

FURTHERING THE EXPLORATION OF INFORMATION BEHAVIOR: HIGH PERFORMING SALES AGENTS AND LINE MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the information seeking behaviors of a group of high performing sales agents working within a for-profit corporate culture. Qualitative methods were used to capture and analyze the social network data. The research results revealed that the primary reason for selecting an information source is the perceived knowledge and experience of the source. A low level of reliance on the high performing agent's manager for information was also uncovered. The agents will seek out the individuals they need with less thought to the relationships they may have with those individuals. This study builds on the results of two previous studies.

Keywords: Non-manager behavior, social network analysis, information seeking behavior.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper reports the results of a study that builds directly on the outcomes of two prior studies, all conducted within the same corporate environment. The first study (study #1) statistically compared the information behaviors of non-managers to line-managers working within the same business unit (Mackenzie 2003a). The results demonstrated a difference in how information need related to information behavior. Managers will accumulate information, regardless of whether there is an explicit need, to a significantly greater extent than will non-managers. The results also suggested that line managers gain access to information by maintaining cooperative and friendly relationships with colleagues, superiors and subordinates. Non-managers are cooperative and friendly at work to a significantly lesser degree than managers working in the same environment (Mackenzie 2003a). These results (study #1) led to a second study (study #2) focused solely on the information seeking behaviors of the line-managers. The results illustrated the social information dependency of the managers working within this defined business environment. Line-managers will rely more heavily on their relationships when seeking human information sources than any other factor.

The third study (study #3), briefly reported in these proceedings, builds on the results of the previous two studies. Using social network data, a group of interacting **non-managers** were interviewed to identify the factors that influence their selection of human information sources. The results from studies #1 and #2 established the managers' dependency on at-work relationships. The prior results provide the contextual contrast for comparison to the current study (study #3), which views professional **non-managers** working in the same business environment. The information behaviors of the non-managers may reflect a psychological contract (Rousseau 1995) that is more explicitly economic than for managers working in the same corporate culture. Understanding why one organizational actor draws information from

another and perhaps allows that individual to influence his or her thinking can provide insight for organizational leadership that may lead to improvement in information dissemination, corporate socialization, training and communication.

SUBJECTS

The site for this study is a sales regional office within a large US company. The subject group was comprised of twenty-one high performing sales agents (18 male and 3 female) from one sales territory. The subjects represented 100 % of the company's top award winners from the selected territory. This group of subjects will be referred to as the *focal* group for this study.

Each high performing sales agent reports to one of the five frontline sales managers within the selected sales territory. These five frontline sales managers report to the senior sales manager responsible for the entire sales territory. This senior sales manager is one of eight directly reporting to the regional vice president who is responsible for the sales performance within the regional office.

METHOD

This study captured social network data to qualitatively express the information relationships of the specific social network – namely a group of interacting high performing sales agents and their information ties (Hanneman 2001). This method uncovers the information seeking relationships and allows for observation of both the social and intellectual structure of the business environment. It allows for a more holistic view of the user. (Wilson 1981).

Two research questions directed this study:

1. What influences a high performing sales agent to seek and select an information source at work?
2. How do the information behaviors of non-managers and managers differ within the same business environment?

The data collection and analysis for this study followed the following steps:

1. The egocentric method (egos only) was determined to be the appropriate data collection method. It began with the focal nodes (egos) and then identified the nodes to which they were connected (Hanneman 2001, 8).
2. Each focal group agent was asked to think of and name the individuals within the company who he or she can depend on as sources of hard-to-get information or are credible sources or authorities. Next, each focal group agent was asked to provide at least one descriptive term or statement for each individual named that would tell me *why* the person was selected as an information source.
3. A social network map was constructed revealing the direction from each high performing agent toward each individual who was sought for information.
4. The descriptive statements expressing why the agents sought out the specified individuals as sources were coded and condensed and then categorized into the major themes.
5. Content analysis was selected as the data analysis technique to capture the patterns in the data. The elements of interest for this study were the themes within the data (Berg 1998).

RESULTS

The results are presented in two sections: first are the descriptive results from mapping the social network data and second, the reasons given by the high-performing sales agents for selecting certain individuals as information sources.

Social network data

The intent of this study was to focus on the high performing sales agents and to investigate their cognitive choices of human information sources. The data emerging from the social network mapping process revealed the information seeking choices made by a select group of interacting information users in context. Table 1 reports a consolidated list of the categories of sources selected by the high performing sales agents. [Note: Only twenty of the twenty-one subjects offered usable data.]

Table 1: Selected Sources: Manager, Agent or Employee

Category of source	# Times selected by focal group agent
Managers includes frontline managers, Sr. sales manager, vice president, corporate leaders	26
Agents includes agents who specialize in financial products	18
Non manager regional employees	7

Managers. The focal group agents named managers more often than non-managers as information sources. The lack of reciprocity as well as the low number of focal group agents selected as sources revealed that this group is not information *self-sufficient*. Seventeen of the twenty focal group agents named a manager as a source (85%), but only eleven named his or her own frontline manager (55%).

Agent Partners. An interesting observation from the study data was that the high performing agent's office partners were not more obvious and explicit information sources. Of the eight high performing agents in the focal group housed *with* partners, only two of the eight identified the agent housed in his office as an information source. The remaining six did not identify his or her partner as a source. None of these six agents are *partners* with agents who were also defined as high performing, which may suggest that they are not structural equivalents in the social network. Dabos & Rousseau suggest that structural equivalence exists when the individuals "occupy similar roles in the social system" and are "exposed to similar information and social demands" (2004, 7). By virtue of one partner being recognized as a top performer and the other partner not holding the same honor or position, the partners may not be structurally equivalent. Of the two high performing agents who did select their partners as sources, one was housed with another high performing agent, which suggests more structural equivalence in the social structure of the group. The other agent was housed with his father, who is a long-term agent.

Reasons for selecting an individual as an information source

When each high performing sales agent was interviewed and asked to *identify the individual(s)* within the company that can be depended upon as a source for information they were also asked

to *describe why*. One hundred and thirty four (134) descriptive statements were coded and condensed into 29 reasons. The 29 reasons were further condensed into seven themes that describe why a high performing agent selects certain individuals as information sources.

- **Knowledge:** An individual is selected as a source because of the knowledge and experience he or she possess. The information received from this individual can be trusted to be accurate. The individual is perceived as credible and honest.
- **Relationship:** An individual is selected as an information source because of the relationship he or she has with the subject, as well as with others in the organization. Confidentiality, trust, influence, and connectedness, are valued attributes of good relationships within the organization.
- **Active Information seeking:** An individual is selected as an information source because he or she is an active information seeker. He or she does not wait until information appears, but is an active researcher. He or she has a good idea on where to seek needed answers. If the individual needs information, he or she will go get it.
- **Communication Behavior:** An individual is selected as an information source because his or her behaviors reflect a willingness to share information. The individual may be viewed as sincere, caring, professional, dependable, reliable, easy to talk to, and willing to listen (e.g., good reputation).
- **Successful:** An individual is selected as an information source because he or she is perceived to be successful on the job or maintain a strong work ethic.
- **Cognitive Ability:** An individual is selected because of his or her cognitive ability. The individual may be viewed as intelligent with good business sense, good judgment, and insight.
- **Communication Style:** An individual is selected as an information source because his or her communication style is perceived as straightforward and decisive.

Although the qualitative nature of this method does not offer an opportunity to provide statistically significant quantitative results, I have provided a numeric breakdown in table 2 of the coded descriptive statements offered by the focal agent group.

Table 2: Numeric Comparison of Themes

Theme for selecting individual as information Source	# of descriptive statements offered by focal group agents	Percent of whole
Knowledge *	45	33.6%
Relationship	31	23.1%
Active Information Seeking *	19	14.2%
Communication Behavior	14	10.4%
Successful *	12	9.0%
Cognitive Ability *	9	6.7%
Communication Style *	4	3.0%
Total	134	

Dabos and Rousseau summarized the two main categories of network ties as instrumental and expressive. They defined instrumental ties as emerging from “work-related interactions” and expressive ties as arising from “emotional closeness such as friendship and personal support”

(2004, 12-13). I suggest that the broad concept of instrumental ties aligns more closely with the following categories of reasons offered by the focal group for selecting an information source:

- knowledge,
- active information seeking,
- successful,
- cognitive ability and
- communication style,
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while the concept of expressive ties aligns more closely with the remaining two categories of:

- relationship and
- communication behavior.

The reasons aligning with instrumental ties [*] captured two-thirds of the descriptive terms offered by the high performing agents when selecting an information source, with the remaining one-third aligning with the concept of expressive ties. These results suggest that this information user group has a more economic focus to information seeking than line-managers working within the same business environment.

DISCUSSION

An important result emerging from this study is the low level of reliance on the high performing agent's own manager for information. Of the 20 focal group agents, only eleven named his or her own frontline manager (55%) as a source. Reflecting on the informal vs. the formal network, this study's data suggests that the formal roles are *less* meaningful to these high performing agents and that they seek sources not primarily because of relationship, as revealed with the previous study focused on the line-managers (Mackenzie 2005), or the hierarchical structure, as defined by the company (agent – manager reporting relationship), but primarily on the knowledge and experience that the individual source possesses. The results suggest that these high performing agents (who demonstrate company defined goal attainment) seek individuals who can provide accurate information.

The role of the frontline sales manager in this business environment is to support the agent by providing information, recommendations and support for goal attainment. These results can therefore suggest that there may be an organizational “disconnect” between the company's view of the frontline sales manager's role and that of the most successful agent in the sales territory.

Another interesting outcome is that 17 of the 20 focal group agents *did* include the name of a manager as a source (85%) although only 55% named his or her own manager. In addition, 5 of the 20 focal group agents (25%) named managers above the level of frontline manager, suggesting that they will seek information, if needed, from the regional vice president, the company's president, other corporate leaders and even the CEO.

The results suggest that a high performing agent may feel less constrained by an imposed corporate structure if the information needed is what may lead him or her to goal attainment. These agents, by virtue of their status as high performing agents, may not need to abide by the

norms associated with the more traditional information sources made available to them by the formal corporate reporting structure.

In this particular for-profit network the selection of an information-resource by a high performing agent is not as heavily influenced by *relationship*. Although relationship is a valued factor, knowledge and experience is valued to a greater extent by this information user group. It suggests a more economic focus for information seeking when compared to the results found within the line-manager social network (Mackenzie 2005), which reflected information behaviors that were less aggressive in moving outside the normative social boundaries.

CONCLUSION

The results of the current study reveal the differences in information seeking behaviors between individuals who choose to be managers and those who do not. The results could begin to suggest that the focal group of information users is less of a network and more of a group of independent, self-reliant individuals. Although these individuals have worked together for many years (averaging 20 years), the economic relationships to the larger organization are based on achieving very specific, measurable and objective goals. Each high performing agent is rewarded based on individual performance. The performance of one agent has minimal impact on the explicit performance of another agent. This is reflected in the low-level of reciprocity and reliance on the defined hierarchy. Although these agents value their relationships at work, the primary influence on information seeking is economic and objective, and less shrouded in politics. Each of these successful agents has learned how to succeed in this environment. This study reveals the informal communication paths and behaviors, which may result in more heterogeneous learning, rather than standardized learning, which is more evident in competitive sales cultures (Tangirala & Ramanujam 2004) where individual rewards are doled out.

A management lesson offered from this study is for leadership to be more aware of the information behaviors of those individual agents who are able to successfully meet the most demanding goals established by the company. Increased understanding may permit the development of information delivery and communication systems (formal and informal) that reflect the needs of this economically valued information user group. Studying success at work may permit processes that allow a greater percentage of frontline agents to meet demanding corporate objectives.

References available upon request from Maureen Mackenzie.