



# Understanding Workplace Relationships

An Examination of  
the Antecedents and  
Outcomes

Edited by  
Alexandra Gerbasi  
Cécile Emery  
Andrew Parker

palgrave  
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# Introduction

Andrew Parker , Alexandra Gerbasi, and Cécile Emery

## Why Do Workplace Relationships Matter?

Workplace relationships are critical to how work gets done in organizations (Cross & Parker, 2004). In today's, flatter, team-based organizations it is often the relationships that people have that result in access to advice that enables the completion of high-quality work. The advice relationships that people have contain knowledge that is important for problem-solving and these relationships have been shown to enhance the

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productivity of organizational units as well as increase the performance and innovativeness of individuals and teams (Argote et al., 2003; Maurer et al., 2011; Tortoriello & Krackhardt, 2010). Furthermore, in organizations with matrix structures, as well as those typified by distributed or emergent leadership, the ability to influence colleagues comes from the informal workplace relationships as opposed to the formal hierarchical structure (Carnabuci et al., 2018).

While there is considerable evidence that suggests instrumental workplace relationships such as advice are important for problem-solving and influencing colleagues, there is also a growing understanding that affective workplace relationships such as friendship provide social support and are a major determinant of wellbeing in organizations (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). For example, friendship relationships can mitigate the emotional demands of work (Parker et al., 2022). In addition, the chitchat that occurs between colleagues in organizations has been shown to be critical to well-being, although it can have a negative effect on employee engagement in work routines (Methot et al., 2021). Furthermore, evidence suggests that being embedded in a network of energizing ties at work helps employees stay engaged and perform better (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016). Overall, an individual's need to belong is a fundamental driver of human behavior and this need is often satisfied in the relationships that people form in the workplace (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Much of the research on workplace relationships has examined their positive outcomes. This is not the full story, though. Negative social relationships such as dislike, distrust, and rivalry also exist in organizations and have a significant impact on the workplace (Labianca & Brass, 2006). For example, de-energizing ties have been shown to have a negative effect on performance, although this can be mitigated if individuals have a sense of thriving (Gerbasì et al., 2015). Even positive relationships can have a negative impact. Indeed, they can have insular properties and individuals can get trapped in their own network of relationships hence missing out on opportunities and new information outside of their closed networks (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000). In contrast, research has shown that problem-solving advice from difficult colleagues can have positive effects on individual performance (Brennecke, 2020).

In summary, workplace relationships do matter, although which relationships are important and whether they have a positive or negative impact is not fully understood.

## Defining Networks of Workplace Relationships

When defining workplace relationships, we need to consider the people in the organization, the relationships that they have with each other, and the network structure of those relationships. From a network perspective, people are sometimes referred to as the nodes in the network. In technical terms, the focal individual is called ego and all the individuals they are connected to are the alters. Earlier research on social networks tended to focus on how the people (nodes) relate to each other within the network structure. For example, research examined whether the probability of people joining or leaving a group depended upon the number and strength of social network ties within that group (McPherson et al., 1992). This stream of research on structural position emphasized the importance of being in the right place in the network, but neglected the possibility that the network positions occupied by individuals might be influenced by their individual characteristics. Today, however, it is more generally accepted that individual characteristics and cognitions are important in understanding how workplace relationships are formed and sustained (Tasselli et al., 2015). For example, research has shown that high self-monitors (chameleon-like individuals who easily change and adapt to fit a social situation) are more likely than low self-monitors (individuals who remain true to themselves and who they are no matter the social circumstances) to occupy central positions in social networks (Mehra et al., 2001).

The types of relationships or network ties that individuals have with each other in organizations are almost limitless. Research, however, has tended to focus on instrumental ties such as seeking advice, information, or knowledge; and affective ties such as friendship, like versus dislike, energizes versus de-energizes, or trust versus distrust. One of the earliest examples of research on network relationships was a study by

Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) where they examined interactions of workers in the bank wiring room of the Hawthorne Works of the Eastern Electric Company in Chicago. These interactions included: who played games with whom; who traded jobs with whom; who helped whom; who displayed friendly behavior toward whom; and who was antagonistic toward whom. Research suggests that relationships such as advice seeking or helping can have one type of impact, whereas a relationship such as friendship can have a different impact. In many instances, however, a network tie can encapsulate more than one relationship such as both friendship and advice, this is known as a multiplex relationship.

The structure of workplace relationships includes both microstructures and the overall macrostructure of a network. The microstructures of workplace relationships include various building blocks. One important building block is reciprocal relationships. Reciprocity occurs when one person forms a tie with a colleague, and this results in the colleague forming a tie with the focal individual (Blau, 1964; Caimo & Lomi, 2015). For instance, when one person seeks advice from another it can result in the latter person also seeking advice in return. Friendship is another good example where reciprocity often takes place, as when friendship is not reciprocated it often diminishes over time, although there are instances when this is not the case.

A second key building block is that of transitivity (Coleman, 1988; Simmel, 1902/1950). Here, the microstructure includes three individuals and the ties between them. Transitivity is important because having three people involved in the relationship can increase the level of normative influence. For example, if person  $i$  is friends with person  $j$  and with person  $k$ , then it increases the likelihood that  $j$  and  $k$  will be friends. If  $j$  and  $k$  do not like each other then it results in an unbalanced triad and it is much harder for person  $i$  to remain friends with both  $j$  and  $k$ . This important insight is the basis of balance theory (Cartwright & Harary, 1956; Heider, 1946). The extent to which triadic structures are open or closed underlies the influential network theory of structural holes (Burt, 1995, 2000, 2004). Here person  $i$  benefits from being connected to  $j$  and  $k$  when  $j$  and  $k$  are themselves not connected, as person  $i$  is more likely to benefit from receiving more diverse information or knowledge.

A third building block is a cluster of individuals (Newman, 2003), where there are more ties between a group of individuals than there are to others in the network. For example, in organizations individuals in one location or functional unit are likely to have more ties to each other than to colleagues in other locations or functions. There are various technical definitions of network clusters such as a clique, an  $n$ -clique, and a  $k$ -plex, however, these need not concern us here (for more details see Kilduff & Tsai, 2003, pp. 44–46).

The overall pattern of microstructures in a network helps to define the macrostructure. For example, networks that are made up of many closed triadic structures will be more densely connected than those with fewer closed triadic structures. An illustration of this is a co-located department within an organization where there is a likelihood of many closed triadic structures of information-sharing ties. This type of network will have a much higher network density than a random selection of individuals within an organization that works in offices throughout the world. Another important measure of network macrostructure is based on the geodesic distance between two individuals, i.e., the number of relations on the shortest possible path from one actor to another (Freeman, 1978). Knowledge and advice tend to flow much quicker in networks where the average geodesic distance between all pairs of actors in the network is lower. Another important property of the macrostructure of a network is the extent to which it is considered a small world structure (Watts, 2004). A small world structure is one in which there are clusters of densely connected individuals with very few ties to other clusters. This often occurs in large business units that are divided by location or function (Cross & Parker, 2004).

## Theories of Workplace Relationships

For readers interested in learning more about social networks and workplace relationships there are some excellent review articles that cover the existing research in detail (for example, Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Brass, 2022; Brass et al., 2004; Tasselli & Kilduff, 2021). One helpful categorization of network theories is that of Borgatti and Halgin (2011).

They differentiate, on the one hand, theories where the network is the predictor of a nonnetwork outcome, for example, the effect of an individual having more structural holes in their network on individual performance (Burt, 1995). On the other hand, are theoretical explanations where the outcome being predicted is a network tie and the predictor is a nonnetwork concept. For example, how an individual's level of performance predicts whether they add or drop network ties (Parker et al., 2016). We briefly summarize below two of the more influential network theories that relate to workplace relationships, one for each of the categories outlined by Borgatti and Halgin (2011).

*Social capital:* The overarching theme of the social capital literature is that network ties are a source of resources (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Kwon & Adler, 2014). For example, being central in the network, i.e., having more network ties gives individuals access to more resources. These resources allow individuals to benefit in comparison to those with fewer network ties. Benefits include higher individual performance (Mehra et al., 2001; Shah et al., 2017; Sparrowe et al., 2001), individual creativity (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003), and team performance (Hansen, 1999; Tsai, 2001). An alternative stream of research within the overarching idea of social capital is the benefit of being connected to individuals who are not themselves connected to each other. Here the benefits come from an individual's position in the topography of the network (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). The most influential line of research that takes this view is structural hole theory (Burt, 1995, 2000). The notion of structural holes, where individuals benefit from having open networks, sits in contrast to the benefits of closed networks that create obligations and social norms that enhance the flow of complex information (Coleman, 1988).

*Network agency, individual characteristics, and cognitions:* While social capital theory is an explanation as to why network ties and structural position lead to beneficial outcomes; a separate stream of research has focused on the antecedents of network ties, i.e., what explains why people add, sustain, and also drop network ties. This stream of research has frequently adopted an agency perspective (Tasselli & Kilduff, 2021; Tasselli et al., 2015). Here the actors make choices within the constraints of existing network structures. The focus has been on how individual



characteristics and cognitions influence network choices. For example, it has been shown that an individual's personality can influence their network choices. An illustration of this is that actors with the personality trait of openness to experience—one of the personality characteristics in the five-factor model (Costa & McCrae, 1992)—prefer open networks where their friends tend to be unconnected with each other (Lönngqvist et al., 2014). Furthermore, extroverts—another personality characteristic in the five-factor model—tend to have more friends compared to introverts (Lönngqvist et al., 2014) and tend to be more popular as friends (Feiler & Kleinbaum, 2015). In addition to personal characteristics, cognition has also been shown to influence network choices. For example, individuals have a tendency to perceive both close and distant friendship relations as being reciprocated and transitive (Krackhardt & Kilduff, 1999). Furthermore, when people are under threat it has been shown that low status individuals are more likely to activate smaller and tighter subsets of their networks, compared to high status individuals (Smith et al., 2012).

## Network Practice

There is a considerable amount of applied research that underlies network practice in organizations. Applied journals such as *Harvard Business Review*, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, *California Management Review*, and *Organizational Dynamics*, have frequently published articles that examine workplace relationships and social networks. For example, applied research has examined communities of practice (Cross et al., 2006); wellbeing and collaborative overload (Cross et al., 2016); and change agents within organizations (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013). Other applied research has focused on formal versus informal networks (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993), competent versus likable workplace relationships (Casciaro & Lobo, 2005), energizing (Cross et al., 2003) and de-energizing relationships (Parker et al., 2013), and how gender influences workplace relationships (Carboni et al., 2020, 2021). In addition, several books have examined the role of networks in organizations from an applied perspective (Cross & Parker, 2004; Cross & Thomas, 2008).

## Bringing Theory and Practice Together

While current academic research gives rigorous theoretical and empirical insights regarding workplace relationships, these papers include only limited details of the practical applications of workplace relations. Likewise, applied research focusing on network practice tends to give limited details of the theoretical implications. This edited collection provides readers with cutting-edge theoretical and practical insights from the latest research on social networks and workplace relationships. We present two different perspectives regarding the role of workplace relationships. First, we examine the work-based outcomes of workplace relationships, such as individual performance, as well as how social network relationships affect attitudes and behaviors. Second, we examine how workplace relationships are formed and sustained and the implications this has for knowledge creation and exchange as well as friendship and trust. Drawing on innovative research on social networks, leading authors in the field examine the importance of workplace relationships across a broad selection of institutional settings in a practical and accessible format for academic scholars, and students alike.

## Networks and Individual Performance

In the first section of this edited volume, we examine the effect of network relationships on individual performance in organizations. A long tradition of management research has examined the effect of network topographies and positions of individuals in networks and how these are associated with individual outcomes. Over the last four decades, the networks literature has shown extensive evidence that individuals' position within intraorganizational social networks is beneficial for their individual work-based performance (see Fang et al., 2015 for a meta-analysis). Yet, there is still much that is not known about moderators (boundary conditions) and mediators (mechanisms) regarding the association between individual network position and performance. To address this, our first set of chapters examines the effect of network relationships on individual performance in organizations.

First, in chapter ‘[Unpacking the Link Between Intrinsic Motivational Orientation and Innovation Performance](#)’ Carnabuci, Nedkovski, and Guerci explore the relationship between intrinsic motivational orientation and innovative performance. Existing research has theorized the psychological explanations for a positive relationship between intrinsic motivational orientation and employee innovative performance. In contrast, Carnabuci and colleagues draw from social capital theory, suggesting that network position is the key link between intrinsic motivational orientation and innovative performance. While many studies have shown network centrality is important for performance, its relationship with intrinsic motivational orientation is less well established. Carnabuci et al. find that employees with an intrinsic motivational orientation tend to become more central within the organization’s informal advice network, which in turn aids their innovative performance. The findings in the paper have important managerial implications. The paper demonstrates that having intrinsically motivated individuals may not be sufficient to maximize performance. Rather, it is important for managers to help employees grow a network of informal advice relationships with colleagues across the organization.

In the next chapter, ‘[Brokering One’s Way to Trust and Success](#)’ Parker, Ferrin, and Dirks examine how helping behaviors and brokerage in organizational networks aid in developing trusting relationships that will in turn impact individual performance. A substantial body of research over the last two decades has examined the determinants and outcomes of interpersonal trust within organizations. However, little of this research has considered how the social network that surrounds an interpersonal relationship might influence the interpersonal trust within that relationship and ultimately the effectiveness and success of individuals within an organization. Parker et al., address this gap by examining the role of helping behaviors and brokerage—connections to otherwise unconnected subnetworks within the organization. Utilizing a social exchange framework, they find that brokers can identify individuals who need information and other resources, act to satisfy those needs by performing organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBIs) toward those individuals, and by doing so, earn others’ trust. And it is this trust that enables brokers to gain performance advantages by maximizing the resource

benefits of their structural position. The findings in the paper have important implications for practice. While there is recognition that an individual's network position provides many potential opportunities. What is less well recognized is what employees do with these opportunities. Parker and colleagues show that network brokers use their position to increase performance by helping others as opposed to maximizing their own benefits. This suggests that managers should promote the importance of network brokerage as opposed to being wary that brokerage will lead to some individuals benefiting at the expense of others.

Next, '[Women Alone in the Middle](#)', Carboni explores gender difference in the occupation and use of social network brokerage roles. For decades, researchers have known that organizational networks that are characterized by brokerage provide important advantages. People who occupy brokerage roles reap significant career rewards, including faster rates of promotion, larger bonuses, more involvement in innovation, and greater likelihood of being identified as top talent. However, recent evidence has emerged to suggest that women are less likely than men to occupy brokerage positions and, even when they do occupy them, are less likely to leverage brokerage for career success. Several mechanisms have been advanced to explain these findings, including structural constraints caused by systemic discrimination and gender role expectations. Carboni reviews the research on brokerage as it relates to gender and posits that a gendered socio-emotional experience of the brokerage role may also contribute to systematic disadvantage for women. Carboni highlights the need for firms to invest in the success of women by enabling them to develop brokerage relationships. For example, by implementing mentoring and sponsorship programs that include training on the advantages of brokerage for mentors, sponsors, and protégées.

## The Effect of Network Relationships on Attitudes and Behaviors

In the second section of this edited volume, we further develop how networks can result in beneficial outcomes. We build upon the existing body of literature on how employee relationships impact employees' attitudes and behaviors. Contributing to this line of research, chapters 'Satisfied in the Outgroup: How Co-worker Relational Energy Compensates for Low-Quality Relationships with Managers' and 'Business Before Pleasure? Bringing Pleasure Back into Workplace Relationships' explore the role high-quality relationships in organizations can have on attitudes and behaviors, while chapter 'Structural Embeddedness and Organizational Change: The Role of Workplace Relations and the Uptake of New Practices' examines how relationships impact the diffusion of workplace behaviors.

In chapter 'Satisfied in the Outgroup: How Co-worker Relational Energy Compensates for Low-Quality Relationships with Managers', Gerbasi, Emery, Cullen-Lester, and Mahdon explore how relationships with co-workers can mitigate against low-quality relationships with a supervisor. Research on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) suggests that employees who establish a high-quality relationship with their supervisor are more likely to feel energized and are also more satisfied at work. Employees, however, have relationships with many colleagues at work, not just their supervisor. To take this into account Gerbasi and colleagues show how relational energy from other colleagues—that is, the heightened level of psychological resourcefulness generated from interpersonal interactions that enhances one's capacity to do work—is a link between LMX and employee job satisfaction. Despite the importance of the quality of an individual's relationship with their supervisor, Gerbasi and colleagues, find that even those who receive lower levels of relational energy from their supervisor, can still be satisfied at work if they are embedded in a larger network of energizing relationships with co-workers. The authors also develop a number of individual and organizational strategies to develop relational energy. These include individuals

taking stock of the energizing relationships in their network, and leaders creating a high-energy environment.

Rowe and White, in chapter ‘[Structural Embeddedness and Organizational Change](#)’ explore the critical issue of how workplace relationships influence the acceptance of organizational changes. They explore how actors’ workplace relations influence their adoption of new practices. They focus on how structural embeddedness, with its focus on the degree to which actors are engrained in cohesive groups, impacts this adoption. The chapter examines UK hospital trusts that are attempting to introduce and integrate new practices to enhance the quality and provision of patient care. Rowe and White find that individuals in cohesive groups are more likely to take on these new practices as opposed to being resistant to change. From a managerial perspective, the authors highlight the importance of managers creating initiatives to develop cohesiveness within groups, as well as key individuals acting as brokers in order to increase the uptake of new organizational practices.

In chapter ‘[Business Before Pleasure? Bringing Pleasure Back into Workplace Relationships](#)’, Moser, Deichmann, and Jurriens focus on the importance of bringing pleasure back into the workplace. There is a substantial body of research that has embraced the positive side of work. Play, passion, commitment, enjoyment, and meaningfulness are only a few examples of how work can be beneficial for people. Moser et al. provide a review of this literature. They note that past literature has largely neglected the very essence of pleasure; that is, pleasure as an end in itself. They argue the absence of pleasure in the study of work leads to an impoverished and incomplete understanding of the workplace. Based on the tradition of ethical hedonism, Moser et al. argue that organizations should commit to pleasure in the workplace and, most importantly, decouple pleasure from outcomes related to effectiveness and efficiency, thus allowing pleasure for the sake of pleasure. The authors make suggestions at both the relational and team level as to how to improve the experience of pleasure within organizations.