

# Applying Social Capital in Organizations and Meta Networks

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## Using Full-Spectrum Social Networks for Applying Social Capital

*Use of social networks for 'netcentric campaigns' is vitally important, but uses only part of the available social network spectrum.*

Organizations of all types, and perhaps especially social sector organizations, have discovered high-impact ways to make use of social networks to “push power to the edges” and to motivate virally spreading mass-action campaigns. (“Pushing power to the edges” means motivating and supporting committed people outside the core of the organization to use their own efforts and creativity to help achieve the organization’s goals.)

For example, Allison Fine’s important book, *Momentum: Igniting Social Change in a Connected World* describes why and how social sector organizations can mobilize social media and social networks to enhance communication and community, collaboration, developing new content, and organizing collective action. Community building and social campaigns rely on getting large numbers of committed supporters to take actions and spread messages that will influence other potential allies as well as governments and corporations that need to be more responsive. Use of social media, which includes social networking sites, takes these capabilities to entirely new levels.

However, there are other important uses of social networks that are not yet fully being explored and taken advantage of. The knowledge is there, but is mostly embedded in theory, or in practices which till now have been difficult to scale. Two vital uses of social networks that are under-emphasized in current practice are:

- 1) Making use of trusted connections to accomplish high value tasks *within the core of organizations*, and
- 2) Enhancing *meta networks* that can be used by all individuals and people in the network for their own focused purposes.

## The Center and Edges are Everywhere

The idea that a network has a center and an edge is fairly clear. The center, or core, are usually the leaders of an organization or network, and the edges are the people outside the core who are willing to help, or who would be if well informed and motivated.

But it is also true that every person and organization is also on the edges of other people and organization's networks. So, as Einstein and complexity scientists have helped us understand, *the center is everywhere*, and so are the edges.

With this understanding we see that "pushing power to the edges" – from the reference point of a single organization's network -- is only part of what we can and should be doing. We can also participate in creating and enhancing the multi-centered networks – or meta networks -- where each person and organization gets the benefit of the entire network. In such a network each person and organization can tap the power of their own networks' edges for use inside the organization by individual staff and small teams to achieve specific objectives. Such uses are especially enhanced by the social capital and trusted connections inherent in social networks. For example, social capital networks and trusted connections can be used to obtain intelligence, influence, and introductions to:

- Find funding,
- Find and build new partnerships;
- Help locate best candidates and reference-check them before hiring;
- Get crucial inside information and influence; and
- Get trusted expertise to help plan or implement new projects.
- Share knowledge more effectively.

### **First-degree Social networks and Extended Social Capital Networks**

Focus on community building and mass action campaigns is mainly about mobilizing first-degree networks (direct contacts) to spread messages and collective actions. Second-degree networks (contacts of contacts) and beyond are of course involved in these actions. But in order to work, the network tools that are used for mass action campaigns don't need to do much more than to make it easy for the network "edges" to send messages on to their friends – using whatever media or tools they individually choose. As a result, often many of the people on the edges never become explicitly known to the people at the center of the network, nor do they need to be.

In contrast, the ability *to tap the edges for use in the center*, relies heavily on making use of extended social capital networks to help get specific tasks done.

Social Capital Networks are made up of reciprocal (mutually trusted and helpful), personal relationships. Reciprocity and mutual benefit are the essence of social capital. *Extended Social Capital Networks* are networks that extend out 2 or more degrees, and that enable trust exchanges between two people who may not have known each other before -- at all or at least not well. Trust with a relative stranger is instantly raised to a high level upon the recommendation of an already trusted contact.

Of course, using trusted connections for introductions, influence, and intelligence has been going on for at least a few thousand years, so many busy modern professionals assume that they already are effectively using their networks. But the truth is that they are effectively using a tiny fraction of their networks' capacities. Given that any individual has 50 to a few hundred trusted first-degree connections, the size of their trusted network increases exponentially when extending out 2 or 3 degrees.

Further, organizations radically expand the number of trusted, reciprocal relationships that are available to any person in the organization's network. Even a small organization with a core network (staff, board, close volunteers, advisors, etc.) has at least hundreds of thousands of *trusted and relevant* second-degree connections and at least a few million out just 3 degrees.

There is simply no way that any individual, or organization, can effectively tap more than the tiniest fraction of their trusted networks without making use of social networking software and services specifically designed for the task. Most social networks on the Web today have databases of connections that *could* enable use of extended social capital networks. But in practice very few Web-based social networks have the right tools, or even the right kinds of data, to make that happen.

## **Facebook and LinkedIn**

To illustrate the distinction between uses of social networks for social campaigns vs use for making trusted connections, let's compare Facebook to LinkedIn.

Facebook is the current social network tool of choice for non-profits, associations and some companies precisely because it helps with PR, communications, and recruiting new members, and to a much smaller extent, with funding. This is in keeping with the current emphasis on using social networks for social campaigns. Facebook does this well because it mainly focuses on the first-degree networks of its users – which as explained above is all that is really needed for these types of applications. In addition, Facebook is a vibrant social media, giving organizations of all types a great platform for reaching large audiences of supporters and getting their messages out.

LinkedIn, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on professional applications of social networks and attracts more professionals in the 35 to 50+ age range, including a very high percentage of senior professionals. LinkedIn is now by far the largest network of this type, with a number of registered users over 20,000,000 and growing rapidly.

Because of its “stick to the knitting” professional focus, LinkedIn is not particularly a place where large numbers of people “hang out” to interact with their friends. Most users tend to use LinkedIn to instead hang out their professional shingle and CV, and to build and use their personal networks for very specific professional purposes – hiring; doing due-diligence; and getting trusted introductions to get customers, funding, partners, influence, and intelligence. (Disclosure: I was an executive with LinkedIn from 2004 through early 2007, and before working with LinkedIn I designed and developed social networking applications specifically for professionals. I’m also a fan of Facebook and other social media.)

LinkedIn is the best social network for tapping large extended social capital networks – making use of trusted connections for professional purposes. This is mainly because:

- It includes an extremely large database of user-updated professional profiles of experience, expertise, and affiliations.
- Its search function enables finding trusted introductions out three degrees for highly specific purposes.
- It includes a number of other features specifically tailored to professional needs.

### **Social Capital Network Demonstration Projects**

A main point I’m making here is that there is a need for organizations to think about networks not only as tools to virally spread a message/meme/action throughout the network. This is important. But, it is time to think about networks also as collectors and amplifiers of social capital that can be used by *every* person and organization in the network for their *own* purposes, as well as for *your* purposes.

My hypothesis has always been that the best way to get professional applications of extended social capital networks more widely used is to demonstrate their value to organizations and networks of organizations. So now, because I believe that there is still tremendous untapped value in extended social capital networks, I am working with others to put together a few small, short-term projects that can demonstrate the value of extended social capital networks for achieving the priorities of organizations.

In addition to demonstration projects for specific organizational networks, we will also be helping to facilitate *meta networks* – multi-centered networks comprised of many organizations and individual professionals that center around common causes and issues -- for example, on a specific Millennium Development Goal, or on broader themes such as environmental protection. These meta networks will

not be new entities, but true extended social capital networks with a limited focus on use of trusted personal connections to achieve the goals of members.

We will also be developing value-adding “trust exchange” applications that can work both inside of existing social networks like LinkedIn and Facebook, and also inside of applications of private organizations to help integrate their private data and uses with the more public data of Web-based social networks.

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