



# An introduction to networking

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## Introduction

Networks are good at filling ‘structural holes’, the gaps between formalised systems, and by doing so create social capital – a value that exists only through the network and not resting in any individual or organisation. They do this by linking people with a common interest, allowing them to reach beyond their immediate connections. These people will not be equal – some will have more resources, others are more connected, but all can contribute to the overall goal of the network.

Members of a network have a two-way communication between each other. This can be in paper form (journals), electronic form (e-mail), social media (e.g. Facebook), or, best of all, face-to-face. The best ways for network members to interconnect will depend on the network’s purpose, size, and geographical spread.

A network depends on a sufficient number of its members being active enough to create the social capital. For this to happen, its members have to not only see this benefit but also perceive a personal benefit from the network. This individual benefit need not be financial; it could be an enhanced reputation or feeling a sense of community. This is because networks are not normally hierarchical so traditional management methods are not effective – network members are largely self-motivating.

In the world of work, organisations create networks and provide their resources. However, the functioning of the network still relies on individuals who still need to see a benefit for themselves as well as the social capital. At the same time the organisation(s) providing the network’s resources – the worker’s time, the ICT resources, the meeting costs – also need to see a benefit. Unfortunately, the benefits of a network are often ‘soft’ (e.g. influence) and the costs are ‘hard’ (i.e. money), which can make justifying a network difficult.

## A network typology

Networks are by their nature flexible so a typology cannot be too rigid, they may have more than one role or may include subnetworks that carry out more discrete functions that are reflected in this typology.

- Support network – A network whose prime purpose is to support the needs of the membership. The members may be doing a particular job (a community of practice) or victims of an event or medical condition. Typically, such networks tend to be informal and inward looking.
- Advocacy network – A network whose main goal is to communicate beyond the membership – either for mass communication or for more targeted lobbying. Such networks need a controlling core to ensure coherence of communication.
- Content network – A network whose purpose is to develop content for sharing either within or outside the network. Such networks usually have a central core that has an editing function. For example, the network collects data to make a meta-analysis.
- Collaboration network – a large loose structure that allows flexibility of communication and collaboration within it. Such a network is often a framework within which other arrangements (such as consortia) are made to carry out more focused work.

Using these ideas, we can map the profile of a network to illustrate the focus of a network’s activity. The network represented by the dashed line below is largely supporting its members while carrying out some awareness-raising work. By contrast, the network represented by the solid line is one that is creating content and then disseminating it. Both could be dealing with the same issue but carrying out different functions.

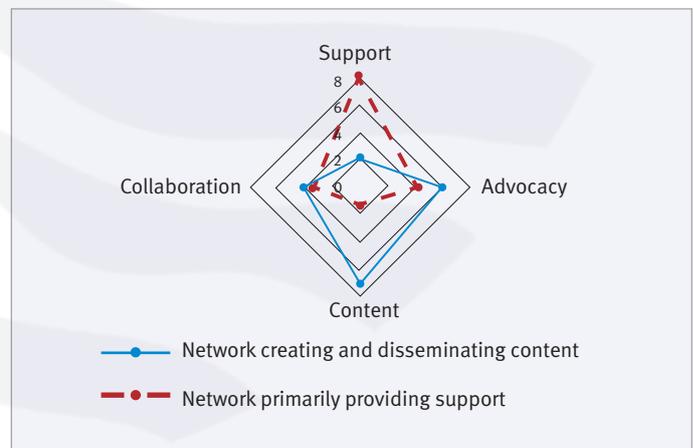


Figure 1 Network profiles

## Network size and structure

What a network wants to achieve influences its size and structure. A network to provide support tends to be small and intimate, with little or no formal roles. By contrast a production network may need very clear role definition (authors, editor, process manager). An advocacy network is likely to be larger and may need to have a core group (e.g. steering committee) to ensure the core messages are correct and suitably targeted. Networks that are more formal may have a hierarchical structure with subgroups reporting to plenary. Ideally, a network will have enough social cohesion (“strong ties”) to support its members, while still having sufficient “weak ties” to gain new information.

The network will have to choose appropriate communication methods to balance speed of communication with volume depending on the network goals. This can range from the format of conference + official journal for formal scientific networks to regular morning coffee + instant messaging for small support groups.

## Network Membership

In any network, there is a natural loss of members over time that has to be balanced by an inflow of new members. There is no optimum number for network membership – this will depend on the network’s goals. When membership is too small, core tasks are not done, and when too big the network starts to splinter into smaller groups. Membership criteria may be necessary, for example to keep the focus on a particular subject or to keep a balance (e.g. one member per EU Member State), but membership criteria (including membership fees) are barriers to entry and so should be kept to a minimum.

## Networking resilience

Resilience is the term used to describe the ability of a network to function in the face of challenges to its operation. Perhaps the two greatest challenges to a resilience of a network are the over-reliance on a single person or organisation for the network’s resources, and the loss of engagement of network members.

To be resilient regarding resources, network tasks and the provision of resources should be divided between its members where possible. This means that if a network member is lost, or an organisation no longer offers support, then the network can continue to operate with a minimum of disruption. A contingency plan for the loss of key actors may be a good idea.

Continued engagement of network members can be achieved by regularly reviewing a network’s overall goals and discussing with its members (and their organisations) whether individual goals and needs are being met. This can allow the network to adjust its activities to meet changing needs. Such a review should also consider the best means of communication within the network.

The network should also be active in the promotion of its activities and the benefits for those involved. A high profile and prolific output make a network’s benefits more visible, so motivating its members to engage while at the same time making it more difficult for resources to be withdrawn.

## Evaluating networks

Networks should be evaluated to see if they are working and doing the job for which they are intended. To do this, it is necessary to be clear about the goals of the networks, and then identify available quantitative and qualitative indicators that reflect the network’s function.

Qualitative indicators may typically come from interviews with network members (e.g. through questionnaires or interviews) or persons with whom the network is engaging. Quantitative indicators, depending on the function of the network, may include communication indicators (e.g. social media posts), product indicators (e.g. how many case studies have been published and read), support indicators (e.g. frequency of communication within the network), action indicators (e.g. how many events have been organised by network members).

Other indicators include reputational indicators (how is the network perceived, and how many people want to join the network), lobbying indicators (e.g. how often do network members get access to key stakeholders), and networking measurements (mathematically calculated indicators such as centrality).

## Conclusion

Networks can be highly effective tools, particularly at filling ‘structural holes’ – the gaps between formalised systems. While they are flexible and can appear unstructured, they still need to be effectively managed, with clear goals, structure, and process. Those managing a network should be looking at the long-term sustainability of the network by examining its resilience and by regularly reviewing the network’s goals and performance.

## Selected bibliography

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