



## Analysing Informal Work Practices and Social Networks in the Workplace

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates how social networks influence informal work practices in the workplace. Employee communication, teamwork, and knowledge sharing are greatly impacted by informal networks, which are made up of connections that do not fall under official organisational structures. This study uses the framework of social network theory to investigate how strong and weak relationships support information sharing, creativity, and problem-solving within an organisation. The impact of technology and remote work on social networks and informal practices, as well as the role of social networks in the workplace, are all highlighted in the study. The study also highlights possible issues that may occur in informal networks, like exclusion and information silos. To improve collaboration and innovation, organisations are advised to balance formal and informal practices, leverage informal leaders, and cultivate inclusive networks. In the end, social networks can be used to comprehend and maximise informal work practices, which can enhance employee engagement and organisational performance

## **INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of digital technologies, flexible work arrangements, and changing organisational cultures have all had a major impact on the dynamics of workplace structures in recent years. Understanding how social networks and informal work practices influence workplace behaviours and results is one important area of interest. Formal and informal connections are examples of the patterns of relationships and interactions that are referred to as social networks in the workplace (Burt, 2004). These networks play a crucial role in information flow, teamwork, problem-solving, and general team performance (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). Conversely, informal work practices refer to the unofficial, frequently unspoken ways that workers collaborate, plan their work, and oversee workflows outside of the official policies and procedures set up by businesses (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). Peer-to-peer mentoring, unplanned knowledge sharing, and unstructured communication are a few examples of these practices.

Because social networks and informal work practices have the ability to impact employee well-being, innovation, and organisational performance, it is crucial to comprehend them. For example, studies have demonstrated that informal networks can act as conduits for the quick spread of information, promoting innovation and speeding up decision-making (Uzzi, 1997). However, these unofficial networks can also lead to issues with equity, organisational control, and the possible exclusion of specific workers (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). Additionally, as digital communication tools change the way social networks form and function, the growing popularity of remote and hybrid work models has brought about new complications (Boschma, 2005). Organisations seeking to maximise these networks' advantages while minimising any potential drawbacks must comprehend how these networks function in contemporary workplace environments.

Even though earlier research has shown how important networks are for business relationships and exchanges (Cuypers et al., 2020; Eberhard & Craig, 2013), there is still a dearth of research on informal networks in particular, which calls for more study (Georgiadou & Syed, 2021). Certain practices and business relationships can be facilitated by informal networks, which depend on interpersonal connections and ties in interactions with others. For instance, Nadeem and Kayani (2019) demonstrated how Pakistani hiring practices are influenced by informal social ties, which are a fundamental component of traditional values in the nation. An unofficial network of regional traders may be an essential bridge in the internationalisation process of multinational corporations, according to Apaydin et al. (2020). These unofficial networks are rooted in a society's cultural and societal traditions, which change over time, as well as its social fabric (Horak, 2014). Consequently, informal networks facilitate continuity and change within informal institutions (Minbaeva et al., 2022), which may present difficulties for both individuals and organisations (Nadeem & Kayani, 2019).

A more thorough comprehension of "local phenomena in order to draw a more realistic picture of the true characteristics and nature of social networks" is necessary because previous research on informal networks mainly concentrated

on Western societies' conceptions and knowledge of such networks (Horak et al., 2019 ). In addition to an implicit awareness of common values, norms, and expectations, informal networks strongly emphasise cooperation, mutuality, and trust. However, not everyone has equal access to these unofficial networks (Bian et al., 2018). There are stereotyped gender expectations and norms in many different societies. As a result, groups of people—including women and minorities—are subjected to various expectations and norms.

Research has demonstrated the importance of informal networks, especially in nations with weak or nonexistent formal institutions such as governments and regulatory/legal bodies—to facilitate market transactions (Puffer et al., 2010). But even in countries with strong legal and regulatory frameworks, informal networks continue to exist (Minbaeva et al., 2022). The informal networks that informal institutions are a part of can be used to explain their persistence (Minbaeva et al., 2022). Therefore, the interaction between informal networks (Lee et al., 2022) and informal institutions (cultural/societal norms and expectations) (North, 1990, 1991; Williamson (2000, 1998). Based on recent research that called for a closer look at informal networks and informal institutions, we specifically look at how they interact and how this interaction causes women to be socially excluded (Georgiadou & Syed, 2021).

In the context of diversity and inclusion in business ethics, the problem of women's social exclusion has received little attention (Georgiadou & Syed, 2021). In cultures with strict gender stereotypes, where men frequently hold the highest positions in corporate hierarchies, societal norms may help to maintain gender inequality. These norms make it hard for women to network with influential and powerful people (Greguletz et al., 2019). Due to their lack of participation in informal networks, women are also routinely left out of business discussions, which prevents them from accessing important information, opportunities, and resources (Georgiadou & Syed, 2021). Consequently, discrimination and gender segregation persist in the workplace and in society, even today.

Examining the interactions and effects of informal work practices and social networks on workplace outcomes in modern organisational settings is the aim of this study. This study will investigate how employees interact with one another at work, how they build informal relationships, and how these practices affect job satisfaction, creativity, and productivity. Additionally, it will examine how technological tools and organisational policies influence these dynamics, providing insightful information about how organisations can better support informal

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly interest in the idea of social networks and informal work practices in the workplace has grown, especially in light of changing organisational structures, technological developments, and changing work practices. Social networks, as used in organisational studies, are the system of interpersonal relationships that affect how employees share resources, coordinate tasks, and exchange information (Burt, 2004). Conversely, informal

work practices refer to the unofficial, frequently unsaid behaviours and routines that workers use to complete tasks, resolve issues, and cooperate outside of official hierarchies and structures (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). The literature on these ideas is examined in this review, with an emphasis on how informal work practices and social networks influence employee performance, create workplace dynamics, and support organisational success.

The phrase "social network" has come to refer to both conventional in-person contacts and online connections made possible by technology, especially the internet. According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), social networks are often referred to as "social media networks" in the context of digital platforms, where people or organisations establish online communities using Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and numerous other platforms. In ways that were previously impossible with offline networks alone, these platforms allow users to connect, exchange information, and preserve relationships. In its broadest definition, a social network is a structure made up of people or organisations linked by one or more kinds of relationships.

### **Informal Work Practices**

The term "informal work practices" refers to the unofficial, frequently unwritten methods of carrying out work within an organisation. Most often not included in formal job descriptions, organisational policies, or standard operating procedures, these methods are crucial to the way work is completed in day-to-day operations and include informal communication, decision-making, workarounds, and relationship-building that are not formalised within an organization's formal structure (Hislop, 2003). Informal work practices are especially prevalent in complex, dynamic environments where flexibility and adaptability are essential, but they can also occasionally cause problems with accountability and control.

Communication that takes place outside of official channels is one of the most prevalent informal practices in organisations. Informal communication occurs through informal conversations, social interactions, and employee networking, whereas formal communication is organised through official meetings, emails, and reports. This kind of communication is frequently quicker and more adaptable, which promotes creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making (Kraut et al., 1990). A sense of trust and camaraderie, which are frequently necessary for team cohesiveness and morale, can also be fostered by informal communication (Wegmann et al., 2015).

Employees frequently use informal work practices to get around inefficiencies when faced with strict procedures or bureaucratic restrictions. Finding more effective ways to finish tasks or utilising personal networks to obtain resources or information are examples of these workarounds (Starbuck, 1992). Workarounds can result in inconsistent practices, a lack of standardisation, and possible conflicts with official policies and procedures, even though they might temporarily increase productivity. Particularly in companies with flat hierarchies or an employee-autonomy culture, informal and formal decision-making processes frequently take place concurrently. Employees may choose to make decisions based on their own intuition, past experiences, or cooperation

with coworkers rather than adhering to established protocols. Because it permits workers to try new things and take chances without being constrained by official regulations, informal decision-making can foster creativity and innovation (Mintzberg, 1979).

The way people move through their workplaces is greatly influenced by their informal networks. Often called "informal networks" or "social capital," these networks are made up of connections based on mutual respect, trust, and common interests (Burt, 1992). Informal networks can affect the information flow within the company and promote cooperation, knowledge exchange, and career progression. They can occasionally serve as a counterbalance to strict hierarchies and frequently coexist with formal organisational structures.

### **Social Network Theory**

Mark Granovetter is the most well-known person frequently linked to the creation and formalisation of social network theory. He emphasised the importance of both strong and weak social ties and how they promote the flow of influence and information within a network in his seminal work, *The Strength of Weak Ties* (1973). According to Granovetter's research, weak ties – despite their apparent lack of importance – frequently act as links between various groups, facilitating access to opportunities and new information that strong ties might not offer. A number of fundamental ideas or principles that explain how social networks and relationships function form the basis of social network theory. The main principles are as follows: Social networks are made up of actors, also known as nodes, and ties, also known as edges. The people or things in the network, like coworkers or community members, are called actors. The ties stand for the connections or relationships that exist between these actors and can be friendship, cooperation, or communication, among other things.

**Tie Strength:** The idea of tie strength, which describes how close or intense a relationship is between two actors, is one of the most important principles of social network theory. According to Granovetter (1973), weak ties are more distant and infrequent, like acquaintances or business contacts, whereas strong ties are close and frequent, like close friendships. Strong ties offer trust and dependability, while weak ties give access to new information and opportunities outside of the immediate group. Both kinds of ties are essential to a network's ability to function.

- An actor's relative importance or influence within a network is measured by their centrality. Central actors have better access to opportunities, information, and resources. Centrality can be measured in a variety of ways:
- The number of direct connections (ties) that an actor possesses is known as degree centrality.
- The degree to which an actor is situated on the shortest path between other actors, indicating their function as brokers or intermediaries in the network, is known as betweenness centrality.
- The degree to which an actor can swiftly contact every other actor in the network, indicating how effectively they can access information, is known as closeness centrality.

Because it highlights the unofficial connections that develop outside of the official organisational structures, social network theory is especially pertinent to comprehending informal work practices. Informal networks frequently influence how staff members cooperate on projects, exchange information, and settle disputes. Organisations can learn more about the hidden facets of their work processes and culture that are frequently hidden from view in formal reporting structures by mapping out these networks. (Prusak, Cross, and Parker, 2001). By facilitating quicker communication and building employee trust, informal networks have been found to support innovation and knowledge transfer. For example, workers who have close relationships with their coworkers are able to share information quickly, which can result in more effective problem-solving and decision-making (Ibarra, 1993). On the other hand, weak ties frequently offer access to fresh knowledge and concepts that are not usually available within the same group, encouraging originality and creativity (Burt, 2004).

A strong framework for comprehending informal work practices in the workplace is provided by social network theory. This theory sheds light on how informal networks affect information flow, teamwork, and creativity by emphasising the connections, relationships, and social capital that workers develop. Social Network Theory insights can help organisations improve communication, create more productive informal networks, and achieve better organisational results.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Informal Networks and Institutions**

Generally speaking, institutions are rules and processes that are created by social activities or symbolic elements and that either permit or restrict an individual's behaviour (North, 1991; Scott, 2008). While customs, traditions, norms, and religion are examples of informal institutions that are hard to alter (Williamson, 2000), formal institutions are contracts and regulations that are easily changed (North, 1991). "A set of rules, compliance procedures, and moral and ethical behavioural norms designed to constrain the behaviour of individuals in the interests of maximising the wealth or utility of the principals" is how North (1990, p. 201) defined informal institutions. According to North (1990, p. 40), they can also be characterised as "(1) extensions, elaborations, and modifications of formal rules, (2) socially sanctioned norms of behaviour, and (3) internally enforced standards of conduct."

The role of institutions in general has been documented in organisation studies (e.g., Abdelnour et al., 2017), international business (Doh et al., 2017), entrepreneurship (Gimenez-Jimenez et al., 2020), strategy (Yao et al., 2020), and political science (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). Despite this, scholars have paid little attention to the informal fabric of institutions, especially in contexts outside of the United States and Western European countries where informal institutions may be strongly embedded due to cultural influences (Dau et al., 2018).. To better understand the role of informal institutions and informal networks, Minbaeva et al. (2022) referred to the necessity of dissecting the "black box" of informal institutions.

Formal and informal institutions were often viewed as two extremes of a continuum in the literature (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Yao et al., 2020). According to Sauerwald and Peng (2013), "informal institutions gain importance once formal institutions are absent or weak," as is commonly believed in the literature on institutional voids (Khanna & Palepu, 1997; Kostova & Hult, 2016). Doh et al. (2017) added that "they [firms] may rely more heavily on informal institutions to address shortcomings in formal institutions" (p. 294). Therefore, actors are said to rely on informal structures in order to replace ineffective or nonexistent formal institutions (Doh et al., 2017). However, this viewpoint fails to explain the phenomenon of informal institutions continuing to exist in the presence of successful formal institutions (Bian, 2022; Minbaeva et al., 2022). In order to provide a new understanding of the dynamics of informal institutions, Minbaeva et al. (2022) described this in terms of the function of informal networksFootnote1, which serve as the foundation for informal institutions.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Role of Social Network in the Workplace**

It has been demonstrated that social networks at work significantly affect organisational outcomes. In addition to formal channels, informal networks of communication frequently function as channels for exchanging information, seeking advice, and making decisions (Krackhardt and Hanson, 1993). Employees can obtain vital information and resources faster thanks to these networks than they could with just formal communication structures. Strong social ties within networks promote trust and cooperation, which results in more productive collaboration and innovation, according to a major finding in the literature (Uzzi, 1997). Social networks are tools for accumulating social capital in addition to promoting cooperation. Career success and workplace outcomes are significantly influenced by social capital, which is defined as the resources embedded within social networks that can be accessed or mobilised for individual or collective benefit (Coleman, 1988). Employees with larger and more varied social networks are more likely to advance in their careers because they have better access to opportunities, information, and support from mentors and colleagues, as shown by Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden (2001).

However, social networks can also be problematic. One of the main issues brought up in the literature is the possibility of exclusion or inequality within networks; workers who are shut out of informal networks may face barriers to accessing important organisational information and career opportunities (Ibarra, 1992); cliques and in-group/out-group dynamics can result in workplace conflicts and decreased employee cooperation (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003).

### **Effects of Informal Work Practices**

In contrast to formal organisational routines, informal work practices are influenced by local norms and employee interactions within teams or departments. These practices can range from informal mentoring and resource and knowledge sharing to unstructured communication and decision-making processes (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). Although informal practices may be

perceived as a departure from formal procedures, they frequently arise in response to the practical demands of the workplace, enabling employees to be more adaptable, flexible, and responsive to challenges (Mintzberg, 1979). According to research by Orlikowski (1996), informal practices are especially crucial in knowledge-intensive organisations where staff members frequently turn to their peers for problem-solving and knowledge-sharing. Peer learning, mentoring, and impromptu teamwork are examples of informal practices that can enhance formal training programs and advance organisational expertise. Additionally, by empowering staff to respond swiftly to shifting conditions or unexpected obstacles without awaiting official directives or approvals, these practices can improve organisational agility. (Takeuchi & Nonaka, 1995)

Informal work practices have disadvantages despite their possible advantages. One significant worry is that these methods might lead to unofficial power disparities or hierarchies, which could compromise decision-making's impartiality and openness (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). Informal networks can occasionally encourage partiality, giving workers outside of the preferred social circles unfair access to opportunities, resources, or information (Ibarra, 1992). Furthermore, when decisions are made outside of established organisational policies, informal practices can occasionally lead to the circumvention of formal processes, which can result in inefficiencies or even ethical issues (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003).

### **Challenges of Informal Networks**

**Information Silos:** Informal networks often lead to the development of information silos, where valuable knowledge and information are confined to specific groups or sub-networks within the organization. For workers outside of these close-knit groups, this can restrict access to vital resources and impede the flow of ideas. Because of this, some workers might have access to a multitude of information, while others might not be aware of significant advancements or industry best practices (Cross, Parker, & Prusak, 2001). Because departments or teams may duplicate efforts or fail to collaborate effectively due to a lack of cross-network communication, information silos can reduce organisational agility.

**Exclusion and Inequality:** When particular people or groups are excluded from important information flows and decision-making processes, informal networks may also result in exclusion or inequality. People who are not part of powerful networks or have weak social ties may be marginalised, which could limit their access to resources or career advancement opportunities (Ibarra, 1993). Employees may become frustrated and disengaged as a result of this exclusion, particularly if they believe their contributions are being ignored or undervalued. Furthermore, informal networks can worsen disparities in workplace dynamics because they frequently arise around shared traits like seniority, background, or social affinity (Burt, 2004).

**Lack of Formal Accountability:** Because informal networks function outside of formal hierarchies and structures, they may not be held to the same standards. Informal networks may help spread false information or circumvent organisational policies and procedures, but they can also encourage quick decision-making and creativity (Granovetter, 1973). Decisions made in informal

networks may not always be in line with organisational objectives or strategies in the absence of formal checks and balances, which could lead to irregularities in the way work is done or resources are distributed.

**Excessive dependence on Informal Leaders:** In informal networks, people in key roles frequently serve as the main information and decision-making sources. Even though these leaders have a lot of power and can help the company succeed, relying too much on them can lead to a bottleneck where decisions and information are passed through a small number of important people. If the informal leaders lack the necessary skills to manage the information flow or are not in line with organisational priorities, this can hinder organisational processes, reduce the diversity of ideas, and raise the possibility of mistakes (Borgatti & Foster, 2003).

**Communication Barriers:** In larger organisations or when networks span departments or geographical locations, informal networks may also be a factor in communication barriers. Over-reliance on informal channels can cause people or organisations to circumvent formal communication systems, which are intended to guarantee that information is distributed efficiently and consistently. Confusion, misalignment, or even conflict within the organisation may result from this fragmented or incomplete communication (Cross & Prusak, 2002).

### **Effects of Technology and Remote Work on Informal Practices and Social Networks**

Studying social networks and informal work practices has taken on new dimensions as a result of the development of digital technologies and remote work arrangements. The dynamics and structure of workplace social networks are changing as more and more businesses use digital communication tools like video conferencing, instant messaging, and email. According to Boschma (2005), the spread of digital tools could improve network connectivity, particularly for remote or geographically scattered teams. Others have warned, though, that technology may also result in the loss of in-person relationships, which can weaken the social ties and level of trust that normally support informal networks (Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995).

Furthermore, concerns regarding the future of informal work practices have been raised by the shift to remote and hybrid work models. Remote work presents difficulties for the impromptu, casual interactions that frequently take place in physical workplaces, even though it can also increase flexibility and lessen physical constraints (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). According to research by Vartiainen et al. (2019), organisations must create new plans for sustaining social networks and encouraging unofficial collaboration in online settings. To lessen the loneliness that remote workers face and maintain the advantages of informal work practices in digital spaces, for instance, virtual "water cooler" areas, online collaboration tools, and organised chances for casual interaction have been proposed.

Understanding the dynamics of social networks and informal work practices will be essential in fostering collaborative, inclusive, and high-performing workplaces as organisations continue to adapt to new work

environments. The literature on social networks and informal work practices highlights their significant role in shaping workplace interactions, performance, and organisational outcomes. While social networks facilitate knowledge exchange, collaboration, and career advancement, they also present challenges related to exclusion and inequality. While informal work practices are flexible and adaptable, they can contribute to organisational efficiency but may also introduce issues of fairness and transparency. The emergence of digital technologies and the rise of remote work have caused significant changes in the structure and function of these networks and practices, which further study is necessary to understand their evolving impact.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion, the social networks that employees create greatly influence informal work practices in the workplace. These unofficial networks, which frequently function outside of the official organisational structure, are essential for promoting cooperation, facilitating information exchange, and enabling problem-solving. By highlighting the significance of both strong and weak ties, the centrality of individuals in networks, and the social capital embedded within these connections, social network theory provides insightful information about how these networks operate. Employees can access resources, exchange knowledge, and close gaps between departments or hierarchical levels with the aid of informal networks, which fosters greater creativity and productivity. But these networks also have drawbacks, like the possibility of information silos or the exclusion of specific people from important conversations, which can impede cooperation and equity inside a company.

Organisations must figure out how to balance the possible disadvantages of informal networks with the advantages as they become more aware of their significance. Communication, trust, and overall organisational performance can all be enhanced by comprehending and maximising informal work practices.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. By encouraging cross-departmental collaboration and providing opportunities for interaction and idea sharing among employees from various levels and backgrounds, organisations can foster the growth of inclusive informal networks. Regular team-building exercises, mentorship programs, and cooperative projects can help achieve this.
2. By identifying key players in informal networks and giving them the authority to act as mentors or connectors, organisations can take advantage of the social capital found there. These people can help break down barriers to communication, offer guidance, and facilitate the flow of information. The organization's overall knowledge and resource flow can be improved by identifying and assisting these unofficial leaders.
3. Organisations should establish unofficial areas (physical or virtual) where staff members can interact impromptu and share ideas in order to promote efficient knowledge sharing. Social gatherings and unofficial online forums are examples of informal work practices that can help spread tacit knowledge that formal procedures might miss.

4. Organisations should make sure that formal structures and procedures are in place to ensure fairness, consistency, and transparency, even though informal networks have many advantages. While allowing for flexibility and creativity through informal channels, a balance between formal and informal practices guarantees that crucial work processes are completed effectively.
5. To spot any gaps or silos, it's critical for organisations to evaluate their informal networks on a regular basis. Management can take proactive measures to address any problems by knowing how information flows and where possible bottlenecks may occur. This will guarantee that important information reaches all pertinent staff members and that cooperation is not restricted to particular groups.
6. Organisations can promote a more inventive, cooperative, and productive workplace by carefully managing and growing informal networks. An effective tool for comprehending and maximising these unofficial practices is social network theory, which eventually improves organisational results.

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