

Leeds University Business School: Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 56 – What are work social networks and how do they relate to hybrid working?

Speakers: Dr Matthew Davis and Dr Helen Hughes

[00:00:00] **Matt:** Hello and welcome to the Research and Innovation podcast. I'm Dr Matthew Davis.

[00:00:11] **Helen:** And I'm Dr Helen Hughes.

[00:00:14] **Matt:** And today we're going to be talking about social networks and hybrid working. We'll be linking it and sharing some of the research we've been doing recently and hopefully explain to you why we should all care a bit more about the networks we build and have at work, and the role they play in our and other people's experience of work.

So I'm really delighted that we have the opportunity to talk to Helen about this today. Helen's an expert in social networks and behaviour at work. And Helen, for people who may be listening who maybe understand a bit what social networks are, they've heard of, use Facebook and Twitter, have heard the term. What do we mean in a work context? What's the social network? Why do they matter?

[00:00:54] **Helen:** It's really interesting. So social networks and social media are not the same thing. So just to sort of clarify that upfront, our social networks are who we go to for different things. So we will have lots of different types of network in the workplace.

They'll be people we go to because they're our friends and we like them and we enjoy their company. There'll be people we go to and seek advice from because our jobs are interrelated in some way, and I can't do my work without going to this other person. There'll be networks and relationships that we have because we need to go to somebody for approval or sign-off on something. And there's a whole heap of other types of relationship.

But when we think about networks in the workplace and specifically network analysis, which is what we've been doing in this research, we're trying to map that and plot that. And what that means, if you can imagine that we end up with these maps or images of organizations that look almost like dots on a page with lines between them, and the dots represent people and the lines represent some kind of connection or tie between these people.

And when we plot that, we can start to understand how well connected people are. So are some people more central in that network than others, are some people on the periphery? And we can use that to inform our strategy and our decision making and our operations.

[00:02:12] **Matt:** That's great. Thanks Helen. That is becoming clear as we've got these networks and maps in our mind of who goes to who and why. So why does that matter. Does it matter if you are well connected, not connected and is there an ideal network? So is there a gold standard we should all try and have?

[00:02:30] **Helen:** Yeah. And again, that's a really good question. So the short answer is yes, they matter. Our networks really do matter. They affect how we feel about our work. They affect how we get our work done. So, if you can imagine if, if I need to go to you, but there are three or four different people that I have to speak to before I can reach you, then that's not very efficient. That's going to take a lot of time.

If the person I need to go to I have to go through others and one of those people is off, that creates inefficiencies. So yes, they do matter. They affect the quality of innovation, the quality of performance, and there's lots of research that's demonstrated that.

The question of "is there an ideal network?" is a slightly more nuanced one because, actually what we know from this is that context really matters. So, you know, there is some sort of absolutes, but actually in most cases, "it depends", is going to be the sort of the nub of it, because...

Matt: That's a cheating answer Helen, a cheating answer.

Helen: Well, the reason for that is because the effectiveness of your network is also depending on your strategy. So you may say, well actually you know, in one particular context it's really important that everybody knows everybody and is connected to everybody.

But you can imagine for a different piece of work, that same network structure could be really inefficient. Because actually not everybody does need to speak to everyone. Perhaps everyone needs to know who they should go to when they need to, but they don't need to be speaking to them all the time. So, the context of strategy really does matter, and that's why I'm saying it depends.

[00:04:01] **Matt:** That's great. Thank you Helen. And let's have a think then about why and how networks might relate to hybrid working, the types of offices and work patterns we have and why this matters. And if I just set the context: so we've been working together with colleagues for two years around adapting offices and how spaces are changing in response to changing work patterns.

So we gathered interview data, survey data, diary data, and also this social network data, that's really interesting, isn't it? Asking people about their patterns of communications, who they speak to daily and weekly, where they sit in offices across a number of organizations. Do you want to share with us maybe what we can take from all that data and analysis to answer the question of how space in the office might affect your professional network, your personal networks at work?

[00:04:53] **Helen:** Yeah, so we, I mean, I think if you can sort of imagine work pre-covid, which many people are now finding tricky to do, but you know, if you imagine work pre-covid and you are perhaps in an office environment, you would know that, you know, you go to certain people because you have to, because you have to get your work done.

But actually there are some people that perhaps you go to because speaking to them helps you do that work better, but actually, you don't necessarily you know, you are not necessarily in meetings with them. You just bump into them in certain situations. Covid and hybrid working has changed some of those dynamics of how we seek and share advice.

And, so this is why it was really important for us to do this part of the network study. Because what we are trying to understand is whether people speak to and collaborate in the same ways in a hybrid environment. And there's perhaps a couple of things that we can take out of this.

And one is that the kind of amount of time that you are in the office seems to affect your centrality, in the network. So that means that the more, you know, for different patterns of, of hybrid working affect how central you are. And that's quite important from a policy design perspective and so on.

Because if you are just saying to everyone, "right, you just need to be in the office", and actually that's not data driven, that that can be really, really problematic. We also know that where you sit in an office affects your centrality. And I'll give you an example of this. We know that, if you sit close by, you know, some people or sit in certain parts of the office, you're more likely to speak to others who are co-located in that part of the office.

And again, that has implications for how you design policies on the space when you are in, so we've heard of, for instance, in our project, people saying "when people are in, we want them all to sit with their team members". And actually, whilst that sounds like a really intuitive good idea, if the network is holding out in a remote environment for those kind of collaborations, perhaps this, when you have them in the office, they're actually better interspersed with teams that they're less likely to come across in their day-to-day meetings. And, and so yeah, these are the kind of things that we're finding with the network study.

[00:06:57] **Matt:** So crucially then spending more time in the office seems to, to mean that people are more central in their networks in terms of how they're connected, the policies that firms use. So when people are in, or if you're having hot desking policies and so on, where people co-locate can really shape, these patterns of interaction, who, you know, who you go to.

[00:07:17] **Helen:** Yeah, that's absolutely right. But I think it is important to also point out one or two of these quite nuanced effects that we've also found.

And, and one of those, for instance, is that it's not always quite as straightforward as saying the more you are in the office, the better it is for your network. For instance, we found that

with new starters in the workplace they very often, you know, it mattered to them that they were in the office, but it wasn't about how frequently they were in the office.

It was about who was in the office at the same time as them. So in a sense, it didn't matter if they were in five days a week if nobody else that they needed to speak to or could bump into is in the space as well. So, it's another kind of, "it depends" answer.

[00:07:56] **Matt:** That's really interesting. Helen, just thinking about different outcomes. Were there any other groups who seemed to have a different experience? In the people that we studied.

[00:08:04] **Helen:** Yeah, so, so certainly this is something that we're quite keen to continue to unpick. We did find some indicators of gender effects. For instance, we found that males in the network seemed to be able to build their network more quickly than females did.

And we also found some interesting and potentially worrying effects for certain minority groups in the workplace. Which showed us that people in certain minority groups tended to be less connected than those in others. And that's really, really worrying for organizations. But it also gives opportunities to recognize this and help bring people in.

[00:08:39] **Matt:** Thanks, Helen. And I know there's so much more in terms of the analysis and data sitting behind this, but I'm going to be mean and ask you just to think about the top three tips that you might offer for employers. I'd be really interested in this, grappling with the question of how do we make hybrid work? How do we make sure people aren't disadvantaged? People feel connected? What three tips would you give based on what we've been doing?

[00:09:02] **Helen:** Yeah, so, I'm also going to say at this point that if you read our report, there are considerably more than three top tips which hopefully would be useful.

But if I just pick out a couple, the first is going back to one of the earlier points I made, which I think if you are going to start exploring your networks, take some time to think about what good looks like. Because one of the things people sometimes do is they sort of just measure something and then decide right "we're going to throw the baby out with the bath water and just change everything; it all needs to be better."

But really think about what better and good actually means in your context. Just because everybody isn't connected doesn't necessarily mean that's a bad thing. So it really just depends what you're looking to achieve. So spend some time thinking about what good means.

The second thing I would say as a tip is think about how you are going to change that. If you do decide you, you want to shape your networks in your organization, think about whether you want to do that from a kind of very managerial perspective, and sort of design the network, because we found that you can do that to some extent.

So as I said, your policy can shape your, your networks your workspace design, the physical environment can shape your networks. And so can the design of particular teams. So, who's in the team, who's not in the team, who's going to certain meetings, who's not?

But think about whether you actively want to manage that, because there is certainly some value in the kind of nudging, just getting people to think about their networks and reflect on this in a different way also has some value. So think about whether you want to nudge it and encourage reflection, or whether you actively want to manage it, because you can have these unintended consequences that you maybe didn't want.

And the final thing I would say is, as a manager, also pay attention to your own networks because your leadership networks are really, really important and they play a crucial part in kind of shaping the networks of others. So don't underestimate the value that you have as a leader.

If you are only going to people that sort of share a similar world view to you, then it's likely that that will transcend through your organization. And it might mean that you are at risk of missing some of that diversity of thought that you could really benefit from.

They would be my three top tips, but as I said, there's plenty more in our report.

[00:11:16] **Matt:** Thanks, Helen. I know there's so much more that we could talk about with this and, and it's really interesting in terms of how all the change we're living through at the moment is playing out and what that means for how we interact and how we can share knowledge with one another.

So with that though, I think we're out of time and what I'd like to do is just say thank you to the Economic and Social Research Council for funding our Adapting Offices project and the research we conducted. If you are interested in what we've just been talking about, so social networks and how that affects behavior at work, or the other issues we talked about in the podcast series around the design of workplaces and hybrid policies, then please do check out our latest report.

It's available to download from our website. It's an interactive report. We've got videos, we've got podcast, lots of other resources that you are free to use, share with others and, to engage with us on this topic.

So with that, please check out the show notes below or in a pop-up depending on how you're listening to us. Thank you.

[00:12:09] **Helen:** Thank you for listening.