving from knowledge-sharing to collective knowing.
- Attract and retain the best employees by providing access to social capital which acts as adhesive that binds people.

A network view of the world is necessary to adapt to the chaos and complexities of continuous change. Organizations must focus on the ties, flows, and relationships in its social network. Though the hierarchy remains in place, atleast for the time being, the reorganizations of its social structure would determine how well the organization adapts to its changing environment. Social network models are to the new organization what organization chart was to the industrial era.

sabidi@nicholaspiramal.co.in