



THE QUEEN

OF CONNECT

Dr Karen Stephenson is a corporate anthropologist and one of the leading experts in social networks in business. Here, she discusses the importance of informal links, trust, and why freelancers are early indicators of the future of work

"Freelancers have to be very astute at understanding the cultural structures of the organisation in which they're working, while at the same time maintaining their independence," says Dr Karen Stephenson. "Freelancers are a lot like anthropologists in that way – always studying culture but not being part of one."

Dr Stephenson is a corporate anthropologist and a leader in the growing field of social network business consultants. She received her PhD in Anthropology at Harvard University, and has an MA in Anthropology from the University of Utah. In 2001, her consulting firm Netform was recognised as one of the top 100 leading innovation companies by CIO. In 2007, she was one of only three women recognised from a shortlist of 55 in Random House's Guide to the Management Gurus.

During this time, Stephenson has worked with a variety of companies – from JP Morgan and Hewlett Packard, to the LA police department. After 9/11, she worked for the Pentagon attempting to understand the hidden relationship structures in the al Qaeda network.

For any company, there is the recognised hierarchy of connections created from the 'who manages who' structure. But as an expert in human networks and building links of trust, for Stephenson it is just as important for an organisation to understand its informal connections. These are the links that determine the people you trust at work rather than just the people you report to.

"The genesis of a network is built on trust. It can take 20 years to build trust and two seconds to destroy it," says Stephenson. "It's these links that combine to form the network of human trust in a company and controls the flow of ideas which are the lifeblood of any business.

"You have to visualise and measure networks so that an organisation can appreciate them, value them, and leverage them for better and more effective performance," says Stephenson. "The aim is to create better synergy between the formal structures and the ever-present informal networks. If you map and measure these networks, you can understand them, appreciate what they do and create the synergy – that way, you become a more powerful organisation as you become more effectively aligned."

To reveal these hidden networks, Stephenson first conducts a survey asking employees questions such as: who do you go to for a quick decision or who do you hang out with socially? Then, using a software programme she developed and designed, Stephenson is then able to analyse the results to reveal the feuds, disputes, relationships that prove so important to the cultural wellbeing of a company. The exercise takes around 30 days although as Stephenson reminds us: "it took me 30 years of research to develop a methodology that now only takes 30 days".

Stephenson herself is far from a corporate fixture. She is president of Netform, but it's a software company of one as she is the face of it. Her 'employees' are her licensees and practitioners that are globally distributed. The main office is in New York, but Stephenson lives an almost migratory lifestyle, landing at the Rotterdam School of Management to deliver seminars, or jetting off on consultation gigs at corporate HQs in Brazil, China and around Europe. You'd have a half-decent chance of catching up with her in Spain when she visits her residence every couple of months.

"I've been in this migratory pattern for a good 20 years," says Stephenson. "In fact, my son was raised to always have everything he needed in a backpack next to him – you never know when you need to leave a country in a hurry."

At least we'll know where she'll be on 23 November 2011. For National Freelancers Day, Dr Stephenson will be at the hall of the London Symphony Orchestra delivering the Freelance Lecture.

"The freelance style of working is very interesting," says Stephenson. "You can mobilise people, that's one thing. But when you mobilise information through cloud computing, you've now got mobilised information and mobilised people.

"Because of this, I think that freelancers are early indicators of where the future of work is headed as they've already embraced the change. On the other hand, it's difficult for people within an organisation transitioning to mobile work for the first time. Freelancers have an embedded competency which will become increasingly sought after in the 21st century. They may not appreciate it now, but they already have what organisations want for tomorrow.

But with all this talk about mobility, remote working, better connectivity and video conferencing, how come Stephenson spends so much time as a migratory worker?

"It comes back to the trust we have with one another," she says. "I've adjusted to migratory travelling anyway but still we need those face-to-face meetings to establish trust. I've just come off a video conference call which was very useful – but only because we've all met before and know each other well. The trust was there – you can sense it in the conversations."

But aren't freelancers at a disadvantage when it comes to building trust thanks to having less time with people.

"Not at all," says Stephenson. "First, trust can be transferred – which is why referrals for freelancers are so important. Also, I think that people working as employees for an organisation often take for granted having to work together. It's like breathing. For freelancers, however, it's more like physical exercise – the more they work on building trust effectively and quickly the better they get at it. And if you're always changing projects, you get lots of chance to exercise it. For me, that's why freelancers can do it faster, better and more economically.

Dr Karen Stephenson is one of the keynote speakers for the Freelance Lecture on 23 November 2011. For further details go to www.nationalfreelancersday.org.uk

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