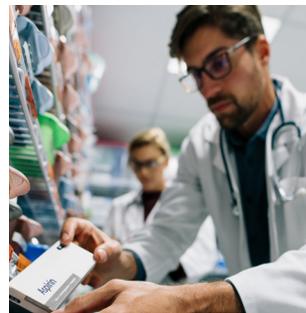


## NETWORK STRATEGIES OF HIGH PERFORMERS



Produce Innovative Solutions  
**Tap Into a Broad Network**  
Early in Problem Solving



## INNOVATION RESOURCE CENTER for HUMAN RESOURCES

This lesson is one in a series of twelve case-study learning modules that emerged from IRC4HR™ sponsored research on the networking behaviors of successful people; those in their organizations' high-performance category who also score higher on measures of career satisfaction, well-being, and engagement. Each module explores a different dimension of how these people build, maintain, and leverage personal networks in ways that help them produce innovative solutions, execute work, and thrive in their careers. It also captures what they do as leaders to bring others along with them.

Rob Cross has mapped networks and individual (and collective) performance in 300+ organizations to identify the network strategies of high performers. With funding from IRC4HR, these strategies (captured in a white paper, "[The Invisible Network Strategies of Successful People](#)," and a series of personal case-study learning modules) can now be shared and adopted by individuals and organizations interested in building and nurturing successful, high-performing, and personally fulfilling networks at work and beyond.

IRC4HR was founded in 1926 as IRC, a non-profit organization designed to promote positive employment relationships and advances in human resources management through consulting, research, and education.

More than 90 years later, the organization continues to bring together employers, academics, and other stakeholder communities to fund action research and share insights on a wide range of topics, including a current focus on the implications of technology and digital disruption on the future of work, organizations, leadership, and the workforce.



PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

# Tap Into a Broad Network Early in Problem Solving

## PRINCIPLE

Innovation does not happen in isolation. When people tap into a broad, diverse network early in projects to help them frame the issue and solution, they solve bigger problems, produce more innovative outcomes and gain greater acceptance of the innovation.



“You can’t be your own island if you want to drive innovation forward.”

## 3 STRATEGIES TO BRING IN DIVERSE VIEWS FOR IDEA DEVELOPMENT

1. Bridge networks and boundaries; scan for insights and make connections.
2. Proactively pursue adjacent expertise and tangential connections early in projects.
3. Involve opinion leaders to amplify the idea and engage the network broadly.

We gratefully acknowledge the support and funding for this project from Innovation Resource Center for Human Resources (IRC4HR™).

*“It is important not to get too far down the path with a solution before we fully explore what the problem is with others. That is a pitfall.”*

*“Work with people you don’t regularly work with. Tap into different experience and people who see the work from a different perspective.”*

*“The more differing viewpoints you have early in a project, the more robust and comprehensive the solution. The key is to reach out right when you are most busy—when a new project has come your way on top of all your other work. It is easy right at that point to hunker down but that is the wrong answer in my personal experience and in watching others.”*

Novel ideas rarely emerge from insular, or narrow, networks. Innovation requires making connections between seemingly unrelated ideas or groups. Creative thoughts that result in valued, new insights, products or processes are sparked at the intersection of different expertise and perspectives. In our interviews, we found this pattern to be consistent: more successful innovators tapped people in their network—early on—who could help them think about a problem in different ways.

Rather than solving the posed problem with an initial idea and working in isolation, successful innovators took a more expansive approach. They valued new perspectives and information instead of relying on top-of-mind experts or go-to collaborators. They tapped into a broad, diverse network to both define the problem space and explore solutions. They included people who could bridge different groups, had different expertise, would bring different values to the challenge, and represented the population who had the problem (e.g., customers) or who would be affected by the change.

By engaging a broad network early, people were less likely to miss information or leave out important expertise or insights. They addressed content and substance, as well as process aspects of the work. Importantly, they also built credibility and trust along the way. Because of their network interactions, these people pursued, developed and implemented solutions that were more innovative than those who had insular networks.

### **Bridge networks and boundaries; scan for insights and make connections.**

High-performers are proactive in building non-insular networks. When people engage with individuals and groups across boundaries and silos, they see possibilities and make connections they would not have considered in isolation. People who are part of successful innovations talk about the importance of four types of boundary spanning ties: *across organizational or expertise silos, to those doing similar work, to those that could help address expertise gaps and to those who informed on the political landscape.*

For example, Leo built a network that helped him re-frame a software solution even when his boss asked him to solve a narrow problem. He turned to another project manager to understand the components of the solution and sort through the politics and existing processes. He asked his manager for referrals to people who could fill in gaps in expertise the new project had exposed. He spent time with data scientists and engineers, not just those working on his project. He built relationships in sales and marketing, which later led to an opportunity to talk directly with customers. And a friend, who had a similar job in a different company, helped him think through core processes, relationships and ways to proceed. The outcome of his work was much more significant and impactful than if he had just solved the problem as posed. It was no surprise that Leo was a star in his cohort.

Similarly, Denise built ties into other functions, levels and locations in her organization: up and down within her department, across and up to senior leadership, and broadly with experts and support staff. Because of her broad perspective, she connected other people and adapted or combined ideas in new ways. A notable, company-wide innovation was spurred when she saw a process that worked with a small group and started asking, “What if we do it on a broad scale? How can I make this work?”

Charles connected people inside his group with people elsewhere in the company: “We know what our business challenges are but there are lots of people around this company that have different ways of solving these same problems.”

**Proactively pursue adjacent expertise and tangential connections early in projects.** Effective innovators want to correctly frame the problem and push their thinking by reaching to people outside their existing network for information or perspective. They seek input from people whose expertise is similar, but does not mirror their own: Who has expertise that is related (even if tangentially) to the work? Who has interests that overlap ours? Often a new angle or unexpected solution comes from talking to someone with the same technical expertise in a different organization, someone with a similar role in different function or someone who solved a similar problem in a different context.

Margaux routinely works with an initial group to get their framing of the problem space, then branches out to find other potential players or stakeholders:



## 10 Signs Your Network Is Too Insular for Innovation

1. You are moving fast and don't want to slow things down. You'd rather not bring in outsiders until your plan and solution is developed.
2. You don't make time to build relationships outside of your “inner circle.” You rely on a known group of colleagues as your sounding board.
3. You worry that people will think that you aren't good at your job if you don't have a ready solution. You don't ask others to help you look at a problem or contribute their perspective.
4. You don't seek input from outside your organization. You don't have a strong external network to give you access to different trends, expertise or perspectives.
5. You don't think to ask your peers doing similar work what they would do in your situation. You see them as competitors not collaborators.
6. You focus on the problem or assignment as it is presented. You begin to solve it narrowly rather than talking to people who might expand the scope or make tangential connections.
7. You take pride in your expertise and enjoy figuring things out on your own. Collaboration—especially across boundaries—is not your default mode.
8. You over-rely on the usual people. Your go-to colleagues or known experts are overly influential and you don't seek alternative views.
9. You don't have a good sense of politics. You work through formal leadership, but get tripped up by informal opinion leaders and unseen stakeholders.
10. You define diversity as demographics. Diversity of thought, expertise, function, tenure, style or sphere of influence are not factored in to problem solving.



“In the early stage of understanding a problem and ideation, we talk to our network and look at tangential technologies or solutions from wherever people are having a good customer experience.”



“When you start to think bigger, you don’t stop at your immediate group or closest contact. I try to hop across networks to get to other areas, other expertise ... I start with people or areas who seem willing and interested, share transparently about our issues and challenges, then allow time for that person to provide their perspective and see if there is commonality. Where we could potentially join together?”

Eve talks to her friends, her manager and people she knows from previous projects: “Someone knows someone ... Then we start pulling that thread, *Hey, we heard you are working on this*. They point us to another person until you get to someone who says, *Yes, you are working on something that is important and interesting to me and I know something that might help.*”

**Involve opinion leaders to amplify the idea and engage the network broadly.** Eventually, the ideation and development network becomes the implementation network. Core and extended project teams should include opinion leaders (not just the formal leaders) who may or may not be supportive of change or a new idea in the beginning. When the work turns to getting feedback more broadly, and implementing or scaling, these network influencers have had a chance to “punch holes in your thinking” and contribute to the solution. They become invested in the outcome and create a contagion effect that brings others along.

Successful innovators often involve people with enthusiasm for the work and credibility in the eyes of others. Stephan sought out people who “think of a larger state of possibilities, beyond what you see today,” when he spearheaded an initiative that would change the scope and direction of the business. Carrie relied on 12 respected sales managers to give input and be ambassadors for a new, companywide effort: “They were people who had been here for a while and knew our culture, our style, our way of working. They would be passionate about what we were trying to do. It was important to choose people who would have the credibility and power to carry the message through from beginning of the project through to implementation ... The wild success of this program had everything to do with word of mouth.”



## Tips for Finding Adjacencies and Diverse Perspectives

- Start with your current network to identify experts, stakeholders and influencers. Explain what you are working on and why you are connecting. Look for overlap and interest during initial conversations. Then ask, *who else should I speak with?*
- Ask for 30 minutes of time to run a problem or idea by someone with a different perspective. Frame the request as, “Here is a problem we are trying to solve. What do you think? Are there different ways you might solve it?” instead of “Hey, I need this.”
- Seek connections between seemingly non-related concepts or areas of expertise. Have your team look to other industries or sectors to see how they have solved a similar problem. Run an idea by people with no knowledge of your work for an unbiased view.
- Play with opposites and impossibilities. What would you never do? What could never happen? What would never get funded or approved? Who would *not* want to be involved?
- Find experts and ideas through analogy. What is your problem like? Who has solved it before?
- Leverage a group that is already a diverse network. Explore your challenge with a community of practice, a cross-functional team or interest group.
- Hold virtual or in-person sessions to pose a challenge and explore ideas among subject experts and stakeholders. Ask a lot of questions, respect and give status to others, stay open to possibilities.
- Reach out to clients, partners, industry experts and others outside your organization to stimulate thinking, alert you to possible pitfalls and polish ideas. Use LinkedIn or Facebook to re-connect and seek introductions—look for points of synergy and mutual benefit early in conversations.

**THE TAKEAWAY?** People often rush to solve a problem or advance an idea, relying on a core, insular group. In our interviews, every successful innovation involved a broad, diverse network early in the problem-solving stage. The message is clear: seek input from people who have different perspectives, adjacent expertise and overlapping interests. You will gain a better grasp of the problem and generate a more substantive solution.