NETWORKS

Nigel here is a bottleneck.

The CEO is a trusted advisor but their failure to delegate has created a bottleneck.

The warehouse is a silo with few external links except Elvis.

THIS IS ELVIS YOUR SECRET WEAPON

Staff are asked: Who do you rely on to get your work done. The results are turned into a matrix map. Map is illustrative only.

Elvis's large bubble shows he has the most connections.

Elvis is the link between two departments.

HR mostly consists of enclosed one way relationships.

This finance clique is largely isolated from the rest of the business.

KEY

One way relationships

Two way reciprocal relationships

Warehouse

HR

IT

Finance

Sales

The CEO

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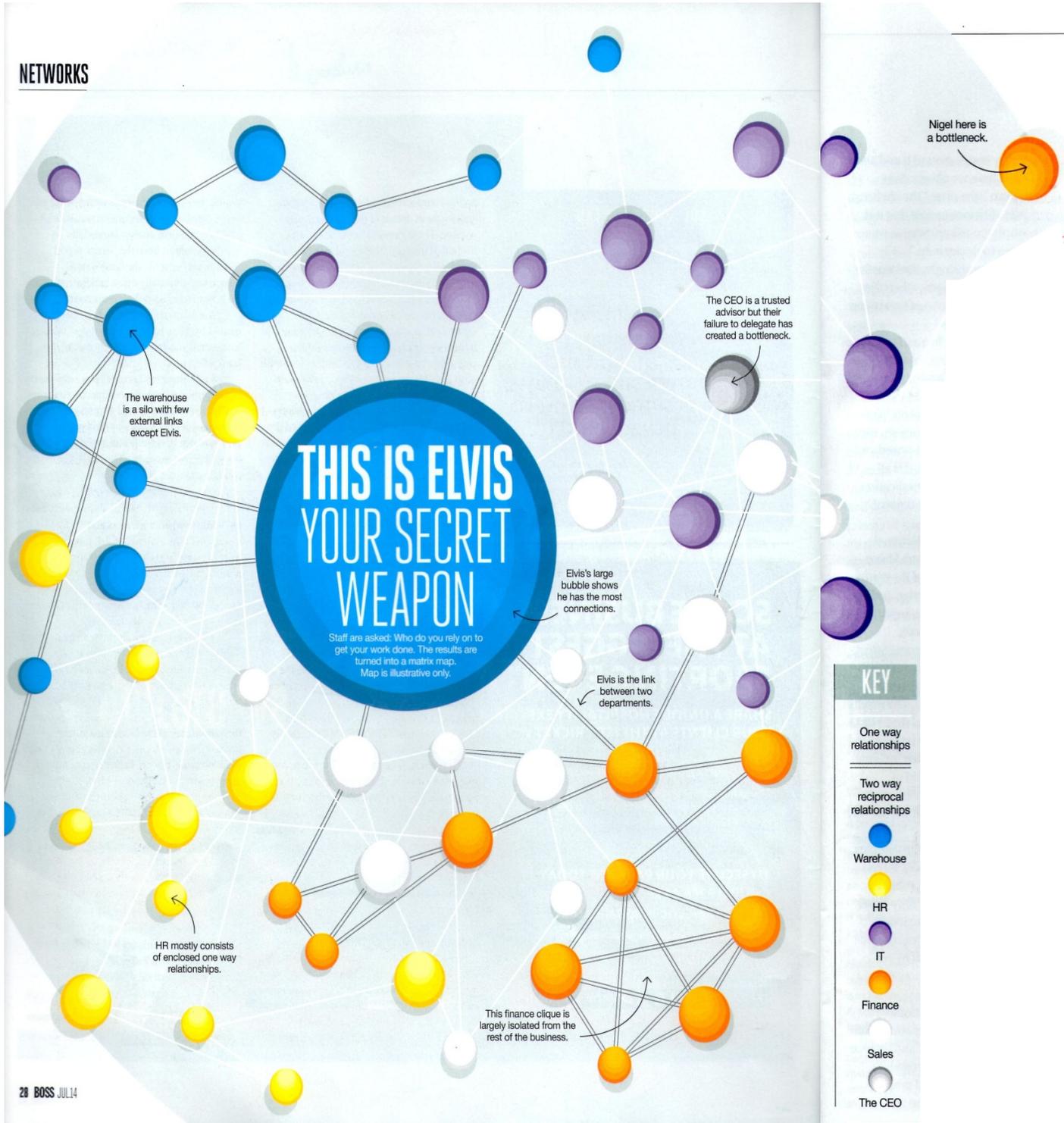
This is Elvis Your Secret Weapon

Social Network analysis can reveal that your most important employee is someone you've never heard of.

Story: Patrick Durkin

Elvis could well be one of the keys to survival for beleaguered airline Qantas. A floor worker in the airline's Sydney supply warehouse, Elvis is more connected than practically anyone else in the organisation. His opinion counts.

It makes him the secret weapon in the airline's flight to accelerate change and stay ahead of the competition.

Elvis's influence comes as no surprise to those co-workers alongside him or those in other divisions who regularly liaise with him or rely on him for advice.

Not that management had any idea about Elvis's influence. In fact, most executives have no idea that these trusted advisers, key within their company, let alone who they are.

"These people have the ability to accelerate change or to kill it," says Caj Kjaer, co-founder of Optimice and the many behind one of the new social mapping tools.

Companies' secret powerbrokers are being discovered through simple online surveys that ask staff to choose the 10 people they work most closely with and answer questions such as, "How do you feel after interacting with that colleague; energised or drained?"

"Management just doesn't know what the social dynamics are, lower down in the organisation," Kjaer says. "This is the employees' unfiltered views about who talks to whom, who works with whom and whose opinion matters. These maps are providing management with this data in a way that pinpoints those hidden links, "Kjaer says.

Companies including Qantas, Telstra and Lend Lease are turning to data analytics to uncover these invisible social networks to look beyond their organisational chart and discover how their company really works.

"You know when you find a really good invention, which seems unbelievably obvious, you think, 'why didn't someone think of doing this before?'," Natalie Slessor, who heads a new workplace team at Lend Lease says.

The completed network maps are rendered as 3D lattices that can be viewed across a whole organisation or focused on a single team. The ability to visualise relationships is helping to overcome resistance by management to "fuzzy" concepts about innovation and collaboration.

"Measurements in my world are very hard to find," Slessor says. "To demonstrate success is like the Holy Grail and these maps could be one of the key ways going forward," she says.

The social network maps are enabling companies to identify key personnel such as Elvis and ensure the right messages are being filtered down during water cooler discussions. "Motivators" such as Elvis can help bring "fence sitters" on board and minimise the impact of "detractors" of change or new ideas.

"People go to Elvis and you need to have a conversation about why they go to him," Sandra Nieuwenhuijzen, head of the supply division at Qantas says.

"The next step [after compiling the network map] was I invited all the big bubbles [those people with lots of connections] to a monthly collaboration forum," Nieuwenhuijzen says. "I did a quiz on what our goals are. They all got zero," she says. "But the quiz communicated the goals to these connected people who really have influence and I asked them to take an action and talk to someone about what they had learnt. Elvis went back to his team and did a session on the goals for our supply chain division. Now everyone knows those goals."

As with Qantas warehouse workers Elvis, the exact profile of these secret powerbrokers is impossible to predict. "Most people don't know that they are powerbrokers," Kjaer says.

"They are often humble and extremely surprised, they just go about doing 'their thing'. They may be the head nerd in the IT department or the employee who makes the most sales, but often management just doesn't see them," Kjaer says.

Their low profile means that when consultants restructure organisations based on the old-style hierarchy or "a last-in, first-out" redundancy program, management can unknowingly strip out the key connectors such as Elvis because they do not understand the role these people play.

One often-quoted US case study involves a low-level administrator who was terminated in a cost-cutting exercise. After her departure, the organisation found she was the hub for millions of dollars in sponsorship and trade show contacts, most of which were lost when she left.

The network maps also identify red flags within organisations, Social network analytics are being used after mergers and amalgamations to reveal which employees might be proving sticking points in the transition. The maps expose isolated cliques of workers who may not be collaborating with the rest of their teams or preventing other networks from flourishing.

"We had another employee who has a big bubble," Qantas's Nieuwenhuijzen says.

"Everyone went to that person but he didn't have any reciprocal relationships, so he had become a bottleneck."

Kjaer says people are surprised how often these bottlenecks are C-suite executives.

Bottlenecks are people everyone goes to, to get their job done, but are failing to properly delegate or quickly make decisions.

"People come to them because they are passionate experts about the subject matter within the company, whether it is engineering drawings or the particular product being sold. They have typically taken on a management role in order to advance their career but everyone still comes to them because they are know for their expertise and their social network. They end up doing three different jobs at once, slow the work flow and end up burning out," Kjaer says.

Engineer Workplaces

One of the key objectives of these maps is to "engineer workplaces so that the right person can bump into each other". Much of the buzz around the field of social network analytics is based on long held theories such as 1970s research on the Allen curve.

"Once people sit more than 50 metres apart, the chances of interacting with each other drop to almost zero," Kjaer says. "If the right people aren't sitting in the same parts of the building that can absolutely quash collaboration and good ideas.

The idea of engineering "serendipity" became the buzz idea in Silicon Valley last year after Yahoo banned its employees from working from home. "Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings," the tech giant told its employees. Google's latest campus at its Mountain View headquarters epitomises the idea, with buildings that resemble bent rectangles to maximise "casual collisions of the work force".

Sydney's Barangaroo development is widely considered to be the first wholesale test case of social network analytics for corporate tenants in Australia, including Westpac, KPMG, Gilbert+Tobin and HSBC. The results could change the way we work, including office designs and a shift to activity-based working.

Despite the excitement of our leading workplace thinkers, most chief executives continue to be wary that such data should be used to make a radical shake-up of their office space or organisational structure. But they also risk being left behind if they wait too long.

"A lot of businesses are asking 'should we do activity-based working or not Is it actually worth it?" Lend Lease's Slessor says.

"Should we go flexible? Should we go activity based? Should we go home-working" Should we go open-plan? Who still needs an office? There is a lot of emotions and a lot of legacy issues around it and about what have we always done before," she says. "The challenge is to convince people that it is worth the risk and that is where these tools will help."

Not surprisingly, the benefits often only hit home when they convert to actual cost savings on the bottom line." Slessor emphasises. "The question for us is how do we save $14 million dollars each year and not piss everyone off. So on one side we have to be very hard-nosed and the other side is soft; it is all about people, communication and technology so it is a real balancing act."

Director of organisational development at Telstra, Helen Lea, has been head of the team orchestrating the design and fit-out for the telecommunication company's new Sydney headquarters on level 20 at 400 George Street.

The telecommunications giant asked each of its staff to complete an online survey in order to map their social networks. The results were combined with observational research and employees using "movement belts" to track how they travelled through the building. The work is part of the growing field of "people analytics" where smart-phone apps and other technology are used to track the way we work, talk and interact.

"These social maps can take quite complex data and package is quite beautiful. It has enabled us to map a significant number of relationships against variables we have never used before," Lea says.   "We have married these social network maps with observational work, the pattern of the movement of our people through the building and how the physical space is used,' Leas says.

The accepted orthodoxy, that human resources employees work and network as one team and information technology and finance as other teams, has all been challenged.

Scepticism about the continued push towards activity-based working and an emphasis on collaboration remains strong. US architecture firm Gensler recently published research which found that office design trends intended to foster collaboration – such as open offices or low-partition cubicles – can in fact inhibit production by consuming space and time employees might otherwise use to focus on specific tasks.

Kjaer agrees that simply seeking more collaboration is not the end goal of these social network maps. "People ask: 'what should our social network map look like?' It's like asking 'what should an X-ray of my body look like?'"

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Management needs to view the maps through the lens of what is going on at the company to create the right level of connectivity and best leverage of the social fabric of the business. They need to ask themselves: "it is six months after a merger and is there still a lack of connectivity between groups of employees? Is there a lack of innovation or group-think. Do we have an aging workforce so need to work out how to transition key people?"

Some say that staff will simply name their bosses for the network and that the maps only reflect one moment in time. Other managers claim they deal with hundreds of people, not just 10. However, the results of these maps are beginning to speak for themselves. Since Qantas employed these tools, the airline's supply-chain efficiency increased by 15 per cent and airline parts turnaround time halved from 26 to 13 days.

The unspoken reluctance by some to have their organisation mapped comes back to fear of how they will be perceived. "You can hide in a big office and behind a big title but there is nowhere to hide on these maps," Kjaer says.

"If you are serious about change, the first thing you need to know is what the reality is."

A workplace thinker at Lend Lease, Slessor is acutely aware of the scepticism with which others view her profession. But she is putting the force of her conviction behind these new network maps that may finally provide a breakthrough in measuring their success.

"The jury is still out [on these maps] but I have to say in my 20 years in the industry, this is probably the closest we have got to finding a really great way to measure the impact of the way we work."

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Connected leading
mobilise your organisation's network
by Hilary Armstrong, Institute of Executive Coaching

When you want to get some advice about the difficult deal, solve the problem or talk about a new idea, do you go to an expert or trusted colleague? Research tells us it is the known colleague who people go to. Our informal network is the one we rely on. It is the accumulation of myriad interactions every day at home and at work. The quality and the reach of this informal network is our social capital, with which we can access people we don't know and even work around people to achieve our goals.

Mapping the informal network begins 4 to 5 simple questions, answered online by employees in a network. For example, name the top 10 people who approach to get your work done; why you go to them (problem-solving, information, inspiration, sign off) and how critical each is to getting your work done.

By analysing these questions, social network analysis maps show where the information is flowing where there are roadblocks, identify which departments are collaborating on how much, who the essential links are between silos, who the change champion and key cultural motivators are and, most importantly, encourage people to think beyond their own roles and teams to consider the organisation as a whole. With this information a connected and networked leader can

- dramatically shift the culture from command and control to collaboration in a very short time
- ensure change and transformation stick and do not take several years to implement
 - build functional and cross-fertilisation across silos to enhance efficiency and innovation
- identify and grow your next generation of leaders (without spending huge dollars on individual assessment tools)
- ensure that the most significant people are retained in a restructure
- challenge habitual thinking and improve relationships in senior teams
- identify and mobilise organisation knowledge rather than sacrifice it in the change process..."

Are you are secret powerbroker?
(please select the answers that apply to you)

1. How often are you asked for your opinion or insight by colleagues?

A. Never or rarely	B. Sometimes	C. All the time

2. How important do you think your contribution is?

A. Useful	B. Important	C. Critical

3. What do you think is the primary reason why people ask for your input?

A. Formal review or approval	B. To provide information	C. To help solve the problem

4. How energised do you think your colleagues feel about you after they have spoken to you?

A. De-energised	B. Neutral	C. Energised

If you mostly answered

- **"A" (you are a bottleneck in your network,** ie lots of people need your say so to complete their work. But there are only so many hours in the day your in-tray is always overflowing)
- **"C" (you are a super influencer,** ie people come to you because they know that even if you don't have the answers to that question you'll know who they should be talking to)

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