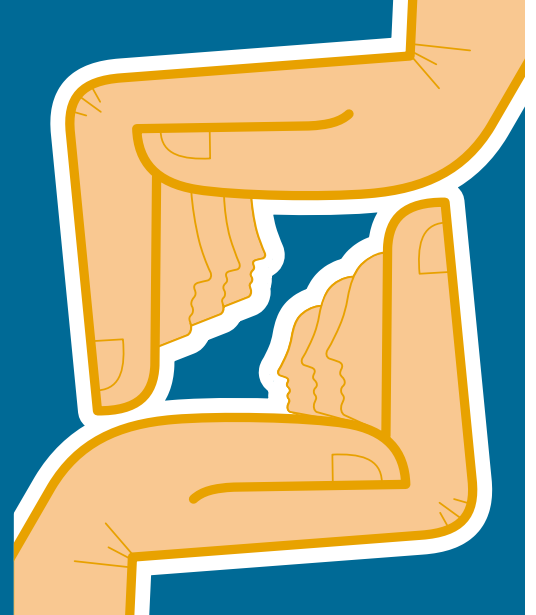


THE POWER OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

by Jeremy Myerson

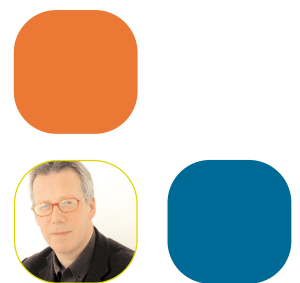


William has had four employers in his career. With the first job, he got a bigger office every time he got promoted. This was the hierarchical organisation whose main use of space was to recognise status. William grew increasingly lonely.

Then, in the mid-1980s, William got a job with a company facing recessionary pressures. It became a fanatical downsizer, stripping out costs, shedding real estate. William found himself within a row of identical cubicles a mile long, a victim of universal planning. One size fits all. William grew increasingly depressed.

William's third employer, in the mid-1990s, decided it had downsized enough. Cutting costs had become an endgame. It wanted to refocus and recalibrate its business, add some value. William was given a mix of different spaces to work in. The choice was his, according to whatever individual and group activity he was involved in. This new approach was called activity-based planning. William grew increasingly busy.

Early in the new millennium, William moved again. He says it will be his last move. His new office is modeled on the idea of neighbourhood, of community. It has streets and a town square, gathering spaces and touchdown spaces. It makes talking to people easier. It's a friendly place, and productive, too. William is increasingly happy.



[Jeremy Myerson](#) is co-director of the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre at the Royal College of Art, London, which explores the practical design implications of social change. He is the author of a number of books on new work practices and environments, including *The Creative Office*, *New Workplace - New Culture*, and *IDEO: Masters of Innovation*.



The Power of Social Networks, continued

The story of William mirrors the story of the American office plan over the past 25 years. Workers have progressed from schoolhouse scientific management to social anthropologist experiment — from the type of place Malcolm Gladwell described in *The New Yorker*, “where employees push clocks and bosses roam the halls like high school principals looking for miscreants,” to neighbourly environments that look like miniature versions of Greenwich Village.

Much the same pattern has been repeated in Europe, where the workplace architect’s favourite metaphor of recent times has been the medieval city plan. This is because compact medieval cities offer physical models of the kind of socially cohesive, highly networked and economically sustainable communities of a couple of hundred people that today’s knowledge organisations are keen to emulate.

Think of the tight streets, the communal spaces, the gatehouse or the parvis in front of the cathedral. All these elements were there to sustain community and have reappeared in modern form and in modern materials as part of a new spatial vocabulary designed to simulate, stimulate and support social networks.

It’s all clearly done for a reason. But what precisely is a social network? Why are they so important? And can you analyse them as a way to design offices? “Networks are self-organising structures held in place by relationships of trust,” says Karen Stephenson, a corporate anthropologist and professor of management who has pioneered techniques to map social networks in organisations.

Within each network, says Stephenson, there are important characters who influence the whole. Hubs are individuals with the greatest number of direct ties to others; gatekeepers guard access to key people and act either as a broker of knowledge or a bottleneck; and pulsetakers maintain the greatest number of indirect ties as they float about unseen within the organisation.

By observing and plotting their interactions on graphs, Stephenson begins to build a picture of what really goes on inside companies, and what is needed in terms of space, furniture and technology to support such objectives as innovation and learning.

But why design offices to reflect the underlying social dynamics of the organisation rather than its formal hierarchy? The North American tradition of space-planning, which has been so influential in the UK, simply turned hierarchy diagrams into spatial designs. Adjacencies were plotted according to who works in which department and who officially reports to who. Does this mean such an approach is out of date?



The Power of Social Networks, continued

Joyce Bromberg, director of space-planning research at Steelcase, believes alternative strategies are needed. She has been working closely with Stephenson's consultancy, NetForm to develop a new way to plan work environments called Community-based Planning (CbP), based on analysis of communities. "Anyone who has spent any time in an office will know that it is rumour, gossip and social relationships that drive things forward, not the organisational chart," she explains. "It is important to recognise the tension between the hierarchy necessary for governance and the informal social networks that really get things done."

Bromberg suggests that members of these social networks are informally bound together by what they do, what they have learned by their mutual engagement in these activities and the shared repertoire of communal resources they have developed over time. They are thus able to operate by sharing tacit knowledge (the unspoken and intuitive skill and experience that is a source of innovation in companies) rather than following explicit processes.

This is a hot boardroom button — the fact that these networks essentially own the money-making "intellectual capital" within the organisation and are essential to its generation should make their maintenance a corporate priority. Joyce Bromberg sums it up: "At best, most office-planning and design processes measure the efficiency of space. Community-based Planning links directly to business objectives and is all about the effectiveness of people."

As William cruises the town square with his cappuccino, looking for a shady seat in an enclave, he'll be glad of that.

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