

On Twitter and in the Workplace, It's Power to the Connectors

By Rosabeth Moss Kanter

In the World According to [Twitter](#), giving away access to information rewards the giver by building followers. The more followers, the more information comes to the giver to distribute, which in turn builds more followers. The process cannot be commanded or controlled; followers opt in and out as they choose. The results are transparent and purely quantitative; network size is all that matters. Networks of this sort are self-organizing and democratic but without any collective interaction.

The significance of Twitter is yet to be determined; it is a simple, impersonal, and transient application of technology. But very real network effects are a new source of power in and around organizations.

America in the 20th century was called a "[society of organizations](#)." Formal hierarchies with clear reporting relationships gave people their position and their power. In the 21st century, America is rapidly becoming a society of networks, even within organizations. Maintenance of organizations as structures is less important than assembling resources to get results, even if the assemblage itself is loose and perishable.

Today, people with power and influence derive their power from their centrality within self-organizing networks that might or might not correspond to any plan on the part of designated leaders. Organization structure in vanguard companies involves multi-directional responsibilities, with an increasing emphasis on horizontal relationships rather than vertical reporting as the center of action that shapes daily tasks and one's portfolio of projects, in order to focus on serving customers and society. Circles of influence replace chains of command, as in the councils and boards at Cisco which draw from many levels to drive new strategies. Distributed leadership — consisting of many ears to the ground in many places — is more effective than centralized or concentrated leadership. Fewer people act as power-holders monopolizing information or decision-making, and more people serve as integrators using relationships and persuasion to get things done.

This changes the nature of career success. It is not enough to be technically adept or even to be interpersonally pleasant. Power goes to the "connectors": those people who actively seek relationships and then serve as bridges between and among groups. Their personal contacts are often as important as their formal assignment. In essence, "She who has the best network wins."

Connectors have always been more promotable, even in traditional hierarchies. In my early research in a rigid industrial conglomerate (that has since gone out of business), I saw that women tended to be excluded from top ranks because there were so few women already in top ranks, and being part of peer groups mattered for career advancement. Wherever teamwork across positions is desirable, natural connectors who instinctively reach across divides to form relationships get the plum jobs, on small sports teams as well as in large companies. For example, on the North Carolina women's soccer team, a perennial winner among college teams,

[Jordan Walker](#) was a team leader because she was a connector who helped other players work together, even though [Coach Anson Dorrance](#) called her one of the least athletic players he had ever seen. As for big business, during the [Seagate turnaround](#), Joan Motsinger was asked to head a technical area even though she wasn't a technical expert, because of her business card collection, which made her a network star.

Network stars have social capital — a stockpile of personal relationships with many people whom they regularly connect to one another. Though technology tools are increasingly common to help people find connections, from LinkedIn to Facebook, I find that even the most technology-savvy leaders rely on their own personal networks to find the best resources quickly. The technology is so democratic that the information is considered less reliable. The human networks are what count. In [SuperCorp](#) companies with far-flung global operations, personal networks of people that managers have met or worked with are often better sources for key assignments than data bases of resumes. One manager in a high-tech company called this "the old-fashioned way, the knowing people type thing: I know a person who might know a person..."

To be known is to be in the know. This is why connectors with big networks have so much power. They don't need to be the formal boss if they have the connections. [Nick Donofrio](#), former IBM executive vice president, encouraged 90,000 technical people to think of themselves as working for him, even though they did not work directly for him in any formal or official way. He answered hundreds of daily emails personally, counting on this as a major bottom-up source of information about issues and opportunities.

Social capital is often, but not entirely, correlated with length of organizational experience. The other factor is whether the nature of the job encourages getting to know large numbers of people — that is, whether the job involves mobility, a portfolio of varied projects, and participation in initiatives that call for communication across groups.

In short, giving people work that spans boundaries is a way to grow the potential for more connectors, in a nice multiplier effect. But ultimately the power of connectors lies in themselves, not in the stars. It comes from their own willingness to continue making relationships, passing on information, and introducing people to one another.