

## HR TECHNOLOGY

# PATHWAYS TO PRODUCTIVITY

Organizational network analysis tools can help spot high-potentials and boost connections among employees.

By Dave Zielinski

Imagine being able to identify high-potential employees early in their work lives, providing a head start on grooming these individuals for leadership roles. Or finding hidden “influencers” who could be convinced to help with change initiatives. Or eliminating communication bottlenecks, improving workforce productivity and engagement.

These objectives are now possible through use of organizational network analysis (ONA), an emerging form of HR technology that captures data from e-mails, instant messages, feedback surveys and collaboration platforms to help identify and understand how people communicate.

ONA software provides a structured way to visualize formal and informal relationships by analyzing how communications, decisions and information flow internally, says David Mallon, head of research for

Bersin by Deloitte, an HR research and consulting firm in New York City.

“Interest in using the methodology and toolsets related to ONA is growing,” Mallon says.

Forty-eight percent of organizations are experimenting with ONA tools, according to the results of Deloitte’s 2017 Global Human Capital Trends survey, which captured responses from 10,400 business and HR leaders across 140 countries. And a related Deloitte report found that large businesses such as Cisco Systems, Cigna Health Insurance and General Motors are using ONA to help analyze productivity patterns, identify high-potential leaders and support diversity initiatives.

One company used the tools to assess communication in its sales function and found that the ideas of many experts in the group were being overlooked. After creating a





new team-centric structure, the sales department saw its revenue rise by more than 12 percent.

Established ONA vendors include Trustsphere, KeenCorp and Microsoft Delve. Some providers also have tools that gauge the mood or tone of internal communications to assess where organizations might be under stress—or to help spot potential fraud. As ONA solutions grow in functionality and capability, experts expect many will be incorporated into core talent management platforms.

## HIDDEN INFLUENCERS

There are informal “go-to” teams or individuals in every enterprise, and they are often not who you might think based on formal organizational charts. They are the employees whose opinions hold sway with peers and who know how to get things accomplished—or to quickly find people with answers. “These people can become key change agents during periods of transformation or amid organization rollouts if approached and communicated with effectively,” Mallon says. ONA technology reveals these individuals by analyzing “nodes and ties” of communication networks.

A “central node” is an employee who is well-connected in a company. He or she shares information readily and is considered influential, according to Mallon. “Ties” are the formal and informal relationships created between these central nodes and others. It’s important to create strong ties between nodes and “knowledge brokers”—workers who create bridges between departments or teams—to ensure that information flows effectively throughout a company.

ONA helps identify silos as well. These are the teams or departments that aren’t communicating well with others in the organization and could benefit from forging stronger connections.

Conducting a network analysis can help a company to create new,

more-efficient organizational layouts that reflect changes in how work is being done. “An ONA toolset can help you determine if an org structure should be redesigned to be flatter or more team-oriented, for example,” Mallon says.

## HR’S ROLE

Although ONA use is not yet formally tracked in Sierra-Cedar’s annual HR Systems Survey, it represents an emerging trend, says Stacey Harris, vice president of research and analytics for the IT research and consulting firm in Alpharetta, Ga. “The technology is in the new class of productivity-enhancing software, at the intersection of tools designed to improve engagement, performance and productivity.”

There’s potential to increase ONA’s impact by integrating it with existing technologies such as workforce management platforms, Harris says. “If leaders can look at which employ-

ees were scheduled over what time periods and pair it with ONA data, for example, it can prove valuable in making better scheduling decisions,” she says. “It provides more intelligence on who should be placed on what projects or shifts, based on patterns of communication and influence identified through the nodes, ties and connectors of ONA.”

HR leaders should play a prominent role in implementing such workforce tools, says Holger Mueller, vice president and principal analyst for Constellation Research, a technology research firm in Cupertino, Calif. Partner with IT to ensure that the systems complement existing platforms.

Whatever your goals, ONA can identify the players who will help you get the job done better, faster and more efficiently than before. ■

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# ANALYZING YOUR NETWORK

HR can use organizational network analysis to:

- **Identify emerging leaders.** Traditionally, high-potential employees are identified from the top down. ONA, by contrast, uses a bottom-up approach. By asking employees who they turn to for help solving problems, making decisions or increasing their energy, for example, a clearer picture emerges. Often, at least half of the employees named as having significant levels of influence come as a surprise to senior leaders.
- **Develop employees.** More than ever, leaders’ success depends on being able to maintain strategic relationships, which often involves managing in a matrix environment, leading without authority, breaking down silos and collaborating across functions.  
ONA can provide employees with an assessment of their personal networks. It can also analyze dimensions that show how well a leader’s network supports skills such as creativity, influence, execution, positivity and resiliency—key traits that contribute to success.
- **Retain talent.** ONA can serve as an early-warning system for two types of employees at risk of leaving the company: people who have become disengaged and those on the verge of burning out. Research has shown that employees who do not enjoy a strong relationship with their boss, lack personal support and are not plugged into the larger network are much more likely to leave than their peers. In addition, those who everyone seeks to connect with can become overwhelmed, increasing their likelihood of leaving. By applying ONA, HR can intervene before it’s too late.

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