



The Invisible Network Strategies of Successful People

Counterintuitive Ways to Innovate, Execute, and Thrive at Work



INNOVATION RESOURCE CENTER for HUMAN RESOURCES

This white paper emerged from IRC4HR™ sponsored research on the networking behaviors of successful people; those in their organizations' high-performance category who also score higher on measures of career satisfaction, well-being, and engagement. The study explored how these people build, maintain, and leverage personal networks in ways that help them produce innovative solutions, execute work, and thrive in their careers. It also captures what they do as leaders to bring others along with them.

Rob Cross has mapped networks and individual (and collective) performance in 300+ organizations to identify the network strategies of high performers. With funding from IRC4HR, these strategies (captured in this white paper and a series of twelve personal case-study learning modules) can now be shared and adopted by individuals and organizations interested in building and nurturing successful, high-performing, and personally fulfilling networks at work and beyond.

IRC4HR was founded in 1926 as IRC, a non-profit organization designed to promote positive employment relationships and advances in human resources management through consulting, research, and education.

More than 90 years later, the organization continues to bring together employers, academics, and other stakeholder communities to fund action research and share insights on a wide range of topics, including a current focus on the implications of technology and digital disruption on the future of work, organizations, leadership, and the workforce.



PERSONAL NETWORKS

The Invisible Network Strategies of Successful People

Counterintuitive Ways to Innovate, Execute, and Thrive at Work

Rob Cross
with Rebecca Garau

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Abstract

Personal networks have become critical to performance and well-being as the collaborative intensity of work has exploded and the pace of change accelerated over the past decade. Yet contrary to popular belief, an effective network is not usually a big one. More than 20 years of mapping networks and individual performance in over 300 organizations has yielded some surprising truths regarding the network strategies of high performers.

Our most recent research focused on understanding the *behaviors* of successful people—those in their organizations' high performance category and scoring higher on measures of career satisfaction, well-being and engagement. *How* do these people build, maintain and leverage personal networks in ways that help them produce innovative solutions, execute work effectively and thrive in their careers?

Based on interviews conducted with 160 leaders (80 men and 80 women) across 20 organizations, we identified twelve network lessons that invisibly differentiate these people.



PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

- ▶ Tap Into a Broad Network Early in Problem Solving
- ▶ Create Emergent Innovation Through Open Interactions in the Network
- ▶ Build Purpose, Energy and Trust to Earn Interest, Effort and Creativity
- ▶ Innovate the Work and the Network Simultaneously



EXECUTE WORK EFFICIENTLY

- ▶ Scale Accomplishments Through Networks
- ▶ Build Individual Agility Through Personal Networks
- ▶ Cultivate Influence Without Authority Through Network Roles
- ▶ Drive Results Through Agile Team and Unit Networks



THRIVE AT WORK

- ▶ Reduce Collaborative Overload to Regain Time and Space
- ▶ Cultivate A Network That Draws You To Personal and Professional Priorities
- ▶ Make Network Investments that Create a Sense of Purpose in Your Work
- ▶ Buffer from Work and Anchor in Non-Work Networks to Gain Perspective and Foster Well-Being

How Personal Networks Drive Innovation, Execution and Thriving

Personal networks have become critical to performance and well-being as the collaborative intensity of work has exploded and the pace of change accelerated over the past decade. Yet contrary to popular belief, an effective network is not usually a big one. More than 20 years of mapping networks and individual performance in over 300 organizations has yielded some surprising truths regarding the network strategies of high performers. For example, we have learned that the second biggest predictor of performance is building *non-insular networks* with boundary spanning ties across functions, geography and expertise. It is the creativity inspired through these bridging ties that tends to distinguish more successful people over time.

What is the biggest predictor then? Counterintuitively, it is not reaching to others in the network—the strategy propagated by almost all self-help books. Rather, it is being *sought* that is typically four times the predictor of a high performer as anything else we have seen. Specifically, people that create energy, purpose and trust in networks win over time at a stunningly high rate. But this is not because they are charismatic or extroverted; you are as likely to see a low-key or introverted person be considered a strong energizer as a more charismatic person. The energizers win because they create *pull* in networks. People bring project opportunities to them, better talent migrates their way and they are able to generate greater innovation and creativity in interactions. As a product of creating pull in networks, these people benefit in ways that are often invisible to their less connected—and less successful—colleagues.

Our most recent research took a deeper look to understand how high performers build, maintain and leverage personal networks in ways that allowed them to produce innovative solutions and execute work effectively. We also assessed whether people who scored higher on measures of well-being, resilience and career satisfaction managed networks differently than those who were not thriving in their work.

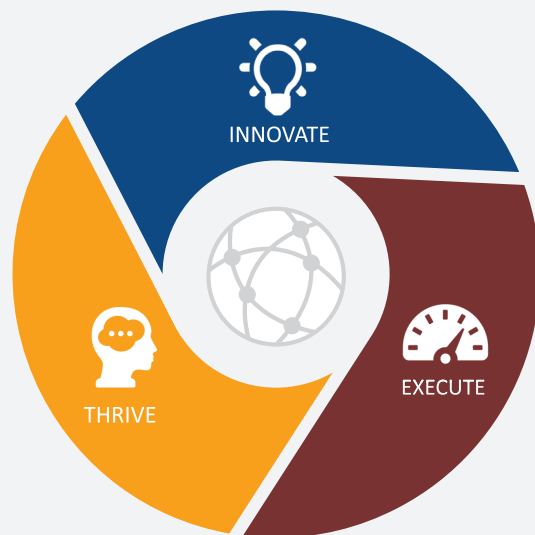
We interviewed high-performing leaders (80 men and 80 women) across 20 well-known organizations in financial services, software, consumer products, retail, professional services, manufacturing and life sciences organizations. The people we spoke with were in a wide range of roles as individual performers (both early-career and seasoned professionals), first-level leaders, managers of managers and senior executives. They represented a diversity of locations, cultures, demographics and backgrounds.

During these interviews, people told stories of career-defining projects, key initiatives and large-scale transformations; they spoke of experiences that went well and those that didn't. They reflected on key inflection points in their careers—such as taking on a high-profile assignment, becoming a first-time manager, working internationally or changing companies—as well as day-to-day moments and interactions. During our 90-minute discussions they shared a treasure trove of subtle—but critical—ways of working through networks that enabled them to succeed and thrive in their careers.

Strikingly, when asked about how they executed work effectively, how they produced innovative solutions or times when they were thriving in their career, they would quickly start to talk about the people involved. Without realizing it, they were describing their networks: How did opportunities

“When I started here, I felt lost. It’s a huge company. But my boss encouraged me to get involved in different activities outside my role and group—volunteering for service projects, giving tours, joining a community of practice just to get out of the bubble of the day-to-day work. I would meet people who are using a tool better, or know how to do something I am struggling with or have context for the things that frustrate me—and just get to know people as people. I have built a network to turn to for help, to get things done faster and smoother and to see why we do what we do.”

12 Network Lessons that Generate Positive Outcomes



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come their way? Who was instrumental early on? How did the team form? How did ideas emerge, or information get shared? What was the nature of the work relationships and interactions? Most had only a vague idea of the networks around them or the many ways they built relationships and interacted with others that contributed to their performance and thriving at work. It was only through probing and building a timeline with each interviewee that the network became visible to them as opposed to solely remembering their individual efforts.

Throughout these interviews, we heard consistent themes as well as valuable details about specific behaviors and types of interactions that generated positive outcomes. In this report, we describe 12 lessons, or big ideas, from the research.

We'll also introduce you to four people: Antonio, Lanie, Ayesha and Nick who work at the fictional company, NetWorx Global. Through these composite characters—drawn from the interviews but not any one person—you will gain a picture of what these lessons look like in context. You'll see some of the day-to-day behaviors and decisions, but also moments of stepping back and making network choices that—whether they realized it or not—would have a positive impact on their performance and well-being.

“Building a network takes time. It’s not about a cocktail-party relationship or how many people you know. It’s about give and take, about people that care about the business and about each other. You need people who will give you perspective and who will tell you when you are wrong—in a loving way. Having trusted colleagues, mentors and truth tellers matters even more the higher you go in the organization.”

Through this paper—and the resources at www.connectedcommons.com/personal-networks—we hope to shed light on the many subtle and, often, counterintuitive, things high performers do to build their network and interact with others in ways that allow them to innovate, execute and thrive at work.



Produce Innovative Solutions

Tap a broad network and create energy in interactions to solve problems, see opportunities and implement new ideas.

A Story of Innovation

Lanie is a senior executive, leading operations for the largest and most high-profile division of NetWorx Global. She never imagined she'd spend nearly 20 years with one company. A couple of years ago, after a major restructuring moved her into her current role, she was charged with making improvements that would lead to cost savings over the long term. Going in, she had an idea of where the biggest problems were and next steps. Despite feeling pressure to prove herself and urgency to get results, Lanie wisely invested time up front to ensure she had the right grasp of the problems rather than "coming in with my 100-day plan ... I felt like there were a million things that were all important to do, but if I didn't get a bigger perspective, I wouldn't know how to prioritize, or which would have the most impact."

Quickly, she met with technical, operations and sales teams, customers and suppliers. She made it a point to spend time in each facility, getting to know what employees saw as the most important part of their job and where the biggest obstacles caused unnecessary issues. "I focused right away on solving the top four or five pain points they had. Most people don't hide where their frustrations are; it comes out pretty quick. I could go in and make those changes immediately. But, the key was to develop the solutions together, take action that removed barriers and modeled the proactive, collaborative approach that I wanted them to take." This began to build relationships and credibility—which paid off in greater engagement, trust and innovation down the road.

Lanie knew that success would be fueled by people who were not on the formal org chart or in the leadership pipeline. "I met with the obvious people, of course, but in each meeting, I would ask questions like, *Who on your team is well connected?*

Who else is involved in this work? Or who do you rely on or turn to when there is a problem? Who else should I speak with? That always got me names of people who were valued, but not on my radar, as well as an understanding of how work got done."

This approach gave Lanie a rich sense of the informal opinion leaders—and who was likely to push back on change. In one instance, she learned of a long-time employee with vast technical and customer knowledge who had been through many re-orgs and restructurings in his career. He was openly negative about the current changes and was known to sway employees against management, believing he would always outlast any senior leader. "I decided to bring him in early to the project team that would change the enterprise system—in fact, I made him responsible for defining specs of the new system. Some people thought I was crazy but, in the end, this made sure he did not feel shut out of the process and, even better, had ownership of the outcomes."

During Lanie's first few months on the job, she realized that years of pushing for efficiency and standardization—which was important—had created an organization afraid to take risks. "If we were going to survive in the long term, we couldn't just slash costs—we needed to innovate. And that was not going to happen if I didn't pull in ideas and people from across the organization."

Lanie worked with her leadership team closely, prioritizing weekly one-on-ones—with 50 percent or more of the time spent off task on each individual's goals and career objectives—to build their trust in her and tap into their knowledge base and networks. She let them know that, while she brought a broad perspective and experience building teams, she was not the technical expert—nor did she have the deep, historical

“Looking back, the main thing I did was remove the fear and defensiveness many people had felt. It gave us a focus, a purpose, for asking why we do things a certain way or for re-thinking how we respond to customers. I knew I had won when I heard key opinion leaders and high-level formal leaders were telling the story of some of our innovations like it was their idea!”

knowledge of the business that they did. “I needed them to know that it was OK to bring ideas forward, tell me what isn’t working. I would handle bad news well and be open-minded about solutions.”

Lanie and her team realized the more they focused on innovation and explored possibilities together, the more positive they felt about their work and the next steps for the business. They began to shift their language from “cost-cutting” and “turnaround” to “beating the competition by creating better processes and best solutions.” This narrative was compelling to many, but really took off when one team made a video of how their innovation changed the customer experience. “We would do town halls and employee meetings and present rational cases and the numbers, but it never seemed to get people moving. But this video—with the customer showing the impact we had downstream—created positive momentum.”

By diffusing ownership early, encouraging teams to consider the *why* of the work before the *what* or *how*, and co-creating solutions rather than just propagating her vision—in other words, encouraging teams to define their work and run with their innovations—Lanie made innovation less about her strategy and more about “the way we do things.” This turned out to be especially critical for those on project teams or customer-relations roles who had previously proposed ways to do things differently but felt they were not heard. “Looking back, the main thing I did was remove the fear and defensiveness many people had felt. It gave us a focus, a purpose, for asking why we do things a certain way or for re-thinking how we respond to customers. I knew I had won when I heard key opinion leaders and high-level formal leaders were telling the story of some of our innovations like it was their idea!”

During this time, Antonio, an early career engineer, was on point to find a solution in response to a customer request. “It was my first time as a lead, and I thought it would be a straightforward job to bring together the people who had really deep understanding of the tools and the process with the information I had about the customer. But, I just didn’t think I had enough information. It was a gut thing, but I wanted to learn more. Why did they need this? How would they use it?”

With the company less than a year, Antonio wasn’t sure of the usual process for obtaining client input. He quickly learned that most people on the development side never asked—and if they did it was time-consuming and frustrating to get the

internal approvals to speak with accounts. Account leads were protective of their clients, and there was an unwritten rule to never let clients further define what they needed once the work had been approved. Undaunted, he took initiative to learn what he wanted to know. Having gone through a rotational program as an intern, he knew some people in sales; he reached out to them to get their perspective of the client and what they would do. A peer, who had a similar job in a different part of the company, helped him think through options and what to ask. Then, he went back to his manager. He told her the team’s initial plan and then asked if she could help him get direct access to the customer before they moved forward. While it was not the usual process, the manager reached out to her contacts to see what they could make happen.

By being proactive, Antonio was able to talk to the customer contact—but then he went even further and asked if he could talk to the people who would be directly affected by the solution. Again, this required further work to get approvals and ran counter to the incentives and culture of the organization. But by being proactive in taking these steps, he saw the problem in a new way—and realized the solution could address several customer concerns at once. His team created a prototype, which he showed to others in engineering, the internal product team and the clients he spoke with. Based on input from the group (including from a few naysayers—people who thought they should stick with the original plan), Antonio’s team developed a solution the client agreed to test on a small scale.

Leaving work one day, Antonio ran into a manager, Nick, who had been his intern sponsor. In the parking lot, Antonio talked enthusiastically about the project and said he thought it might be useful for other customers, but he wasn’t sure. Nick asked questions and realized this might be the kind of thing Lanie was talking about when she said she wanted to promote

“If I hadn’t bumped into Nick out of the blue that day, if he hadn’t been curious and taken interest, my project would have been just another project. Instead, it became a huge win.”

innovation. “This was a turning point for the whole thing,” Antonio recalled later. “If I hadn’t bumped into Nick out of the blue that day, if he hadn’t been curious and taken interest, my project would have been just another project. Instead, it became a huge win.”

After his conversation, Nick described the idea and how it could adapt and scale to other customers during a meeting with Lanie and a few others on the leadership team. He was excited, but cautious, too. “I’m not sure how broadly or easily this could translate to other customers, but if it does, there would be a lot of people to get on board and systems to change.”

Within the team, objections began. *If this was doable, if it was such a good idea, we would have done it already. Has this engineer gone through the right channels? How far along is the test?* Lanie thought, “I don’t know if the idea is right, but I am going to let this be a chance to show people I mean what I say. If people will bring their idea, I’m going to give it attention. We’ll figure it out and not shut it down before we even start.”

Lanie asked Nick to work with Antonio and his manager and come back to her the following week. When Antonio met Lanie for the first time, he was nervous, but she set him at ease. She laughed that she probably wouldn’t understand the details of his project and so could he be patient with her questions. She listened carefully and then said, “We are going to work together to figure this out. Let’s talk about how we can do this.” She showed interest in the idea and confidence in Antonio, which had a memorable and motivational impact on him throughout the work, especially when working through obstacles and setbacks. “I thought this was the coolest thing! She made it sound like it was the most important thing to work on and that I was contributing to a larger effort. And she gave me a level of ownership and trusted that I was capable. I worked on next steps all week and over the weekend. In my spare time, I was thinking about it.”

In the months that followed, Antonio and his team—guided by Nick—showed the prototype to other customers, product managers and operations team leads. Lanie handled the

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politics and the process concerns, giving the team cover to try things out and see how viable the solution would be. Antonio thought that the initial prototype was solid; he was surprised by how much the solution changed due to getting feedback, bringing in other groups and iterating on the solution, and by the processes for implementing it broadly. He felt the work turned the corner when one skeptical operations manager saw how, after the initial transition, the change would simplify work and help people get back a lot of wasted time. By engaging with this naysayer early and in a proactive and positive way—rather than perfecting a plan and then trying to force it through—Antonio helped turn this key opinion leader into the unofficial ambassador for the work and someone who significantly helped pave the way for wider acceptance.

The innovative solution—roughed out as a fix for one client—turned into a huge cost savings for the business unit. “Literally, this fix saved us thousands of dollars every time we ran a similar process—when we scaled it, the savings were dramatic. Plus, we solved a customer problem more broadly—not in the narrow way that it was first presented—and of course this created more energy around innovation.”

As for Antonio, he gained a greater sense of how the company works and built a network that reached well outside his engineering group. Seeing how his efforts can have impact, he continues to bring energy and enthusiasm to his work and conversations with others. When NetWorx Global announced they were acquiring a smaller, specialty company, Antonio was an obvious choice to be part of the integration team.

Lessons of Innovation

While we often remember innovative successes through the lens of our own actions—in other words what we did that generated the success—our research shows that this way of simplifying the world cognitively blinds us to the ways that networks are crucial in all phases of a successful innovation.

In the NetWorx Global vignette and in the stories of people we interviewed, innovation often emerged from surprising places; it fundamentally required a network to develop into a prototype and then survive the gauntlet to implementation. Antonio reached out to the network early on—not just to

figure out how to solve the exact problem given to him, but to reframe the problem and consider broader possibilities. Making this effort and proactively engaging a broad network often seems risky or runs counter to organizational cultures and individual habits and instincts. But, undoubtedly, it is a practice that pays off over time.

Later, Nick and Lanie’s interest and interactions allowed the idea to evolve and gain support. They understood the potential of the innovation, but also the need to engage stakeholders and implementers for it to evolve into a viable

solution more broadly. The core team pulled in other people with needed skills, knowledge and influence and sought key opinion leaders early. The team adapted the network to meet the innovation need and, in doing so, they ensured the solution hit the mark and was adopted.

Our interviews revealed that effective innovators are consistent in driving innovation through networks through four strategies.

1 Tap into a Broad Network Early in Problem Solving

Throughout our interviews we found that more successful innovators tapped into a broad, diverse network—early on—to help them define the problem space and explore solutions. They sought out people outside their team, group or function, as well as people from different demographics, locations or levels. They included people who could bridge groups, had similar—but not the same—expertise, would bring different values to the challenge, and represented the population who had the problem (e.g., customers) or who would be affected by the change.

By engaging a broad network early, our successful people *framed problem spaces more accurately and produced more comprehensive and successful solutions* over time. In contrast to less successful people who went to work solving the problem themselves or with a narrow network, our successful people produced more substantive results and were less likely to miss information or leave out important expertise or insights. They addressed content and substance, as well as process aspects of the work. Importantly, they also built credibility and trust along the way. Because of their network interactions, these people produced more innovative outcomes and gained greater acceptance of the innovation.

Antonio, like many people we interviewed who were involved in successful innovation, did not jump quickly to a plan or solution based on initial information. He turned to people who would have expertise (engineering team) as well as different perspectives on the problem and the approach (his manager, peers, customer). Similarly, but on a bigger scale, Lanie reached out broadly in the organization to gain a fuller picture of what was taking place in the business. She was able to frame the challenges more comprehensively and see the solution as a set of opportunities tied to innovation.

Notably, people who benefited most from this strategy often did it when they were under the greatest pressure to *not* engage in these critical interactions. They tapped into the network right when the new project hit their desk amidst the chaos of an already overflowing workload. All of us have experienced these overwhelming, time-pressured situations. The lesson from our successful people is don't hunker down and fight through the work on your own. The "just do it" approach is a viable strategy and one that will keep you from getting fired. But incrementally you will fall behind the more successful people who accomplish broader objectives

by pausing and exploring—even just a bit—to gain valuable perspective and plant seeds of interest and support.

 **Many people know to include multiple stakeholders and diverse expertise when innovation is explicitly required. Few people do this in the course of routine work, when they are asked to fix a problem or make a plan. Fewer still tap a diverse network when deadlines are tight and pressure is on. But this is precisely the time when successful people take time to explore possibilities with others. By not pushing through an initial idea or relying on their own expertise or inner circle, they come up with more comprehensive solutions to bigger problems.**

2 Create Emergent Innovation Through Open Interactions in the Network

The quality of exchanges within networks is a powerful determinant as to whether the right questions are asked, ideas are expressed and potential solutions are explored and refined—or whether creativity is unrealized and innovation stifled. Successful people in our interviews encouraged possibilities to emerge through networks in several subtle ways. They were open with others about challenges they faced, problems they were trying to solve and projects they were working on. They stole five or ten minutes of colleagues' time to ask how they might tackle the issue—over coffee, in a hallway, at the end of another meeting, for example. In doing so, surprise offers and unexpected insights came their way, which helped them to produce more creative solutions or see unique opportunities.

In contrast, people who shut down emergent innovation avoided new input or exploratory discussions, focused on constraints and assumptions about what can't be done, and drove to a decision before ideas had time to develop. Antonio hit this kind of resistance; we are all familiar with his initial attempts to expand the innovation beyond its original use. Nick and Lanie, like the more successful people in our interviews, prompted openness by being curious and interested in what others have to say and what they are doing. They asked open ended questions (*How can we build on that? Why haven't we done this before?*). They avoided shutting people down with body language (frowning, disengaged posture) or by pointing out flaws (*That won't work because ... or, We tried that before ...*). They didn't expect others to have fully vetted, bulletproof presentations and were willing to share what they didn't know or admit they didn't have an answer.

Serendipity, too, was a common factor in innovation. In every one of our interviews, people characterized at least one but more commonly three or four serendipitous encounters that were critical to the success of the innovation. Seemingly random interactions lead to ideas or opportunities *way* more often than we remember—as when Antonio ran into

Nick in the parking lot. However, more successful people *manufacture* serendipity. Nick always made it a point to park away from the building and in different areas of the lot. He would often bump into people he wouldn't usually work with and have a short conversation to catch up. As for Antonio, when Nick asked how things were going, he took advantage of the moment.

Another key thing people did—which is counter to the way most people think about their plans and projects—was to sustain their openness to ideas and change well beyond the early development and planning stages. They expected the work to shift or that changes would be needed (even dramatic course corrections) as new information came in or new people or groups got involved. Antonio did not expect this, but the more-experienced Nick and Lanie did—and were not dismayed by the slower pace and the multiple iterations needed to get to the best solution.

 **Typically, people expect the creative, innovative part of a project to be limited to the early stages. But more often, the initial ideas and prototypes are just a starting point. More effective people don't get locked in to an idea or plan too soon. They maintain openness to new ideas and budget time and resources—as much as 75 percent—to cycles of obtaining input, making changes and evolving the innovation through the network.**

3 Build Purpose, Energy and Trust to Earn Interest, Effort and Creativity

The ability to generate energy or enthusiasm in networks is the largest predictor of a high performer we have seen over 20 years of research. It is also tightly tied to where innovations emerge and change takes hold in organizations. People who create enthusiasm do so in three key ways:

- Build a foundation of trust.
- Help others gain a sense of purpose in their work.
- Generate energy in day-to-day interactions.

The importance of trust, purpose and energy emerged repeatedly in our interviews. Over and over, we heard of people getting enthused and giving extra effort when they trusted—and felt trusted by—their manager and the people they worked with. They became engaged when they could see how their work fit in or how they could have impact. And, when people left meetings and conversations feeling energized rather than drained, it had a snowball effect—they more enthusiastically contributed their ideas, interest and talents.

This platform of trust, purpose and energy comes from engaging in specific behaviors systematically. At NetWorx Global, Lanie built trust in a number of ways. She was honest about what she didn't know and that she would rely on her

People's sense of thriving in their work, willingness to stay in a given organization and even physical health are all dramatically impacted by the quality—not the quantity—of the relationships in their network. Thriving is about being connected to others with a foundation of trust, with a sense of purpose and through energized interactions.

Assess your own ability to generate trust, purpose and energy in others with our Thriving Through Connections diagnostic at www.networkassessments.org/thriving-through-connections.

leadership team and others. She was consistent in what she said (“I want to hear your ideas, I want to know what isn't working”) and in actions she took (listening carefully and not critiquing, blaming or berating people when they speak up.) She engaged in ways that showed she had the best interests of employees and the company in mind—not just a desire to get a quick win for herself. This foundation of trust is critical. People only come forth with fringe ideas or reveal personal aspirations if they feel safe. Leaders like Lanie intuitively know this and work to build this foundation in all relationships.

Lanie's message of innovation helped others find purpose in their work as well. “Beating the competition through innovation” became the North Star aspiration across the company. She clarified the *why* of the work, before getting in the weeds of *what* or *how*. She made it a point to show appreciation for effort, as well as wins. She charged managers to meet one-on-one with their direct reports to assign work so that each person could contribute to and co-create solutions, or to get involved in ways that aligned with their individual interests and aspirations.

Because of Lanie's approach, Antonio felt he had the green light from the top—as well as from his manager and Nick—to pursue the best solution for the customer by working with others. People's sense of purpose is dramatically influenced by the degree to which they feel their work is meaningful through interactions in the network. If people feel work is meaningful they will be more likely to bring their best and, importantly, move to the stage of being energized in their work.

Antonio—even though he had no formal authority—was an energizer in his network. He communicated enthusiasm for the work in his interactions with others in the engineering group, customers, operations and management. In meetings and one-on-one conversations, he engaged others in realistic possibilities that captured their imaginations and hearts. He

didn't take his own ideas too seriously and genuinely sought to bring other people into the conversation, asking them what they thought and building off their ideas. Remember, Lanie was also an energizer during her initial meeting with Antonio; she showed interest through body language and voice as well as what she said, listened carefully before responding and used self-deprecating humor to put Antonio at ease.

These energizing behaviors are what people see and feel. The more often people experience energizing interactions in their day-to-day work, the more they give greater effort—but only when that energy is built on the foundation of trust and purpose that more successful people create.

 **It is common to over-estimate the degree to which networks lead to higher performance by virtue of our reaching out to others for information or resources. In our interviews, every successful project happened largely due to serendipitous encounters or people making suggestions or offering resources. This kind of emergent innovation only happens in the context of relationships where people have directly (or indirectly through reputation) built a foundation of trust, purpose and energy.**

Innovate the Work and the Network Simultaneously

People who contribute to the evolution of something new are more invested in its success. When moving into the implementation of the innovation, they become natural champions and early adopters. The more they engage and spread positive word of mouth, the faster an innovation takes hold. In contrast, people who develop a solution without adapting the network struggle to move from innovation to implementation. They miss out on positive word of mouth and are surprised by resistance or roadblocks that come later. Innovation may miss the mark or have poor uptake.

In our interviews, more effective people understood this well. They approached innovation by adapting both the project *and* the network that would produce and support it. Antonio did this intuitively as he sought to understand the problem space and create the initial solution by reaching out to a range of stakeholders. He asked his team to help him identify possible contributors and asked his manager for referrals. He sought to gain a more expansive view of the customer—first talking to initial contacts, then asking for one more person or group to meet with. (Often that second step in the network yields valuable insight and gets you to key influencers.) And, by creating a simple prototype early on, he prompted others (internal colleagues and the customer) to think through the project and contribute. In groups or one-on-one, he would show how the prototype worked and ask: *Where are the bumps? How could this be improved? How could something*

like this be used by your customer? What would it take to implement it?

Lanie recognized the importance of engaging the broader network if the solution was to be scaled. She formalized the core team of Antonio, his initial collaborators, Nick and one other operations manager, while pulling in people to represent various customers, types of work and areas of operations. She saw the need to move quickly to bring in needed expertise, as well as those who would be valued allies or advisors as the work evolved. She worked with Nick to recruit network brokers who could bridge internal silos and external groups, connectors who would socialize ideas and be conduits of information, and energizers who would test and amplify the solution. She also encouraged the team to bring in naysayers and use negative feedback to address legitimate concerns.

A powerful differentiator here is this willingness to bring in resisters early and in a meaningful way. More successful people seek out naysayers, critics and challengers early—even people who are not overly negative, but just pulling in a different direction. Successful people want key stakeholders involved and don't wait to perfect an idea before taking it out to the network. They allow people to contribute by asking with genuine interest: *How would you solve this? What else do you need to see this as valuable?*

 **Too often, our tendency is to perfect ideas before exposing them to others. However, many people we interviewed learned (often after 10, 15 or 20 years) that this was a failed strategy. By getting an idea partially developed and then engaging formal stakeholders, network influencers and, paradoxically, naysayers early, more successful people develop more robust solutions and reduce the likelihood of influential people becoming sources of friction later.**



Execute Work Efficiently

Initiate connections to create influence without authority and adapt networks to implement, scale and drive results.

A Story of Execution

Nick, introduced previously, is an experienced manager at NetWorx Global. With 15 years in the industry, he has seen economic highs and lows, adapted to changing demands and worked with a diverse range of leaders and teams. He currently manages product launches in the U.S. and Mexico. He has consistently been a top performer, known for his ability to manage people and processes. He is often the go-to when senior leaders are creating a new task force or initiative, and people throughout the organization want to work with him because of the chance to be involved in a high-profile win. “I believe in putting others in the spotlight, giving them the opportunity to shine and making sure people have some aspect of work that they are crazy about ... When people have these experiences, they are always more engaged, and we get the best out of people. I’ve noticed that there is a direct link between the parts of work that are not going well and the lack of interest and ownership of the people involved.”

Nick naturally takes a network view. “It’s just in my DNA. Throughout my career, I purposefully took on different roles and assignments, building my network, trying to learn different perspectives and different operations ... Another thing I have learned is that you are never working with just one team, even when a team is technically responsible for a project or piece of the work. To get things done, you need to get the right people in, no matter where they officially sit in the organization. You can’t think, *How can I do this, how can I solve it?* You have to ask, *Who do I know who can do this? Where is the expertise? Who else can I bring in because they have the skill or the time or the resources? Who wants the opportunity or needs the experience?*”

In order to know how to address a need, or staff a project, or envision opportunities, Nick makes it a priority to learn the strengths, weaknesses, interests and aspirations of individuals. “A leader who can do that is going to be 100 times more successful than someone who takes a cookie-cutter approach. A lot of leaders say this, but don’t do it well.” He implements three practices that allow him to prioritize this with his direct reports weekly one-on-ones, quarterly “resets” and ongoing feedback. With team leaders and line managers, “I’m a big fan of the walk and talk. In 10 or 20 minutes, I work through something on the spot, or get to know them and where they are coming from just a bit better.”

Nick also keeps up with colleagues outside of NetWorx Global—people he worked with early in his career, as well as those he is connected with through shared professional interests. He is a committee chair of a national industry association and has breakfast with two peers from his previous job every few months. He blocks time for network development each week. He’ll send an email or LinkedIn message to colleagues he met at an executive education program or through industry conferences to ask a question, seek a referral or just check in. Other times, he’ll read industry articles or management blogs and send them to people in his network—or reach out to authors or organizations mentioned if he has a specific question or sees relevance to his work.

Because of his external network, Nick became a key player when NetWorx Global began pursuing growth through acquisition. Through his work with an industry association, he was well-connected to two key leaders in a mid-size company that had expertise and a strong customer base

"I had essentially added a job to my existing job, so I couldn't be involved at the level I was used to. I put effort into ensuring everyone knew and trusted each other so information would flow, people would reach out directly, and I wouldn't be the gatekeeper. I told them, Share your idea or problem with someone else on the team before you come to me. I also brought at least one other person on the product integration team to all the other acquisition meetings I attended. It helped them to understand the big picture and prevented over-reliance on me."

related to a new technology. He did not know much about the technology, but he was aware of the company's positive reputation. When a current customer put out an RFP for work that would dovetail with the new technology, Nick realized it was an opportunity to partner with the new company, expand NetWorx expertise and potentially open a new line of business. He made an introduction between the heads of engineering for the two companies, and the collaboration won the customer project. The effort was a success, eventually putting the companies into negotiations for an acquisition.

Nick was tapped to oversee the product integration team, which would involve people from both companies in various roles. "Because I know the people here, it was easy to line up those who were interested in the work, saw it as important, and were also respected and plugged in to the organization. I also asked to bring in similar folks from the other company—I didn't want just a bunch of people with manager titles."

"When we got started, I made it a priority to get to know the new people—not just assign them work—and to bring the team together, to understand our roles, priorities and other demands, to see how our work fit together. At the beginning, there was caution, some mistrust, but to make this work I needed them to share openly with me and openly with each other. We held

in-depth project calls on Monday and quick status meetings on Thursdays to get things going. I also brought the team together a few times for face-to-face meetings."

Importantly, Nick promoted fun within the team as a way to connect people at a personal level and add levity to otherwise high-pressure work. Early team meetings included time off task to socialize as well as fun activities, such as a bingo-style game to get to know people and a scavenger hunt when they visited each other's locations. As work progressed, Nick started asking team members a question of the week, such as, *If you could travel anywhere for two weeks where would you go? What is your favorite book or movie character?* They would occasionally go out for lunch or a drink after work. "I believe if people don't enjoy what they are doing and aren't having some fun, you are not getting the best out of them. The group was skeptical at first, but my efforts paid off. I'm finding now that we have been together for a while, they trust each other and value each other's input a little more."

To manage the surge of work tied to the acquisition, Nick learned to delegate and diffuse ownership of the work quickly. "I had essentially added a job to my existing job, so I couldn't be involved at the level I was used to. I put effort into ensuring everyone knew and trusted each other so information would flow, people would reach out directly, and I wouldn't be the gatekeeper. I told them, *Share your idea or problem with someone else on the team before you come to me.* I also brought at least one other person on the product integration team to all the other acquisition meetings I attended. It helped them to understand the big picture and prevented over-reliance on me."

Ayesha, a product launch manager, emerged as a key person on the integration team. She was promoted from individual contributor to manager just the year before the acquisition was announced. "Making the move to manager wasn't easy, especially because I was leading people who had been my co-workers. I always thought my boss would be the one to help me figure things out, and he was great. But, I quickly realized I couldn't just lean on him. The best thing I did was reach out to my peers, people in the same role in other parts of the business. Most of them had been doing the job for a few years, so they helped me see things and learn."

Ayesha's peers and a mentor got her over a big hurdle: learning how to succeed through others. "Those first few months, I felt like I was always busy but not doing anything! I like to see a problem and solve it, to have all the answers. As a manager,

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you can't do that. You have to think of the pieces of the work, and then work through the plan and the staffing. If you don't do that, you end up micromanaging; there are not enough hours in the day to do it all ... It's a different kind of satisfaction, knowing you helped other people hit the targets or come up with the answer."

Ayesha had just begun to feel like she had her head around the job when Nick asked her to be part of the product integration team. He saw how she successfully adapted to managing a team, knew she had deep knowledge of product launches and internal processes and was respected by her co-workers. Ayesha was flattered but had doubts. "Why would I want to add more stress right when I was starting to get comfortable again? And what could I contribute? But, I could see that I would be in a position to influence how we do things—and Nick knew that would matter to me. And, it would be a high-profile project and a chance to be exposed to other groups and managers."

Ayesha quickly found how she could best contribute to the integration: she was a network broker that had a lot of connections across groups. She could understand and credibly address concerns and criticisms of employees from both organizations. "Because I had done product work and understood the bigger picture, I knew who to go to for input and how to get them to look at the plan and make it better. I could spot the influential people in the other company, too. Usually there is a team lead or experienced operator that everyone defers to or goes to for help. I knew if I could get them on board, the rest would come along. I also informally ran things by some of folks who were skeptical or who would be affected by the change. By the time we rolled out phase one, people knew what to expect and were, for the most part, on board."

Nick appreciated Ayesha's ability to meet and build rapport with the newcomers and brought her into a brainstorming session with the larger acquisition team, including Lanie, to consider how to foster collaboration and integration of the acquired company employees. "We didn't want to create an 'us versus them' mentality," said Lanie, who had charged her talent management team to review performance management and pay structures to be sure they were not incenting competition or siloed action. But bringing people into the company smoothly wasn't a task relegated to HR. Ayesha suggested a buddy system (partnering newcomers with a well-connected teammate) and Rotation Fridays (a certain number of people, randomly chosen, would shadow a team or person in another group). The group also agreed to "on the

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spot" rewards for collaboration or helping outside one's group. Managers committed to hold bi-monthly onboarding meetings with direct reports for a year to be sure people were adjusting and had built the relationships they need to be successful.

Many people who worked with Nick and Ayesha on the product integration project described it as a highlight of their time at the company: *Best team I've been on. I learned so much. I was proud of what we accomplished. It felt good to be heard and my opinions respected. We made a difference.* Bringing together two companies, multiple product lines and different systems, processes and cultures could have been fraught with infighting, misunderstandings and disappointments. But Nick and Ayesha took many small actions—especially in the beginning—to foster enthusiasm and support of people within the core team and extended network. They intentionally painted a picture of why the work mattered and co-created solutions. "They didn't come in pushing their plan or telling us exactly what to do," said someone from the acquired company. "They got to know us; they asked a lot of questions like, *How do you do this now? What works well and what would you change? What else are you working on?*" A team member said, "Nick was good about coaching us through something we hadn't done before, without micromanaging. He offered help without showing off or focusing on how he did things in the past." A long-time NetWorx Global employee noted Ayesha's reputation for showing respect, giving full attention to the people she was interacting with, whether on a call, presenting to a large group or one-on-one. Because of their behaviors and interactions, they engaged a broad network—not just a team—resulting in a successful integration of products and processes. One year later, none of the acquired employees in Nick's function have left the company, and product development and launch processes are on track to out-perform prior years.

Lessons of Execution

Often, we think execution is a matter of having the right plan and the talent to accomplish it. Our research shows that the network and the nature of the interactions within it differentiate individual performance and successful people's ability to execute work.

High performers we interviewed understood that their ability to get things done and be effective depended on the informal networks in organizations. Like Nick and Ayesha in the vignette above, they operated through the network in two critical ways that enabled success. First, they drove influence without

authority by always finding and engaging key opinion leaders in networks early. By investing time in these disproportionately important influencers, they were able to bring others along with their plans with much greater success and less effort. Second, they focused on driving results through team-level networks by managing the center, fringe, silos and external collaborations with key stakeholders. They intuitively recognized that while teams were assigned the work, it was really the quality of the collaborations within and outside of the teams that drove success.

On a personal level, they were also much more effective due to proactively understanding capabilities and aspirations of others throughout the network. These investments of time and effort helped them to break work down and enroll networks in ways that enabled them to scale their results well beyond their individual abilities. They also leveraged relationships to adapt and learn as roles and circumstances changed, crucially avoiding career-derailing network traps that invisibly undermined their contemporaries.

Our interviews revealed that more successful people consistently and efficiently execute through networks using four strategies.

5 Scale Accomplishments Through Networks

In today's organizations, few accomplishments of substance are a product of individual effort. Rather, success is enabled by networks that provide needed expertise, information, resources, decision approvals and political support. The high performers we interviewed viewed their personal networks as a unique resource that allowed them to execute beyond their own efforts or expertise and that of their immediate team. They thought in terms of *network capability*, where their network was a fluid extension of their own expertise that magnified what they could do. They envisioned new ways to leverage talent and allocate work beyond existing roles, processes and habits. They learned to look at problems as bundles of issues to be solved, or discrete tasks—and then asked, *Where in the network is relevant expertise, information, resources or support?* In contrast, people who over-relied on personal capability were limited to smaller tasks or projects, missed opportunities for high-impact work and struggled to delegate and engage others.

Nick, like a number of people we interviewed, excelled at “seeing” network capability and shaping and scaling work accordingly. He intentionally built an understanding of expertise and aspirations in the network—with his direct reports, but also in conversations with employees in his function, across the organization and even externally. Importantly, he preserved time to develop those contacts and build relationships *before he had a need*. This allowed him to envision projects and opportunities as a set of activities for a network, not as a linear list of tasks for him or for his group to accomplish. In doing so, he could match employees to work they cared about and were

committed to and was able to see how a partnership could open the door to new customers and markets.

Crucially, for these networks to live up to their potential, our more successful people diffused ownership early. Rather than holding tightly to an idea or plan, or dictating how work should be accomplished, they actively sought contributions of others to evolve and improve their projects. They were clear about contributing only where they had unique value to add and helped others see their unique contribution as well. They offered support and help but did not undermine ownership by changing decisions or jumping in too quickly when obstacles arose. Nick diffused ownership by making sure the integration team had awareness of each other's expertise and why they were valuable to the project. By letting people know everything shouldn't flow through him, he avoided becoming a bottleneck to the process and also strengthened the capability and the network of team members. Additional actions—bringing other people to meetings or encouraging people to shadow him—allowed Nick to back out and for others to gradually take on more as they became connected and developed needed skills.

 **It is far too easy to neglect network development in today's collaboratively overwhelmed times. But waiting until you have a specific need severely limits your ability to tap the best resources to execute the work. Insidiously, it also limits how you envision possibilities. Our interviews revealed that deep knowledge of the network changes how people see work—how they envision project or client possibilities and their concurrent ability to handle work. The key is to make investments in understanding expertise and aspirations *ahead of time* to expand your ability to react to problems and capitalize on opportunities.**

6 Build Individual Agility Through Personal Networks

Successful people manage complexity and constant change in today's workplace by supplementing gaps in skill, expertise or political awareness through networks. People with more effective networks are successful in formal role transitions and when new capabilities are required as roles morph around them.

In contrast, people with less effective networks falter. Stories abounded in our interviews of high performers who couldn't replicate success in new contexts, and, more insidiously, people who didn't adapt networks when roles shifted through new projects or expectations. Notably, these kinds of failures are *never* seen by the organization as an ineffective network strategy. Connectivity to others—or lack thereof—is an invisible factor. As a result, people become defined by a failure or labeled in ways that deprive them of future opportunities. In many cases, they leave the organization.

The high performers we interviewed were agile and able to adapt, avoiding common network traps that undermine success over time. Many, like Ayesha, described making the pivotal transition from individual contributor to manager and relying on others to help them learn what they didn't know. They adapted their network to the new context. Similarly, and crucially, more successful people applied this same strategy to other role changes. They sought out people doing similar work in a different group, or others currently or previously in the same role. They met with both formal and informal leaders and developed connections across groups, levels or locations to understand what they do, how they work and how they may interact in the future. They leaned on one or two confidants—a mentor, a peer, a friend or spouse—to be sounding boards and to give honest feedback. Crucially, however, they did not over-rely on people connected to their previous role; a common reason people struggle or derail in a new role is that they place too much value on their past network rather than adapting it to the new context.

More effective people were also alert to future collaboration as they adapted to new roles or established themselves in new groups. They would surge into the new work to build the network and learn the role. Yet, they were careful to avoid behaviors that would cause collaborative inefficiencies and overload later. Both Ayesha and Nick did this in different ways. Ayesha, building on the lessons learned as a new manager, had honest conversations with her product team and the new integration team to set and adjust expectations. She looked for ways to delegate and give new responsibilities to people as their skill and interest warranted. Collectively, they agreed on norms for decision making, asking for help, attending meetings, and being accessible and responsive. Nick carefully avoided being the indispensable expert, or “White Knight” that everyone involved in the integration turned to. By building team connections and bringing others into meetings, he removed himself from collaborations where he did not have unique value to add. Leaders that come into a role and try to establish their worth by being the expert or in control often falter in 18 months as they can't back out of interactions they need to avoid collaborative overload. Once you have a reputation of being the sole expert or being in charge, it is tough to change expectations or send others to meetings.

We also saw Nick and Ayesha creating pull into new networks. Rather than pushing themselves into the various groups and teams involved in the integration by touting their knowledge, experience or brand rapidly, they paid close attention to needs of others. They were curious and asked questions, showing respect for their new colleagues and their experience or situation. Gradually, Nick and Ayesha morphed their knowledge to the need and situation. Just as this was important for creating the trust, purpose and energy needed for innovation, creating pull is key to successful transitions and working with new groups.

 **People who become productive in new roles or in changing situations surge into both the work and the network. They quickly develop connections with people who can help them make sense of their context and responsibilities or fill in gaps in expertise. They meet and engage both formal and informal leaders across level, function, geography and expertise. By investing in personal ties and building relationships before they are needed, these people rapidly create a network that more typically takes years to develop.**

7 Cultivate Influence Without Authority Through Network Roles

Managing influence without authority has become critical in today's matrixed and highly collaborative organizations—and a staple in most business schools and leadership development programs. But the common understanding of influence is tied to behaviors that people deploy to influence others—such as formal leaders or stakeholders—without considering network influence. What we have learned in this research is that the more successful people often go a step further by focusing on the informal—and often unnoticed—opinion leaders in a network.

By *identifying, enrolling and aligning* network opinion leaders, successful people we interviewed gained access to information, expertise and support needed for plans and projects to be implemented successfully. Involving informal influencers improved the chances that information and expertise was accessible when it was needed, efforts were supported, and plans and projects were implemented successfully. People who leveraged influence only through formal channels missed the chance to sway negative opinion early, struggled to gain broad support and lost momentum as opinion leaders pulled in different directions.

Nick, for example, understood the value of informal network roles by staffing the integration team with key influencers from both companies. Ayesha, as a manager, had a role in implementation, but so did many others at her level in the organization. She was well connected within her group and bridged into other groups that would be affected by the acquisition. She was also skilled at spotting people who were influential in the acquired company—especially those who were energizers or resisters. Each person she met from the acquired company, she tapped to learn more about who is who: *Who in your group would influence others on this decision? Who always offers good ideas? Who do people go to when they have a question?*

The integration team worked to gain buy-in from opinion leaders in both companies by initiating conversations with partially developed solutions. They were open about what they knew, what they didn't and their process for moving

forward. They also used informal conversations to prep influencers, rather than going in cold to a meeting or formal presentation—a common practice among our interviewees. Nick and Ayesha were genuinely interested in what others thought and the constraints they saw and showed empathy for changes or challenges they faced. They—and their colleagues—were also transparent when they couldn't address a concern and explained why a different decision was made.

Nick, like many we interviewed, worked to align the team and network influencers as well. He did not assume people would automatically collaborate and coordinate effectively. He took steps to build relationships and created structures and systems to support alignment over time. The group spent time upfront building trust and talking about the *why* of the work (to create an unbeatable product line by combining talent and technology). They spent significant time working through how various interests and priorities overlapped or competed. Practical issues, such as clarifying roles and setting regular meetings and communication systems, were also essential.

 **Too often, people think of managing influence without authority as finding formally powerful people and persuading them. This approach overlooks the significant influence of key opinion leaders in networks. Informal influencers can naturally get many others to be interested, supportive and enthused—or sway large numbers of people in a different direction. More successful people identify and engage these network influencers early.**

8 Drive Results Through Agile Team and Unit Networks

Teams have become the primary way by which work is allocated and assigned in organizations, but our interviews made it clear that the traditional thinking about team effectiveness is insufficient. Sometimes teams were made up of direct reports and the more traditional-sized groups of 10-15 people. But, just as frequently, teams were larger committees or task forces where the best and brightest from around the organization were assigned to a strategically important outcome. In some cases, these groups could involve hundreds of people. It was clear that the *network of collaborations* within and outside of the teams drove the results.

More successful leaders we interviewed were attuned to this and focused on the collaborative patterns and needs of the network. In our Networkx Global story, Lanie and Nick fostered agility broadly and systemically. They drove results by managing specific points in team-level networks:

- **They knew and utilized the network's center**—people who are the most in demand—and encouraged collaborative behaviors to avoid inefficiencies and burnout.

- **They leveraged the network's edge**—newcomers or distant geographies—by helping connect them into the network to avoid isolation and under-utilization.
- **They bridged silos where collaboration matters**—where scale gains could be obtained by connecting people doing similar work and where innovation could be realized by integrating complementary expertise.
- **They created transparency of expertise**, so team members leveraged each other and did not direct all queries and ideas up the hierarchy.
- **They minimized insularity** by ensuring there were structures and clear expectations for interacting with clients, customers, vendors or other stakeholders.

Nick, like Lanie, knew a good idea could come from anywhere, and so prompted others to share ideas, offer critiques and contribute to how the integration team operated, the plans it created and the execution. He handled mistakes with a focus on solving, rather than blaming and did not pull rank. Nick and Ayesha both worked to balance and rebalance work to respond to network demands, using project and team meetings to create transparency around workload and challenges, provide help and foster collaboration. They also wanted newcomers to feel valued and get networked quickly into the bigger company—thus Nick's plan to never go to meetings alone and Ayesha's ideas for a buddy system and rotations. Nick was quick to show appreciation for hard work with a simple "thank you." And his ability to help people laugh and have genuine, personal interactions allowed people to feel connected and part of something bigger than themselves.

Many people in our interviews also employed a wide number of subtle devices to ensure that they were hiring for collaboration. They asked candidates during interviews for examples of how they solved a problem with a team or had them describe a typical day. They avoided hiring people with a hero mentality or "us vs. them" mindset. And, they took responsibility for getting newcomers integrated into the network quickly: introducing them to internal and external customers and partners, taking them to lunch or coffee periodically to check in and helping them make connections and navigate the formal and informal networks.

 **Most of us have learned how to build and manage an effective team. Unfortunately, traditional team principles break down in today's network-centric organizations where people are on multiple teams, involving various groups and often of unmanageable size. Many times, the key predictor of a team's success is how they manage internal and external collaborations—not just team vision and mission. Successful leaders know this and are more likely to focus on collaboration and integration at places in the network that matter most for performance.**



Thrive At Work

Reduce collaborative overload and invest in networks proactively to boost well-being, resilience and career satisfaction.

A Story of Thriving

Antonio, Ayesha, Nick and Lanie all gained understanding of how their networks—and specific ways they interacted within the network—contributed to their ability to innovate and execute. Each of them, in different ways, built broad, boundary spanning networks to gain understanding, access information, create solutions and accomplish important work. But their networks and relationships also provided a critical source of resilience, well-being and career satisfaction—helping them weather particularly intense and challenging times.

Lanie, the senior leader, leans heavily on a mentor and friend in another division, as well as her husband and a close circle of friends to keep work in perspective. “The acquisition is complicated. The day-to-day work is complicated. I lost my quality director at a crucial time leading up to a customer quality audit. We’ve had issues with a supplier. Our financials are good, but the other divisions are struggling, so I feel that

weight. I’m type A and push myself and others pretty hard, but I’m clear on my North Star: to make the business better and do it in a way that brings others with me. Plenty of leaders only do the first, and nobody wants to work for them. So, I’m honest with my leadership team about my values and priorities. I’m also clear that work doesn’t define me or dictate everything—my husband, my kids and my church family keep me grounded in what matters most.”

Lanie’s work demands are global and the hours are long, but she focuses on the positive side of 24/7 connectivity.¹ “It goes both ways—I can view work as interrupting my family life—or I can take advantage and unapologetically integrate it all. I can be at a kid’s event and respond to a text or email. I usually spend a couple hours early in the morning doing focused work, but otherwise I appreciate the ability to be where I need to be and know people can reach me. I also have to check myself: how do I give the most value, not necessarily give the most time?” As a practical matter, she meets with her assistant every Friday for a calendar review, looking 2-3 weeks out. “We move things around, say no or delegate things that other people can do, and make sure I have built in blocks of time for priority, but longer-term goals—those things can fall off easily if I’m not proactive about that. Also, if I know I’ve got a tough stretch, I make sure I fit in something that energizes or excites me—that is not the time to give up meetings that get my creative juices flowing or a mentoring session where I feel like I’ve helped somebody else out.”

“I’m honest with my leadership team about my values and priorities. I’m also clear that work doesn’t define me or dictate everything—my husband, my kids and my church family keep me grounded in what matters most.”

1. About 20 percent of the people we interviewed had few, if any, buffering mechanisms—but thrived nevertheless. Like Lanie, they unapologetically and willingly integrated work and non-work: moving easily from a meeting in the office, to a call in the car, to a child’s school event, to replying to a text at dinner. They saw the upside and enjoyed the benefits of 24/7 connectivity rather than resenting it.

“Sometimes you have to let it go. To recharge my batteries, I pick things where I can be singularly focused and not talk about work, where there is not room for mental distractions.”

At the manager of managers level, Nick is in high demand and is learning that some of the things that made him successful to this point cannot be sustained. “With the acquisition and my other responsibilities, I needed to learn how to manage my time and collaboration better. Overall, my time in meetings and working with people through email, text and calls increased, but I became more effective—I couldn’t do it otherwise.” During this time crunch, he took stock of his collaborative habits. He realized his desire to help and to share what he knows created unnecessary burdens on his time and used others’ time inefficiently as well. His calendar was packed with back-to-back meetings he wasn’t sure why he was invited. Nick made several small, key changes that continue to this day. He is less hands-on and backs out of things sooner. He took more control of his calendar: holding several blocks of time each week for high-priority work, agreeing to half the requested time for meetings, checking email at three specific times a day and putting tasks on his calendar, rather than on a separate to-do list. He and his direct reports have improved how they run meetings as well. They are more disciplined to set a clear purpose and agenda, provide clarity on who and why specific people need to attend and include pre-reads so collaborative time isn’t wasted on background and updates.

“I do have one great work friend, who has been a lifesaver. We think the same way, care about the same things in our work, but also talk about non-work things. We laugh a lot! Being able to laugh even when I am frustrated helps me like my job more.”

Long hours are the nature of the job, but Nick also protects time to be an active member of a downtown revitalization board. “We work with city officials, neighborhood groups and businesses to fund, renovate and support our town. It gets me out into the community, and I meet a ton of interesting people—chefs, musicians, entrepreneurs—that I would never meet doing my job.” Nick also sees time with family and friends as vital for getting needed mental space away from work. “Sometimes you have to let it go. To recharge my batteries, I pick things where I can be singularly focused and not talk about work, where there is not room for mental distractions. I ride with a cycling club every week if I’m in town, and my wife and I golf with another couple when the weather

is good. Plus, I always put the phone away at dinner. It just gives me a moment to disconnect, no matter what is going on.”

Ayesha, the first-level manager with a key role on the merger team, is enthusiastic about gaining expertise. “When I first came to NetWorx, I made it a point to volunteer for things that interested me and I thought I would be good at. When I worked well with people, I looked for more things we could do together. Now, I think I am getting known for the kind of work I like and want to do more of.” Admittedly, the job can be consuming, but her relationships with co-workers help her manage the intensity of work and make her feel like she’s doing something worthwhile every day. “I do have one great work friend, who has been a lifesaver. We think the same way, care about the same things in our work, but also talk about non-work things. We laugh a lot! Being able to laugh even when I am frustrated helps me like my job more.”

At one point when Ayesha was particularly overwhelmed and stressed, her friend said she needed to stop waiting for things to slow down or get better. “He said I needed to figure out how to do this for the long run and said that work/life balance isn’t something that is given to you—it is something you control yourself. I had never thought of it that way. I started to set some boundaries. Now, I leave at 4:30 once a week to meet my sister for our favorite class at the gym. I rarely miss it. I feel physically better and when I give myself that time, I feel a little more in control, no matter how the week is going. Then, I have a better attitude and energy to get back to work. I also started singing again—I’m part of an *a capella* group and we have a lot of fun! And, few months ago I started working from home on Fridays. I use that day to plan, to get caught up and to tee up priorities for the week ahead. People have asked, *How did you get that?* I say, *Have you ever asked?*”

Antonio enjoys his work as an individual contributor and is excited about the opportunities he has had to learn and have impact at NetWorx Global. “I have the same role as when I started, but I have been lucky to do interesting work, with people who challenge and support me. I’m not bored. I actually have a lot of autonomy—and I don’t work weekends!” He feels valued by the company and has a sense of gratitude as well. “I’m here because I like the people. I’m at a stage in my life where my friends are moving on to other jobs, and they post about their raises, or perks or opportunities to travel. I think about it sometimes, too, and have a little fear of missing out—but you have to be careful not to always think the grass is greener somewhere else. I have built a good network here; if I go somewhere else, I have to start that over. I won’t just be able to pick up the phone and ask a question or get to the

right people quickly. And, I've got people who are pulling me into their projects, asking me to contribute, helping me think about my career. That's a benefit you can't get on day one at another company."

Outside of work, Antonio is a committed youth sports coach and plays on a co-ed soccer team. "I've had people say, *I can't believe you have the time! Why are you so involved?* ... It's like people are surprised that you have a willingness to focus on something different, something more than work. But I think it makes me better at my job." He grew up playing sports, and he values physical fitness, but the camaraderie of being part of a team is more important to him. It's something that he tries to

"People are surprised that you have a willingness to focus on something different, something more than work. But I think it makes me better at my job."

instill in the young people he coaches—and he sees parallels to how he thinks about teams and collaboration at work. "I'm pretty good at getting people pumped up, working together, focused on progress—even if we're not going to win today."

Lessons of Thriving

Never have people had more autonomy to create a context to thrive—to shape their careers and lives, to be engaged and invested in work, to be happy and productive in a sustainable way. That may seem surprising, given the collaborative demands and pressures people experience at work. But, what we found in our research is that thriving at work often is as much or more about the relationships and quality of interactions with others as the type or pace of work.

Our research repeatedly shows that those working in difficult circumstances, or in mundane roles, are just as likely to thrive as those who are in jobs that, on the surface, seem ideal or inspiring. The difference is that people who are thriving at work are proactive and intentional in shaping the network and their collaborative practices in ways that create purpose and allow sustainable, effective performance. They take control over what they can—which is far more than many people realize—rather than being defined narrowly or by the demands of their current role.

The people we interviewed described four strategies that allowed them to play offense, rather than defense, and benefitted from a sense of thriving and well-being at work.

9 **Reduce Collaborative Overload to Regain Time and Space**

Collaborative overload driven by time in meetings, on the phone or answering email is a significant roadblock to being effective—and thriving—at work. And it is a problem that is not going away soon as it is fueled by globalization, matrixed organizations, 24/7 connectivity and, often, a push for "one-firm" shared decision making and inclusion of diverse voices. Whether because of a surge in volume or intensity of work or due to a relentless increase in demands over time, people end up attending meetings, accepting requests and responding to calls, emails and texts at all hours, and are consumed by work that others could do.

Our research has shown that we create collaborative patterns and habits that on the margin do not seem like a big deal yet

accumulate to significant amounts of time that absorb our days. The good news is that people can gain back 18-24 percent of collaborative time by being proactive along three fronts.

While it is easy to see external reasons for overload (your boss, the extra assignment, not enough resources), it is more difficult to see the ways our struggle is self-imposed. Often beliefs or mindsets drive how we work with others and what we take on. Our interviews revealed a series of these values that can lead us to jump in on occasion when we shouldn't: a need for accomplishment, desire to be in-the-know, getting identity from helping others and then becoming the path of least resistance, fear of missing out or fear of loss of control. People who were thriving recognized their personal patterns—often after a rough time at work, personal or professional relationship problems, or a health crisis—and worked to counteract them. They *challenged beliefs* by understanding how identity and ways they choose to engage drive excessive collaborative demands.

People also *imposed structure* by focusing on their priorities and adapting roles, routines and interactions for efficiency. They defined clear objectives that helped them prioritize their time and created rules for how they interacted with others. Finally, more successful people addressed collaborative inefficiencies when they *altered behaviors* by employing appropriate communication channels and promoting efficient network norms. They improved their meetings—both in-person and video conference—ensuring needed people are present, others are free to decline or come and go, and that time is used for collaborative tasks. They also became more efficient in their use of email and knew when a phone call, text or IM was a better choice. More effective groups also set expectations around response time, especially after hours.

Both Lanie and Nick have seen many people burn out or blow up their personal life because of the overload and stress of work and have thought, *that could be me*. Lanie realized she was often fighting to prove herself as a female executive—with many real challenges—but also some of her own self-imposed fears. Several years ago, after a health crisis, she made the

decision to be unapologetic about her family commitments—and she has enjoyed three promotions since. Nick likes to be hands-on and enjoys the thrill of being able to jump in, help and solve problems. But, after a stretch where he didn't say no and was playing catch-up every night (often until 1 a.m.), his wife called him out: either change how you work or change jobs. He took the challenge and, with the help of a coach, learned to pause before saying yes to a request or jumping into a conversation or email thread. He started to ask: *Is my involvement really necessary? Is it driven by my ego or fear? What happens if I wait or say no?*

Lanie, Nick, Ayesha and Antonio all had one or two ways they imposed structure and changed their behaviors to better manage their collaborative time. Lanie had a weekly calendar-review routine to look ahead to block time and shift tasks. Nick focused on creating more effective meetings and setting his rhythm for work (email three times a day, adding tasks to his calendar, scheduling times on his calendar as *Do Not Disturb*). Ayesha worked closely with her teams to rebalance workload, manage expectations of others and protect time for top priorities. Antonio learned to hold 15 minutes after each meeting to take notes or quickly execute tasks and to set aside two-hour blocks of time every day for focused work. He worked with the engineering group to establish rules about emails, so they are clearly tagged based on action needed.

 **Often, we look for the big things—a new technology or a re-organization of the team—that will allow us to turn the corner on collaborative overload and gain more time. This is not how the game is won; collaborative overload is like death by 1,000 cuts; there is no big, heroic solution. People who are more effective at managing collaborative overload do two things. First and most important, they do not cede control to others—they see overload as something they can and will influence. Second, they identify five or six behaviors that can have the most impact and then are vigilant about engaging in those behaviors to reclaim 18-24 percent of their time.**

Cultivate a Network that Draws You to Personal and Professional Priorities

We found through our interviews that people who were thriving had clarity on expertise they wanted to deploy in their work and values they wanted to live through their career. They were intentional in how they spent their time and created networks that pulled them to their professional and personal objectives. Over time, their network materialized key opportunities that enabled them to do work they found more meaningful.

Without clarity of expertise and values, people were more easily pulled into unwanted projects and roles. They fell into a defensive posture that negatively impacted their well-being.

Most knowledge workers or leaders spend 85% or more of their time in a given week on email, in meetings and on the phone. This places an enormous—and invisible—cost on organizations and people. The good news is that making just 5-6 small changes, you can claw back 18-24% of your collaborative time.

Assess your own collaborative practices with our Understanding Collaborative Overload diagnostic at www.networkassessments.org/collaborative-overload.

We routinely heard stories of people who felt defined by the system and became less productive and more stressed, trapped and overwhelmed. They were more likely to feel compromised by long days, difficult relationships and negative workplace politics. Some had challenges with their health or personal relationships that were ultimately a product of letting others (e.g., bosses, teammates, under-performing subordinates, etc.) chart their course.

Over the span of her career, Lanie experienced times of thriving and times when she felt she was in the wrong place doing the wrong job. When she gained clarity on her personal and professional priorities, she was able to take steps accordingly. Her North Star objectives informed decisions about her calendar each week, and over time, she began to enjoy greater career satisfaction and a sense of well-being.

Antonio, too, had clear personal and professional priorities. At this stage of his career, he saw that he was gaining the experience and building networks that allowed him to thrive now—and will contribute to his long-term career aspirations. His path was not based on what other people expected of him—and that sense of control and choice was a powerful source of thriving at work.

 **Too often, people move ahead in their careers based on other people's priorities, or drift into work and roles they wouldn't choose. People who thrive at work are clear on both the expertise they want to deploy and the values they want to live through their work—and they proactively build a network that supports their aspirations.**

Make Network Investments that Create a Sense of Purpose in Your Work

A sense of purpose is only partially tied to the nature of the work. Our interviews also clearly revealed that purpose is heavily established through relationships and interactions in our networks. Importantly, people who were thriving proactively invested in relationships that helped them see

that their efforts had meaning. They structured their time and pursued opportunities for enjoyable, purposeful and positive interactions. As people experienced these valuable interactions, they brought themselves more fully to their work. Negative or draining interactions remained but seemed more manageable or balanced if people had even a few purposeful relationships at work.

In contrast, when people didn't have colleagues, mentors, managers and leaders that supported a sense of purpose in work, they felt trapped or isolated. They were unsure of their value or unique contribution and felt depleted, rather than energized, by interactions with colleagues. Obstacles and setbacks seemed overwhelming, rather than being a challenge to face with others.

Feeling a part of something larger than oneself is one way to gain a sense of purpose; people we interviewed sought this connection in various ways. Often, they looked for people who cared about the same things they did—*pushing the technology, efficient processes, creativity, work hard/play hard*—and worked with them whenever possible. Thriving people always had at least one project or task they looked forward to because of the people involved. For Ayesha and Nick, the integration network became a significant source of purpose as the group galvanized around learning, co-creation and potential for impact.

People who were thriving preserved time for people and activities that supported a sense of purpose and meaning, rather than allowing weeks to go by without energizing, purposeful interactions. Ayesha and her close work friend routinely pulled each other into projects because they knew they would challenge each other in a positive way. Lanie avoided the slow takeover of draining interactions by offsetting weeks filled with difficult or low-purpose commitments with time for more positive, high-value interactions. Others we interviewed shifted the workload within a group to offer a better mix of energizing interactions, worked on projects that cut across silos (planning a speaker series, organizing a company-wide family day, being an onboarding sponsor) or got involved in company-supported external activities, such as tutoring at an elementary school.

 **People often think a sense of purpose is tied to the work one does, but our research shows it is as much or more about the interactions you have. People who are more satisfied in their careers pursue work relationships and collaborations that yield a sense of purpose. This can come from creative work, a chance to have direct impact, efforts to give to or help others, or an opportunity to be a part of something bigger than themselves. And, it doesn't take a lot of these connections to create a benefit—just one or two has a positive impact on people thriving and engaging in their organization.**

12 Buffer from Work and Anchor in Non-Work Networks to Gain Perspective and Foster Well-Being

In our interviews, people who were thriving in work created rules, set expectations and developed their network in ways that fostered confidence, perspective and physical and emotional well-being. They did this in two key ways: *buffering* from the demands of work with a few firm rules—and, more surprising—*anchoring* in life beyond the job by committing to one or two groups outside of work.

Putting up a few boundaries—often just making one or two small changes—allowed people shut off work, recharge and create a greater sense of control over their time. Like Lanie, Nick, Ayesha and Antonio, people we interviewed made all different choices, based on their role, commitments and preferences. Examples include:

- Check emails just three times a day. Let key people know to text, IM or call if they truly need an immediate response.
- Block times to focus on friends or family. Don't answer your phone during family dinner or after a certain time each evening. Avoid bringing work home on weekends.
- Build in hard stops at points in the work day or week. Go for a run at lunch twice a week; work from home one day a week; leave work 15 minutes early to avoid traffic.

Anchoring is a more counter-intuitive strategy for thriving—especially as people's work seems to demand more and more time and attention. Our research repeatedly showed that people who were thriving were anchored by connections into at least on one and, more often, two non-work group. The details varied. People anchored in community, volunteering, exercise, sports, family traditions, intellectual or academic interests, social groups, artistic interests, and religious and spiritual practices. Our busy, successful people at NetWorx Global were committed to family and church activities, golf, a cycling club, volunteering in the community, classes at the gym, a singing group, coaching and playing sports.

For people who were thriving, these groups and activities were not optional: they were commitments that were rarely cancelled. They expressed the benefits of non-work networks in various ways:

- **They give you a reality check.** All of life isn't lived in the bubble of work. There are other things people care about and other ways to live.
- **They foster gratitude.** Deadlines, pressures and challenges are not the only things you notice. You pay attention to the good things in your life.
- **They provide opportunity to learn from different people in different spheres of life.** You see patterns or make connections that can be applied or adapted to work.
- **They help you be resilient.** You are not limited by one role. Your identity is not wrapped up in what is happening

professionally. When you define yourself broadly, you are energized and strengthened by other aspects of your life when work is difficult.

- **They build confidence.** You are less dependent on one company. When you are not operating out of fear, you make better decisions for the business, your current work and in planning for the future.
- **They promote focused performance.** When you anchor in networks that encourage healthy habits (sleeping, eating well, exercise), you improve physical well-being, cognitive function and emotional regulation.



Many people feel they are too busy to make regular or substantial commitments to activities and groups outside of work, or their essential family responsibilities. They think of it as optional and something to do someday when work eases up. In fact, people who are thriving are busy or have high-stress jobs—but anchoring in at least one (ideally two) non-work groups helps them sustain their mental and physical energy.

Conclusion

The collaborative intensity of work has exploded over the past decade. The research is clear that networks of relationships and collaborative endeavors within and across organizations play a crucial role in individual performance, as well as career satisfaction, resilience and well-being.

In reading this paper, we hope you begin to see how network interactions contribute to whether people do—or don't—successfully innovate, execute and thrive at work. By understanding the hidden network and paying attention to specific ways you interact within the network, you can gauge the health of your personal network. Consider the subtle—perhaps counterintuitive—ways you can engage with others that would earn the greatest impact for you, your work and the network.