

With the right research approach and analytical techniques, social networks can be leveraged in many facets of the business world. Internally, companies can increase operational efficiency by analyzing how work really gets done within different departments. At a broader level, social networks can add a new lens through which to view the company as a whole, evaluating how key stakeholder groups interact with each other and with clients. Looking externally, influence networks within target markets emphasize a community-based approach to sales and marketing initiatives. Organizational Networks, Client Connectivity Networks, and External Networks, then, each require a distinct set of research and analytical techniques.

DECISION NETWORKS

Social network analysis can also be applied outside of the organization by communicating with the company's target community and uncovering External Influence Networks. These networks reveal the authentic relationships of trust and advice-seeking among the audience of interest. Influence Networks are relevant, formed around specified topics, issues, or product categories, and should not be generalized. When one individual is nominated by several members of the community, the individual serves as a Trusted Advisor in the network. The reach of these individuals often extends into several different companies and industries, making their networks a diverse system of information sharing.

Similarly, a Connector is a network member with a unique structural role as they are connecting groups of people who would otherwise not be connected. Some Connectors are also Cross-Connectors, meaning that they connect individuals from different types of customer groups. For example, a Cross-Connector on the topic of servers and storage devices might connect executives at a financial institution to a technology firm's CIO (Figure 3). The structure of a Cross-Connector's network allows them to assume different brokerage roles in the network¹, such as:

- **Coordinator** - brokers relationships from the same stakeholder group



- **Gatekeeper** - controls the boundary of an organization or stakeholder group



¹ Hanneman, Robert A. and Mark Riddle. 2005. Introduction to social network methods. Riverside, CA: University of California, Riverside (published in digital form at <http://faculty.ucr.edu/~hanneman/>)



- **Representative** - acts as his group's contact point to an external group



- **Liaison** - connects two otherwise unconnected groups



The assortments of Key Network Members are all valuable as they give voice to the needs of the community. Organizations looking to move market share by increasing customer acquisition and retention must connect with the voices that matter to their audiences. The study of external networks empowers organizations to do just that.

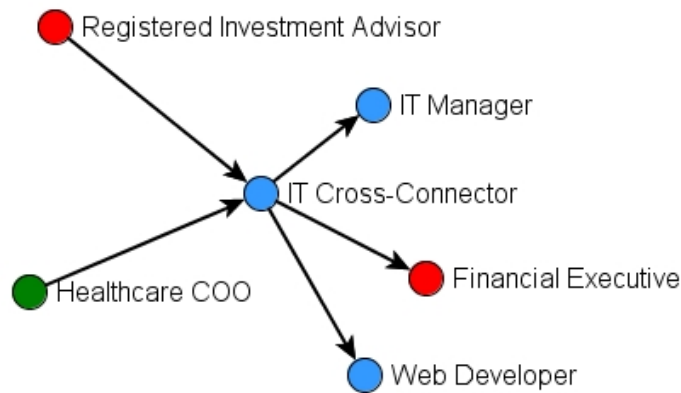


Figure 3: Cross-Connector in an External Network

Whether you are examining networks of trust and advice-seeking within your organization, across your target customer base, or between these two audiences, many aspects of social network analysis can be applied to produce actionable results. Uncovering insights on network dynamics and the identification of Key Network Members are the first steps in harnessing the power of social networks.

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