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From Tiananmen to Tahrir:
Knowing one’s place in the 21st century
Karen Stephenson

FROM TIANANMEN TO TAHRIR

Tiananmen Square, the largest city square in the world and located in the capital city of Beijing, China, was the site of democratic protests in June of 1989. The Chinese government suppressed the rebellion, but not before the iconic image of a lone student in a white shirt facing down an army tank was witnessed around the world. Twenty-two years later and halfway across the globe, another democratic disturbance rumbled, this time in Tahrir Square, located in the capital city of Cairo, Egypt. Nicknamed Liberation Square, it was the site of a democratic uprising in Egypt from a suppressed people whose patience had reached a boiling point. The conclusion of the Egyptian revolution has yet to be written, but a more hopeful outcome is expected. It began with the desperate act of a Tunisian fruit vendor who six months earlier lit himself on fire to protest government harassment. That horrific act proved to be a tipping point. It was instantly communicated around the world and launched the Arab Spring.

Equitable and democratic governance is a common thread (and threat) in these two examples. Here I wish to highlight the role of technology that enabled a people to be networked together and thus collectively transport themselves to a different place and mental space because of an idea. Over two hundred years ago, this was the American Revolution; recently in Tiananmen, it was the fax revolution and more recently, Facebook and Twitter communicated the events that transpired in Tahrir. All were transformative and all were enabled by the state of technology in their time. And it is that same transformative ethos that will propel new tipping points regarding how people not only “know” their place but overcome obstacles to determine their place within communities, commerce and workplace.

Technology isn’t just impacting political revolutions in sovereign nations. It also impacts the (1) physical workplace and (2) social networks that connect and enable people to conduct commerce. Unfortunately, the workplace and social media are in an advanced state of disconnect. The “office,” a postmodern notion is dragging centuries old industrialized concepts into the 21st. This may explain why it is the object of derision in television sitcoms and Hollywood movies. The physical place of “the office” is fixed, and within it knowledge is created and stored, typically in products, services, documents and books. Inside “the office,” routine work drones on: people are hired, fired or retired. In between these work-life events, they meet, mingle and connect, and social networks are a natural outcome. Social networks are governed by reciprocity, sometimes dismissed as office politics. But office politics are nothing more than the give and take or parrying back and forth of favors and this type of finessing is as ancient as human evolution (For further discussion on the mechanics of exchange or “habitus,” read Pierre Bourdieu’s The Theory of Practice). It may be “what you know” that gets you in the door, but it’s “who you know” or your social network that determines your success within the cultural confines of the workplace.

Social networks begin innocently enough, starting out with low levels of trust, but they deepen into significant ties that engage people in a shared sense of value—so much so that people are bound to each other long after a firm’s expiration date. Social networks can beat any deadline, but they can also delay them indefinitely. To tame or domesticate these networks, order is imposed by a hidebound managerial class branding the three R’s: regulation, roles and responsibilities. “Work” is then compartmentalized into (1) line and (2) staff. This elemental yet elegant duality is further sorted by job function or discipline. What emerges from this taxonomic dissection is a “map” of the organization; called the organization chart, and its rules more often than not, will clash with unruly social networks.

So there you have it: the office consists of two distinct but parallel universes: one of authority from which unfolds formal rules and bureaucratic procedures from a ruling man-
agement; and social networks through which informal understandings emerge and a good portion of “real” work gets done. The former is characterized by a hierarchical structure known as the organization chart and the latter by social or informal networks. Managers understand the former and often forget or take for granted the latter. They live and breathe the hierarchical ladder because their reputation hangs on every rung.

It’s a shame when managers become enraptured by hierarchical status, because at one time they knew about office social networks and used them to get ahead. But a form of selective amnesia takes over as they climb the stairway to heaven on their way to the executive suite. Over time, they progressively lose their ability to appreciate how social networks operate and honeycomb the hierarchical infrastructure they command. It’s difficult to see social networks once you’re out of them because they are invisible and ubiquitous as the air we breathe. Collegiality characterizes them, so one could conceivably “spy” on them by paying attention to elevator conversations and hanging around smokers’ clusters and water coolers, but who has the time? It’s a grand opportunity lost when managers don’t heed the value of their organization’s social networks. If social networks were routinely measured, managers could gather up a wealth of early innovation and knowledge (called social capital) that would redound to their credit. More often than not however, this knowledge goes by the wayside because it is simply unmeasured. If you don’t measure it, then you don’t recognize it. If you don’t recognize it, then it is unimportant and the knowledge dissipates, untapped. A cruel twist of fate is that if you don’t measure it, then you don’t measure it. If you don’t measure it, then it is unimportant and the knowledge dissipates, untapped. A cruel twist of fate is that managers often “try” to measure social capital by instituting high school hall monitor maneuvers—tracking time and “busy-ness” as representative of productive work. It’s a pathetic play and reminiscent of last century time-motion thinking.

So what is a social network, really? It is a shadow organization marked by an important distinction—trust. Trust is an invisible human connection, hidden in plain sight. Within trust, there are natural ebbs and flows of shared knowledge that link people together and can be put to good use to solve problems. If you are a newcomer, new executive or new hire introduced to a culture, you may inadvertently trip over these hidden connections, sometimes shocked by their existence or by the knowledge that is stored within them. Most managers regret their late discovery, largely because they could have solved that pesky problem months ago had they only known! But because these social networks are not measured, then they become lost knowledge, inaccessible to serve work objectives in a timely way.

In this brief article, I hope to persuade the reader that the existence of social networks in workplaces should not remain in the shadows, but be revealed through social capital measures. Why? Because the workplace is at a tipping point. Advances in mobile technology and cloud computing are transforming the physical workplace into a virtual one. If you thought social networks were difficult to measure within the walled confines of a traditional office, then just imagine the task before you if you are going to leverage those networks in a world of mobile work. Social networks have persisted throughout the millennia whether we measure them or not. If we hope to capitalize on their value in the workplace, then now is the time to do so by instituting a meaningful measurement system. Networks are a valued part of an organization’s knowledge capital metrics and persist regardless of how the office is structured or which technology “du jour” is used.

For example, in the life of every organization there come decisions that dictate the urge to merge or reorganize. If social networks are not recognized or factored into that decision, then it is highly likely that the reorganization will be conducted naively or incorrectly thus contributing to the abysmally low percentage of successfully executed mergers and acquisitions (M&As).

Newly minted academics and consultants often make the mistake of developing derivative schemes for revealing connection, but they either forget or dismiss the principles of basic human bonding, that is, how humans remain culturally bound to each other. Even the 19th century pioneer anthropologist Rivers discovered that indigenous peoples would fabricate their blood lineages to create “credible” linkages to or disassociations from one other, for political expediency or to mess with the mind of the anthropologist. What supersedes blood connection then and now is political finesse. This activity is deconstructed and validated into seven categories (discussed in Kleiner’s 2002 article on the author’s work): (1) routinized activities (what postmoderns call “work”), (2) innovation, that is, coming up with new ideas for how to approach novel problems, (3) seeking answers from historical sources (e.g., legacy or expertise), (4) how to go about changing the way we do things currently (improvement or learning), (5) how to “kick back” and “shoot the breeze” (informal or social murmurings), (6) who “makes the call” (decision-making) and (7) who divines the future trends (shamanistic or strategic thinking). Each of these social networks has different “valences” of trust. Never ask “who trusts whom?” you will never get an honest answer. The best way to access the hidden veins of trust is to go about it obliquely through these seven, seemingly uninspired questions. Buried within each of them are prototypical patterns that are the mathematical signifiers of true connection (the reader is referred to Stephenson and Zelen’s article entitled “Rethinking Centrality” for mathematical development). Among that group of elite connectors are a select few that can align business objectives with organizational performance and market valuation. It is simply economically prudent to measure social capital networks in order to cut through the thorns of “yes-men” and false leads.

As recently as last century, extracting the tacit knowledge of an organization was attempted through augmenting knowledge engines. This resulted in a wave of knowledge management software solutions and e-mail monitoring. These approaches are top-down hierarchically driven aids that I dismiss as “information age” propaganda, as they offered more distraction than lasting solution. Now with the advance of virtual work and ubiquitous technological connection, the traditional office is fast becoming an artifact of the past. Why? Information, once the territorial domain of Dilbert land and fixed (. . . in the land of cubicles, the man with two monitors is king . . . ), has now been mobilized; Dilbert land is becoming irrelevant. Information doesn’t need an office to be housed when it has been mobilized and can be stored via cloud computing. With both information and workers mobilized, office policies, politics and metrics are now in future shock. Traditional hierarchy has been shaken,
right down to its foundational core.

I am not advocating the overthrow of long established human resource office policies, only their resolution and realignment with current realities. Never have we more urgently needed smart management and an updated human resource function to provide the needed balance, insight and guidance now that social networks that are no longer ground by office politics. Traditional managers, and in particular, the human resource function, are overdue for an update or they too will be made irrelevant or reduced to mechanistic, transactional functions. It is incumbent upon the human resource (HR) function to measure and map social networks in the same way they meticulously groom the organization’s charter. If we continue to ignore the measurement of these networks and the social capital contained therein, then we do so at our peril. Wiki Leaks is not an episode in history, but a condition of existence in the 21st. The fact that we still do not have standards for measuring social capital within firms is an incomprehensible mystery to me because it is those very social networks that hold the key to how we work and live, especially so when both worker and work are mobile.

Who should own this responsibility? Who should lead this charge? I have already telegraphed my answer to the reader. In my opinion, we should reanimate the chief human resource officer (CHRO), whose ultimate charge is that of care-taking, shepherding and aligning the corporate culture with business objectives. It is the human resource professional who can and should map, measure and monitor social networks in the new workplace, as he or she would measure any other relevant work skill or competency to determine the health of the organizational culture and the true value of the total human asset.

**Cultural Evolution and Technological Revolution and Social Connection**

Consider a thought experiment based on five years of experiments with M.B.A. student teams at the Rotterdam School of Management (RSM) (2006—2011) and a decade of research using M.B.A. student teams at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) (1990—2000). There are two teams: TEAM A and TEAM B.

- TEAM A consists of 10 people who distrust one another but are ordered to work in the same office area to solve a complex problem. The latest technology and ample resources are put at their disposal in order to solve it.
- TEAM B consists of 10 people who trust one another but due to unforeseen circumstances are scattered in global offices and given sub-optimal technology with which to connect in order to solve the same complex problem.

In repeated experiments where the distrust in Team A and the trust in Team B are held relatively constant, TEAM B will consistently outperform (and usually under deadline) TEAM A. The obvious conclusion is that superior performance is facilitated by trusted connections among the team members despite suboptimal technology and working at a distance. If one varies workplace variables such as time, distance and technology, the results are confirmed: the precondition of trust trumps both technology and proximity. An analogous experiment was played out in quantum mechanics a century earlier. When two electrons with different spins are fired at the same time from different sources separated by various distances, the electronic spins would consistently align. The tricky part is that the measurements revealed that the two electrons were communicating faster than the speed of light, causing Einstein to remark that such a phenomenon was “spooky at a distance” as it flew in the face of conventional quantum wisdom. The 2011 discovery of faster than light travel of the subatomic particles called neutrinos at CERN may help explain this phenomenon and help rewrite a few of the laws of physics in the process. The speed of trust gives rise to coincidental thinking between trusted colleagues separated by distances and truly appears “spooky”. Of equal power in the workplace, is when relationships are contaminated with distrust. When this happens, work grinds to a halt. Conclusion: Trust at any distance is speedy; distrust at any distance is toxic. Fig. 1 is a snapshot of M.B.A. teams where betrayal occurred in the team located in the lower part of the figure.

This experiment begs the question: what impact does trust have on organizational performance, regardless of where the performance occurs—either in proximity or at a distance. Can we reliably generate, legislate, manage and measure trusted connections among individuals? Can we do more than merely measure trust, but proactively manage it to achieve superior performance in a business or community culture? The answers to these questions will have a profound impact on how we work or collaborate with one another. In this section, I explore how trusted and technological connections have become intertwined with distance and time. This social fact will have implications for the 21st century workplace.

**Cultural Evolution and Technological Revolution**

To appreciate the complexities of cultural realities, let’s step back in time to look at a particular form of cultural migration. From the 1st century BC, the Silk Road was a constantly changing network of land and sea routes connecting disparate cultures through the nomadic movement of people trading with each other. Early archeologists had a name for how and why the ancients “hooked up”. They called it “central place theory” and they posed this simple question: “What makes people risk life, limb and economic wellbeing to be centrally connected to others to trade?” Is there a social imperative, a drive or, a biological imperative, a gene, to connect?

Fast-forward two thousand years where we are traversing the Internet. The Silk Road and Internet share some amazingly common features; chief among them is that they are both networks. As with the Silk Road, the Internet is a constantly changing network connecting disparate cultures through migrations—only for the Internet it is less about the migration of people and more about the migration of information and ideas. What we label a revolution in technology may be misplaced. Instead, a deeper evolutionary drive may be at work here, regarding the social imperative of humans to connect.

Could information become the ultimate avatar, as people message their virtual selves across continents in the twinkle of an eye? Said another way, our ancient forebears con-
conected by piercing the airways with "tom-toms," tapping out staccato missives to distant tribes and relatives. Today, we connect by tapping out staccato texts, tweets and melodious ring tones. This so-called "revolution" is really not so revolutionary at all. The human drive to connect is a constant; what varies is the physical form connection takes as it is transformed by technology.

Just look at the last 100 years in Western industrialization. If we think of industrialized progress, we conjure up visions of long Cartesian rows of sewing machines, typewriters, printers, presses and assembly lines. In this world (and the remnants of that world are still with us today), the machine or the technology was fixed, and humans were tethered to it and both served and serviced the machines. Information was stored in the machine and to some degree in the people. The machine was smart, and the interchangeable less smart part in the time-study equation was the individual.

With the arrival of the personal computer or "lap top," information was still stored in the machine, but the machine could be mobilized. The interchangeable part was now a disposable or replaceable piece of technology. Internet, WIFI and tiny catching devices like PDFs emancipated humans from being physically leashed to a factory, workstation, "desk top," or "lap top" to being virtually tethered to a cloud. Now we can virtualize our presences and telegraph our messages in a massively new form of cultural contagion. This will have unforeseen consequences, because humans have never had such "unfettered" access to giving voice and raising voices. This is disruptive change of the first order in the social order—that is widely affecting the world order.

The Face of Culture

We literally and figuratively live in a Milky Way of possible connections. Nevertheless, I maintain that technological connection is only a catalyst, not a driver. The true connecting imperative remains profoundly and primordially social: being in the presence of another. Despite virtual connection, Tweeters will still Foursquare (e.g., Foursquare is a location-based social networking application for mobile devices. Users check-in using a mobile device to select from a list of venues nearby). When and where possible, tweeters tweet up to meet up with colleagues the "old-fashioned" way: f2f (face-to-face). By way of example, Tahrir Square became the central place for the Egyptian revolution. Central places where people meet in f2f meetings galvanize trust, and can, at times, drive social movements. How would the Arab Spring have launched were there no town hall or Tahrir Square in the equation? What exactly happens when we meet up in a central place, face-to-face?

It is called homophilly. Homophilly is the principle of "like seeking like" and is determined largely by our five senses and perceptible body language. There is more to connecting than meets the eye (literally and figuratively), and it has been popularly (and contentiously) labeled "blinking" (see Malcolm Gladwell). Blinking operates at the level of the subconscious, catalyzed by f2f and is far faster than tweeting. The ancient refrain goes something like this: "You look like me, you think like me, you talk like me, you're one of us." No amount of virtual tweeting is likely to unravel three millennia of genetic coding that is baked into how humans size each other up. This primordial behavior is acted out on children's playgrounds and adult playgrounds every day of the week.

So while tweets may be all the rage, primal connection comes down to facial twitches that inform our "expert" judgments and cultural stereotyping. And that is precisely why Tweeters will continue to Foursquare—you can bowl
alone and drink alone, but who wants to. . .it's better to be in the company of others. Despite cloud computing or perhaps because of it, human behavior bears witness to the dominance of physical and cultural place: we tweet up so we can meet up. It is in physical space where we subconsciously conduct that subtle cultural calculus of sizing each other up. Whether it's f2f or virtual, connecting is a social imperative. But of the two forms, f2f is inexorably primal. Primal is personal and it will always take place in a central place where we can be in close physical proximity to one another. This type of physicality is called propinquity and forms part of our evolutionary DNA.

**WHO REALLY MATTERS**

When we are engaged in formative behaviors that lead to a trusting relationship, we may experience miscues, misunderstandings, even betrayals as we calibrate our behaviors to one another. Despite all evidence to the contrary, humans persist in trusting, connecting, getting betrayed, suspending disbelief and trusting again. These trusted connections are not formed in dyadic pairs as most economists had originally assumed, but in triadic and longer looped chains that coalesce around a founding idea, a family, a tribe, a clan, a cult or mega-organizations.

The propensity of people to trust others in their social networks presents certain challenges. If you are a member of a professional group, like a faculty club, social club or work group, how can you really be sure of the AAA rating of the information you are receiving from your colleagues? In the majority of cases, it’s because you trust the source, and as such, the source is part of your trusted social network. Just because you receive information from a trusted source does not guarantee the veracity of that information. A terrorist (less known to you) or a family member (well known to you but who could be a terrorist) could transmit the identical information to you. Because you trust a familial (or familial) source over the other less known or unknown source, you will swallow the information whole as if taking in a good meal. But it could be your last meal. An abundance of historical, popular and anecdotal evidence indicates that political careers and life-ending moments are ultimately sourced to a trusted connection gone awry. In the end, it’s our trust in others that is blind, not love. And that's why our trust in others that is blind, not love. And that's why there will always be mafia, mystery and murder in every culture, because it begins and ends with a trusted connection. However misguided, once the alchemy of forming trust has occurred, is it then galvanized. When this occurs, a subtle closing of the ranks seals the network and group membership. Network membership or belonging to a group is defined by its barriers to entry: “You don’t look like us, you don’t walk and talk like us, you don’t think like us, you can’t be a part of our group.” Here is where the noose of cultural norms tightens around the fragile necks of its members. You are here because you have conformed and “they” (or the “other”) did not—they don’t “fit in,” they are “outliers,” they are not “team players”. VOILA! You have the beginnings of nascent culture emerging. That warm feeling of belonging to the group is a tradeoff for the tightening noose around your neck. Once you accept it, it’s that same clubbiness or groupthink that over time can feel suffocating, controlling and potentially destructive; instructing you where to go, how to behave, who to talk to and what to value. There are those who find comfort in this form of social control because knowing “one’s place” is a preferred mode over being alone. Knowing your place begins with trusting your social networks.

**Egocentric Networks**

When we imagine trusted connections and attempt to draw them with pen and paper, they often look like simple “hub and spoke” pictures. These crude maps are called egocentric networks, named after the “ego” in the center. Individuals unconsciously see themselves at the center of their own universes. Affectations such as name-calling (this person is NOT in my network) and name-dropping (this person IS in my network) are examples of this type of self-centeredness. Gladwell writes (and it is confirmed by research) that egocentric networks have a natural upward limit of around 150. It is difficult for humans to continue to “up” their numbers while maintaining older, more established contacts, due to the simple fact that trust takes time to build and time is a limited and finite resource. Given these constraints, people let go of high maintenance associates and swap out one high maintenance friend for an easier one. Maintaining your egocentric network takes time, even for the most efficient among us.

The famous axiom “the map is not the territory” couldn’t be more true here. Drawing your egocentric network doesn’t make it real—that’s only your perception, you could be a pretender to your own throne. But if your colleagues report back that you are in their egocentric networks, then this connection is called a confirmed or two-way link and more reasonably reflects real behavior on the ground. An example of a student’s confirmed egocentric network is shown in Fig. 2. As compelling as an egocentric network appears to the “ego” at the center of it, the real cultural network only emerges when the egocentric networks of everyone in the group, community or organization are aggregated, as demonstrated in Fig. 3. A single individual’s egocentric network is their perception of how they are connected. While we can estimate the networks of others, we can never know how “accurate” our approximations are. The only way to overcome biased, egocentric “approximation” is to uniformly measure and aggregate all egocentric networks such as you have displayed in Fig. 3. This approach will better inform managers and leaders and help them to avoid miscalculations, misfires and assumptions which inevitably arise when relying solely on one’s perceptions and intuition.

**Cultural Drift**

Many change initiatives and M&As fail due to “cultural” reasons. Pointing the finger of blame at culture is simply to cover up the fact that we never had a firm grip on understanding the culture in the first place. Cultural beliefs and values are held in place by key connectors in the social networks. If these key cultural connectors and their pivotal points or loci of connection, i.e., the connectors, could be identified early in the change process and persuaded to support the change management process, they could communicate more meaningfully the message of change throughout their networks and ultimate shift the culture accordingly.
How? Because they are authentically trusted and their shaping of the corporate message in a language that people will understand and accept is what can make the difference between success and failure in an M&A. A message emanating from a trusted source, not a hierarchical one, is the message that will be believed. Consider the following case materials from the United States government.

- Case 1: A 3-star admiral at the Pentagon lamented, “I can lead men and women into battle, but I am a prisoner of war in my own organization.” He repeatedly witnessed that his decisions, once announced, were subsequently dissembled upon implementation.
- Case 2: An Admiral of an intelligence agency pronounced (post-9/11) that connecting the dots through collaboration was to be the modus operandi of the agency hence-
forth. Less than 24 hours after his announcement, a newly minted employee entered his office to announce that he was leaving the organization. When asked why he was leaving, the young man reluctantly admitted his supervisor had threatened dismissal if he collaborated with a competing agency. Unable or unwilling to work in a toxic environment, the recruit voluntarily left.

- Case 3: In transforming the Army supply chain from linear to nonlinear to reflect post-9/11 realities, a surprising finding emerged. On following the networks, I identified an employee critical to a collaborative, cross-functional process. There was only one problem—she adamantly refused to laterally collaborate with this other agency because her performance record was strictly based on a linear, hierarchical model, not a collaborative, or lateral one. As a result, sub-standard, delayed materials led to the real deaths of armed service members. Her inability to grasp the unintended consequences of her actions stemmed directly from how she was linearly rewarded and measured for her performance. When the performance metric was adapted to recognize and reward lateral connection, her behavior changed accordingly.

There are many good and noble reasons to die—saving the life of an innocent villager, running into burning World Trade towers, even accidental death (“friendly fire”) is an understandable consequence of the fog of war because of conditions on the ground. But to lose a life just because deep within the bowels of a bureaucracy, a technocrat seated in some cubicle with blinds on can’t, or worse, won’t consider the unintended consequences of an action or inaction that could lead to the deaths of innocents, is in no other language, regrettable. Yet, it happens every day in war, healthcare, manufacturing, and a host of other industries. No one is immune. The mounting statistics of senseless deaths stem from none other than unregulated collusion, disengaged employees, or “perverse incentives”. Perverse (or bureaucratic) outcomes, that is, creating the very behavior you are trying to eliminate, is enough to make anyone take to the streets and revolt! People die for stupid reasons the relationships they do have are with central players, generally do not have as many one-on-one relationships on critical pathways, usually between hubs. Gatekeepers generally do not have as many one-on-one relationships but the relationships they do have are with central players. They “control” access to others or serve as bridges between others to control the flow of information. They are maximally connected to everyone via indirect routes.

- The first repeating pattern is to be central, like in a hub-and-spoke system (read: the egocentric network). Hubs are connectors who have one-on-one relationships in an organization. They are typically those team members who know everyone in their department very well, and, in general, are repositories for local knowledge. Since they know where the best resources are, they act as clearinghouses of information and ideas. This pattern rapidly and efficiently distributes information. (Sometimes too fast...).

- The second pattern is the gatekeeper, who is perched on critical pathways, usually between hubs. Gatekeepers generally do not have as many one-on-one relationships but the relationships they do have are with central players. They “control” access to others or serve as bridges between others to control the flow of information. They are often self-aware of their power. As such they can and will finesse a situation, alternating between the “sin of omission” (e.g., telling a falsehood) and the “sin of omission” (e.g., telling a half-truth).

- The third pattern is the pulse-taker, someone who is maximally connected to everyone via indirect routes. The pulse-taker is a behind-the-scenes person, unseen, but all seeing, and a touchstone for culture. This is the most abstract of the three network roles. Pulse-takers are maximally connected to the greatest number of people indirectly (e.g., “a friend of a friend is a friend” and “a friend of an enemy is an enemy” are axiomatic phrases for Pulse-takers). Generally Pulse-takers have a wide array of contacts that extend beyond the limits of their immediate groups. They are people who have a diversity of interests and group memberships. As such, they are attuned to the “pulse” of the organization.

Together, these three positions: hubs, gatekeepers and favor in support of the status quo. Shifting a culture into significant and lasting change represents a substantive challenge. It is completely surmountable if one can persuade the key connectors that reside within the social networks of the office culture to support the change. In the three government cases presented, we measured the office networks and identified the key connectors within them. The key connectors were “unusual” in that they were unlikely candidates to serve on change committees. But ask them we did, and they served. Once engaged in proactive change efforts, their trusted status was uniformly reflected in behaviors throughout the office, making alignment with new organizational objectives achievable in a six month time period—far shorter than the usual two to four year change cycle.

Cultural Shift

When we measure social networks, what we actually “see” are the aggregated, vestigial remains of trusted connections among a network of people. When properly tracked, these traces of trust derive from three robust patterns, which, like DNA, shift the genetic cultural code to produce lasting change. These naturally occurring patterns are way stations through which information gets processed, but which are invisible to the naked eye. We share these same prototypical patterns with our ancient ancestors.

- The first repeating pattern is to be central, like in a hub-and-spoke system (read: the egocentric network). Hubs are connectors who have one-on-one relationships in an organization. They are typically those team members who know everyone in their department very well, and, in general, are repositories for local knowledge. Since they know where the best resources are, they act as clearinghouses of information and ideas. This pattern rapidly and efficiently distributes information. (Sometimes too fast...).

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Together, these three positions: hubs, gatekeepers and
pulse-takers, HGP, comprise the DNA of any culture (see Fig. 4). We are all connected in one way or another, and some of us more than others. If the social networks of the workplace were to be measured, then every worker would possess a statistical profile of network connection complementing but not overlapping a 360-cross evaluation assessment. A 360-cross evaluation only gets at part of a person’s network. My recommendation would be to combine the normal suite of performance metrics with a social capital analysis approach. This approach, in my opinion, comes very close to capturing the total human asset’s contribution to organizational performance. Those individuals with more statistically significant profiles in one or a combination of the three network positions are able to catalyze change by virtue of their social capital profile, as they are more trusted and therefore more likely to be believed. If you are going to conduct change, then you want to have the ear of these key connectors.

Key connectors are usually unaware of their own influence, and most people surrounding them are also unaware of them. So why can’t we recognize these connectors? For the same reasons we have only a partial understanding of the information contained in our surrounding networks — because we see only “our” part of the whole map. We can’t see whole organizational networks simply because humans are not omniscient and unable to see critical connections with only one set of eyes. But a smart methodology can be our second set of eyes.

Social capital analysis offers an intelligent and comprehensive approach incorporating social network analysis (in particular, see Kleiner’s 2002 article in Strategy+Business on Stephenson). Our workplaces are becoming less about place and more about connection and mobility, making social capital analysis an essential approach for aligning office networks with business outcomes.

THE END OF THE OFFICE

In the late 1700s, social theorist Jeremy Bentham promoted the idea of architectural panopticons as a panacea and cure for the social ills of the day. His basic idea was this: a panopticon is a type of building that allows an observer to observe (opticon) all (pan-) those occupants (prisoners, students, employees, etc.) without the occupants knowing it. He felt that with close observation and accompanying diagnosis, social ills could be identified, treated and cured.

Variants of his inspiration surround us today in the way we construct our prisons, hospitals, schools, yes, even Dilbert Land. Candidly, the politicians of “transparency” are merely employing this several-hundred-year-old idea by dressing it up in 21st century rhetoric. Transparency by any other name is a panopticon. In the language of design, a panopticon is called hierarchical planning and gives rise to shaping space into six- and eight packs, creating the office landscape derided in Dilbert Land. Presently, Mr. Bentham’s panopticon has devolved to a government requirement of 165 sq. ft. in the “modern” office. Although the calculus of space has changed over time, it was always predicated upon how smart you made the space. In today’s thinking, the smarter the space, the less you need.

Several hundred years later, the philosopher Michel Foucault’s premise of knowledge architecture was blended with...
Bentham’s idea of an architectural panopticon in his comparative analyses of the construction of prisons, asylums and educational institutions. Foucault was less focused on a calculus of space and more on a calculus of institutional power hidden within the panopticon. He suggested that the purpose of downwardly individualizing techniques — such as examinations, interviews and confessions (the tools of a managerial class) — were used by the institution to deconstruct the individual. “Discipline” was about the methodical breakdown, assessment and reassembling of a person into the institution’s ideal image of what an “individual” member or citizen should be. Individual decision-making is a ruse: who lives and who dies is decided by institutions (e.g., for an anthropological viewpoint on this, read Mary Douglas’s Princeton lecture series). A thorough reading of Foucault’s writings on the mechanics of institutional power are so unsettling that anyone who deeply understood them, they turn about and run as fast as they could in the opposite direction and never look back! Both Bentham and Foucault’s theses were predicated on the domestication of the individual confined within an office or workspace, where both the space and knowledge were fixed. What neither of them foresaw was a Pandora’s box of change — the unleashing and mobilizing of information and worker. We can’t go back in the box.

And then there came GPS. With information mobility, cloud computing and the soft monitoring of people through GPS tracking devices, the need for fixed office spaces and knowledge storage all but evaporated. With a new class of mobile and remote workers on the rise, it becomes imperative to measure social networks. The act of measuring is not about controlling a mobile workforce, but about recognizing them for the contributions they provide through collaborative work in new workplaces or repurposed spaces: home, hotel or cafe, mobile (road, rail or air) or fixed (office, hoteling or conferencing).

What happened in Tahrir Square is being replicated in micro increments throughout the world of work. By way of example, the newly elected mayor of Lexington, Kentucky transformed Lexington’s cavernous city hall so that there are no walls, only scattered desks interspersed with tables. The Mayor has turned tables on Bentham, and allows himself to be seen at his desk and in meetings. This is one approach. No Dilbert Land in Lexington.

The transformation of scientific work at the NIH is another example of change. Here a scientific workforce is being directed to think about the workplace for the next two generations of scientists, with one caveat — to build that workplace now. One thing is certain: the way the administration of science is conducted today in twenty buildings and several campuses will not be the way it is conducted tomorrow. It is a perfect storm. The NIH is never going back to the way things were. Although the transformation is still not complete, the corner office is being packed up and sent to the Smithsonian museum.

Hopefully, these few examples will percolate in the reader’s mind about the power of social networks and why we must develop consistent measurements for them. Closing the gap between measurement and performance is more important than ever because of the dual mobility of information and worker in a digitized landscape. In the past and present world of work, people came together and were always held together by the force of trust. Trust, once formed, was and still is flexible and can be stretched across a floor plan, a campus, a world. The revolution in Tiananmen, Tahrir, and now the office, is not just a revolution about technology and ideas, but a reminder as to why we are compelled to connect in the first place. Trust trumps technology. Never forget that. Being virtual simply reminds us of how important trusted connection is and has always been and will continue to be. Let us seize the moment in understanding this total transformation (or evaporation) of the office. To measure what is so profoundly human and critical to work — the trusted connection — is to appreciate, not depreciate, the total human asset. For many of you who already live in this mobile virtual world, you know what this recognition and validation means to the world of work. You are a harbinger of what is to come.

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The yin and yang of connection through two opposing forces of heterarchy and homophily can be read in Stephenson’s 2009 article on heterarchy, entitled “Neither Hierarchy nor Network, People and Strategy, 31, 4, 4—13. For a mathematical version of diversity, read Karen Stephenson and David Lewin’s “Managing Workforce Diversity: Macro and Micro Level HR Implications of Network Analysis” in The International Journal of Manpower, 1966, 17(4/5), 168—196.


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