# Organisational Network Analysis: Viral Engagement

With the influx of technology and academic attention, management is no longer an art but a science. The ability to understand and harness the informal social ties between people can allow organisations to reach new levels of effectiveness. A quick look at human evolutionary history reveals that the key to our survival was the ability to work within social units that consisted of no formal hierarchy, with everyone contributing towards the needs of the group. The importance of knowing who to turn to for information, co-operation and resources parallels today's working environment.
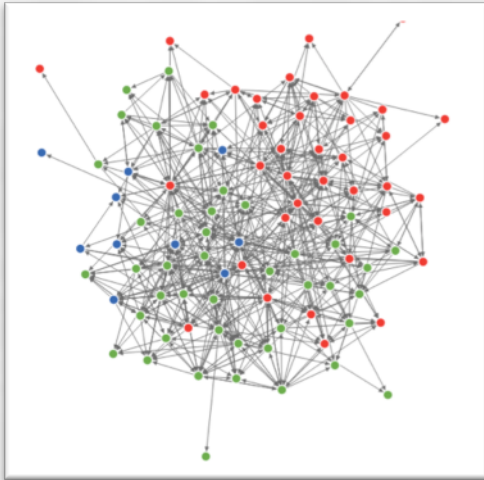
The ability of leaders to mobilise and effectively manage their people underpins success. The formal organisational structure that HR typically defines only reveals a fragment of the social power and influence of the individual. Technology has now allowed for organisations to map out these social bonds, enabling a variety of insights to be achieved by using organisational network analysis (ONA).

Employee research is primarily focused on collecting attribute data (e.g. characteristics of the individual), ONA offers insight into the relationships people hold with each other. This is relational data. Based upon social network analysis, a technique used by sociologists, ONA visually represents the informal relationships that employees hold with each other. In the sociogram shown above, the coloured dots (known as nodes) represent individuals from different departments, with the arrows between them representing the relationships individuals hold with each other. The visual nature of this analytical technique allows the representation of information to be seen at a glance — in effect, it tells a story. The ability to see clusters of groups and the spread of connections can identify insight that would have remained invisible (or extremely long to process) if a straight staff survey was carried out. Moreover, various individual and group metrics can reveal insight about how a network interacts and functions.

The best way to really understand ONA, is to have a look at a basic network of your own. Linkedin and Wolfram Alpha have to tools to instantly visualise your online social networks and see the composition of your social network. For example, your connections are clustered together by their location or current job, with ties linking them with the rest of your connections. You'll probably be surprised at who is connected to who. The advent of social media has reduced the six degrees of separation rule to four.

Despite awareness of the existence of informal power structures, business specialists have long studied the configuration and hierarchies of organisations. At Silverman Research we believe that by understanding the informal relationships between employees, managers can identify and understand the variety of roles tat people play. For example, individuals may act as *bottlenecks* (individuals who impede the flow of information) or *connectors* (individuals who hold many strong relationships and could act as good allies when trying to onboard a new process). *Areas of opportunity* (e.g. assessing whether communication across departments could result in innovative practices) can also be assessed.

In a recent project with Unilever, ONA was used to explore the prevalence of information seeking ties (i.e. who turns to who for information) and identify individuals who could benefit from communicating with specific individuals more. We also carried out the same project last year, so that we had the added benefit of comparing this new data with historical comparisons. For every individual the number of ties were reported, alongside how often employees turned to each other for information and their tie density (the percentage of possible ties available).

Studies like this demonstrate the ease of identifying the key individuals within an organisation. Interestingly, the key communicators and information providers are not always leaders — meaning that these influential individuals are likely to have remained unknown according to formal organisational maps. By identifying the key 'social players', new initiatives can be rolled out quickly and more effectively as the social influence needed to drive change amongst peers has already been tapped and mobilised. As all leaders know, trying to introduce change without the support of their people is a painstaking task.

ONA is a highly versatile tool, as it can be used to increase innovation and creativity by fostering communication, alongside the flow of engagement. By identifying the individuals who are most engaged within their role, and then visualising how engaged their connections are, leaders have the potential ability to not only increase engagement by looking at the different attitudes and job demands between engaged vs. disengaged people, but also see how engagement trickles throughout a network much like the effects of a virus.

If someone is disengaged and those who turn to that person for information are also disengaged, tackling the epicentre of engagement can have drastic effects for the entire network. Social interactions are highly formative of attitudes and opinions (in spite of more 'extrinsic' motivators such as pay, support, benefits, etc). This concept of 'viral employee engagement' is something that should draw the attention of all business leaders – the first step to achieving it is to conduct an ONA.

The future of ONA is bright as it is a useful tool for HR and promises to revolutionize action-planning and leadership. Unfortunately, this tool is widely unknown and misunderstood. With thought leaders pushing new philosophy of being insight-led and adopting new technologies to measure opinion and make decisions, it is likely that ONA will be the jewel in HR's crown.