Networking Configurations in Professional Service Firms: How Consultants and Auditors Develop their Social Capital

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Two important features characterize high performance service organizations: As knowledge represents their crucial resource its development and exchange is of major importance for the competitiveness of the professional service firm (PSF) (Sarvary, 1999, Engwall & Kipping, 2002). Second, high performing service organizations such as consultancies and audit companies pride themselves to employ some of the most talented and highly ambitious graduates (Maister, 1993). In such a context, the development of personal networks can been seen as particularly important: To come up with innovative solutions a consultant/auditor has to effectively collaborate with multiple groups such as partners, clients, peers and team members helping him/her to exploit existing knowledge and explore new approaches. At the same time these contacts are not only instrumental in "getting the job done" but also in accelerating individual career advancement (De Graaf & Flap, 1988, Lin, Ensel & Vaughn, 1981, Marsden & Hurlbert, 1988).

When examining the role of networks and networking for career success a great number of contributions focus on the characteristics of organizational actors' networks: The number of structural holes has been found to be positively related to career progression (Brass, 1984), pay level (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001) or performance evaluations (Burt et al., 2000). Other authors confirm the role of network centrality to be positively related with workplace performance ratings (for example Mehra et al., 2001 or Cross & Cumming, 2004). Some of the benefits derived from such networks include formal and informal information exchange regarding career planning and job opportunities (Boxman et al., 1991), professional support and greater visibility with senior management (Linehan, 2001).

While research gives evidence of the overall conclusion that "individuals who cannot network and leverage their positions in their organizations are unlikely to be rewarded" (Carpenter & Wade, 2002) and such findings intuitively ring true to practitioners, surprisingly little is known about how people do actually network. What networking strategies do organizational actors actually use to develop their social capital? Are there different patterns of network development and if so, what do these patterns look like? Considering that people seem to be more or less successful in developing their social capital another closely related question is what differentiates good networkers from bad networkers.

This study looks at how 52 professionals in the consulting and auditing industry build up their networks over the first 18 months after being promoted to a manager position. The choice of study participants at mid-career stage, roughly speaking those who survived the first five years and then got promoted to manager level is based on the assumption that this is a key phase in a service professional's career path representing a major shift in the his/her activities: While working as a senior consultant/auditor on one particular consulting/auditing mandate at one client company reporting to one manager leading this project, the employee who has been promoted manager is leading multiple (mostly two or three) projects at the same time, having to mange multiple project teams that do the actual audit or consulting work at the client company and report to the various partners heading these projects. The implication of this career progression is that service professionals have to enlarge their network of relationships considerably, dealing with a maximum number of different stakeholders: Clients and partners, peers, mentors, team members and other external contacts, managing downwards as well as upwards.

The aim of this work is twofold: In a first part we explore what networking strategies organizational actors employ to build up their social capital. We define “networking strategy” as an ensemble of activities an organisational actor uses to construct his/her network. Such a strategy consists of a multitude of actions involving different stakeholders within and outside the organization. Using a grounded theory approach we analyze our extensive interview data to describe the dimensions that characterize a networking strategy. We then perform a cluster analysis to detect any distinctive networking configurations among our sample. Findings indicate three networking configurations: The Game-players, the Trade-off makers and the Low-keys. For the first group networking seems to be a way of life, they are networking upwards as well as downwards inside and outside their organization. Trade-off makers concentrate their networking activities and network mostly upwards while the Low-keys exhibit a present focused non-calculative networking strategy focusing mostly on networking downwards.

Describing each type of networking configuration we enhance our understanding of these patterns in a second phase by examining how they are related to network characteristics and social identity measures. We find that the three networking configurations are related to network characteristics such as network size and density and social identity scores on role clarity, co-worker integration and organizational commitment.

Implications for further theory development as well as practical implications for career management in professional service organizations are discussed.

Key words: Networking, PSF, configurational approach

NETWORKING CONFIGURATIONS IN PROFESSIONSAL CONFIGURATIONS IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS: HOW CONSULTANTS AND AUDITORS DEVELOP THEIR SOCIAL CAPITAL

The role of social capital has become a prominent topic in management research. Social capital as “the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) is seen to be of crucial importance to access to information, resources, influence, and solidarity (Adler & Kowen, 2002). Some of the benefits derived from networks include formal and informal information exchange regarding career planning and job opportunities (Boxman et al., 1991), professional support and greater visibility with senior management (Linehan, 2001). Organizational actors have been shown to cultivate and exploit social capital to advance their careers (De Graaf & Flap, 1988, Marsden & Hurlbert, 1988). Van Emmerik et al. (2006) found that the engagement in such informal and formal networks is associated with more career satisfaction.

When examining the role of networking for career success a great amount of contributions focus on the characteristics of organizational actors’ networks: The number of structural holes has been found to be positively related to career progression (Brass, 1984), pay level (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001) or performance evaluations (Burt et al., 2000). The extent of structural holes has also been shown to be positively correlated with an ego’s number of contacts at higher organizational levels which are themselves positively correlated with access to organisational information as well as career sponsorship (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001, also Cross & Cummings, 2004). Job candidates whose social networks include a tie to the hiring organization negotiate larger increases to their initial salary offers than candidates who do not have a tie to the organization (Seidel et al., 2000). Looking at specific network types Sparrowe and Linden (2005) find that a member’s advice network centrality is positively related to his/her level of influence as network centrality grants him/her control of knowledge flows and information (also Salk & Brannen, 2000). Other authors confirm network centrality to be positively related with workplace performance ratings (for example Mehra et al., 2001 or Cross & Cumming, 2004).

These research results seem to give evidence for researchers' overall conclusion that "individuals who cannot network and leverage their positions in their organizations are unlikely to be rewarded" (Carpenter & Wade, 2002). At the same time such findings intuitively ring true to practitioners when reflecting on their own experiences. Yet while the critical role of networking for career success does not seem to be in doubt surprisingly little is known about how people do actually network. What networking strategies do organizational actors actually use to develop their social capital? Are there certain networking patterns we can detect about how networking is done?

Contributions shedding some light on the question of networking strategies come from three different perspectives: The contingency perspective contributes indirectly to this question by pointing out some of the contingency factors to influence strategies used in networks: Stevenson and Greenberg (2000) for example showed that the context - a favourable or unfavourable political opportunity structure - as well as the network position (peripheral or central) have a major impact for determining organizational actors' influence strategies (direct action, use of brokers or the use of coalitions). This perspective is however more focused on contextual factor that may potentially influence networking strategies than with the strategies themselves. A second perspective touching on the question of networking strategies is research on different network types: Ibarra and Hunter's (2007) work on networking finds that managers construct different types of networks: operational, personal, and strategic: While operational networks help them manage current internal responsibilities aiming at the accomplishment of a specific tasks, the personal networks enhance their personal development by providing referrals, information as well as coaching and mentoring. Finally, strategic networking focuses on future challenges by making managers aware of new business directions and the stakeholders they need to enlist aiming for maximum leverage. Schaafsma (1997) talks about four “networking styles” - bureaucratic, participatory, reactionary and democratic- reminding the reader of Blake and Mouton’s (1968) managerial grid. Unfortunately the author only describes the two dimensions of agency and structure to categorise the networking styles and assumes that managers will be able to adopt their networking styles according to the “dominant concerns and values of the action and members at different times.” The research on different types of networks implies that managers have to use different strategies for constructing these different networks as each type of network serves different situations and purposes. The question how concretely organizational actors go about constructing these different network types and if there are different, perhaps equally valid strategies to yield the same results rests unanswered. Last but not least a variety of “how to” career guides advise people how to network. They combine anecdotal accounts of how people network with advice prescribing certain behaviours such as to “work the floor”, “get to know people” (Williams, 2000) or to “branch out and get your name out there”. These networking guidelines include recommendations such as meeting key players, going to local events and dinners, or assisting new recruits and giving career advice. The problem of such guidelines is that they tend to be quite general and more prescriptive in terms of what is seen as good networking behaviour than descriptive in terms of what organisational actors actually do.

AIM OF THIS STUDY

Despite researchers' interest in social capital and networks and practitioners' interest in the topic of networking one of the still unanswered key questions in this topic area is whether there different patterns of network development and if so, how do these patterns look like? The aim of this study is twofold. First, we want to explore what networking configurations organizational actors employ to build up their social capital. We define "networking configuration" as an ensemble of activities an organisational actor uses to construct his/her network. Such a configuration can be described as a pattern consisting of a "multidimensional constellation of conceptually distinct characteristics" (Meyer et al. 1993) involving different stakeholders and actions within and outside the organization. Considering that people seem to be more or less successful in developing their social capital a key question is what differentiates good networkers from bad networkers.

In a first phase any detectable networking configurations will be described using attributes that reflect how organizational actors manage their relationships. In a second part we want to enhance our understanding of these networking configurations by examining if and if so how they are related to network characteristics and social identity measures.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study looks at how professionals in the consulting and auditing industry build up their networks over the first 18 months after being promoted to a manager position. The rational for choosing high performance service organizations to study network development is based on two assumptions: As knowledge is the key resource of service organizations its creation, further development and exchange is particularly crucial in these industries (Sarvary, 1999, Engwall & Kipping, 2002). To come up with innovative solutions in this highly knowledge intensive business networking is seen as crucial for exploiting existing knowledge as well as for exploring new knowledge and expertise (Swan et al. ,1999). Collaboration with other service professionals and presumably network development seem to be particularly important in this context. The choice of participants at mid-career stage, roughly speaking those who survived the first three to five years and then got promoted to manager level is based on the assumption that this is a key phase in a service professional's career path. Preliminary interviews conducted with HR employees and partners in the auditing and consulting industry outlined that the move from senior consultant or senior auditor to the role of a project manager represents a major shift in a professional's activities: While working as a senior consultant/auditor on one particular consulting/auditing mandate at one client company reporting to one manager leading this project, the service professional who has been promoted manager is leading multiple (mostly two or three) projects at the same time, having to mange multiple project teams that do the actual audit/consulting work at the client company and report to the various partners heading these projects. The advancement to the manager position requires competency in structuring the work of others and leading an engagement team (Stumpf, 1999). The implication of this career progression is that service professionals have to enlarge their relationships considerably, dealing with a maximum number of different stakeholders: Peers, mentors, clients and partners (Stumpf, 1999), managing downwards as well as upwards.

Sample

The sample consisted of a total of 53 service professionals. 16 of them came from the German offices of a global strategy consulting company, 37 participants were employees of a Big Four auditing firm, 15 from the company's London office, 22 from the New York office. The sample was representative in terms of age, gender, number of years with the company and areas of specialization for each company. All participants had been promoted to a manager position not more than three months before the beginning of the study. Table 1 gives an overview of the sample characteristics.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data Collection

Data collection took place at two times: At time T1 at the beginning of the study as participants had just been promoted to a manager position within the last three months and on average 15 months later at time T2. Study participants were guaranteed that all their data would be held confidential and only aggregate-level data reported back to their organization. Each data gathering time T1 and T2 consisted of a narrative semi-structured interview and a network survey. Three of the authors conducted the interviews at both times, starting out to interview all together for the first couple of interviews and then continuing interviewing in rotating pairs.

The first round interviews aimed to create an understanding about the participant's work and role as a manager trying to capture their day-to-day experience. We adopted an open-ended semi-structured style to best capture the newly promoted manager's perspective (Spradley, 1979). The interview started with broad questions, such as "Could you please tell me what you do as a project manager?" As all participants had only been recently promoted we used open-ended questions to understand how this new position differed from what the service professionals had done before, what were any particular challenges they were experiencing in this new role and how they imagined to develop over the course of the next year on their job. As the interviews progressed, we probed for specific points of information and terminology (for instance, "What do you mean by the phrase 'managing your team well'?", "How do you do this, 'keeping a good client relationship'?") through more structured questions (Spradley, 1979). Particular emphasis was put on the question how they were managing their key relationships in their professional life. The first round interviews lasted each between 1 and 1,5 hours. They were all recorded and then transcribed.

At the end of the first interview at T1 and about two weeks before the second interview at T2, participants were asked to fill out a standard egocentric network survey (Knoke & Kuklinski, 1982, Wasserman & Faust, 1994) asking them to list the names of the people in their network they would consult for task advice, innovation advice, buy-in, and professional growth advice as well as who were their social and external contacts helping them to be successful in their job. To ensure comparability T1 and T2 surveys were completely identical. When filling out the survey at T2 participants were not provided with any information about what contacts they had listed for the network survey at T1. As part of the survey participants completed an ego-network matrix and gave further information characterising the relationship with their network alters, e.g. the duration, length and frequency of interaction, the location and hierarchical position of the alter, as well as cognitive and emotional trust and closeness to the alters were assessed. We used Ucinet to plot the T1 and T2 networks for each participant.

As a consequence any network changes between T1 and T2 could be traced back and became part of the interview at T2. Between 14 and 16 months after the first round interview we met again with the study participants for a second interview. We felt that this time span was acceptable to assume that participants would have had the time to settle in their job, implying that strategies how they were managing their relationships would have started to evolve and thus their networks would have started to develop. An average of 15 months also seemed to be a reasonable time span to assume that study participants would have – if at all –

only a very vague recollection of what they put into their network survey at T1, implying that we gathered network data at two statistically independent events.

Interviews at T2 averaged between 1,5 and 2 hours in length and were again recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interviews at T2 were more structured than at T1. The overall aim of this encounter was to ask the participants for a recollection of what they had been doing to manage and develop the relationships helping them to be successful in their job. The interview started with open questions about any highlights during the last year such as any major professional or personal changes, any major achievements participants felt proud of or any unexpected events. As the social network data from T2 was available a few days before the second interview we used the interview for data triangulation, i.e. we probed about any major changes we could detect from comparing a participant's T1 and T2 network survey data, for example a major change in network size or density, or a shift in network membership to understand the story behind the numbers. Emphasis was placed on the root causes and intentionality of these changes, i.e. had participants actively brought them about and if so how or were they "just happening". By asking participants to make themselves sense of the data we were aiming to uncover any implicit knowledge about how they went about building their networks and capture the actual reasoning why network changes were occurring. The interview also served as a means to uncover any contradictions or inconsistencies between what the network data seemed to suggest and what the interviewee was telling us, e.g. if according to the network survey the trust score with one alter went down considerably and the interviewee told us in the second interview about a conflict with this alter we concluded that both data gathering methods confirmed a similar change in the alter relationship, if however the contrary was the case we probed for any explanations. As preliminary interviews with HR personnel and partners at the consulting and auditing company had found that client interactions represented a key consideration for managers' career advancement we asked for any changes in their client interactions participants had recognized throughout the year, e.g. the time they spent selling and or socializing with clients but also how many new clients they had taken on and how this had been happening.

An additional social identity survey was given to participants at T2 after the second round interview. Participants were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale the appropriateness of a series of items assessing task mastery (Morrison, 1993, Morrison, 2002 and Chao et al. 1994), role clarity (Rizzo, 1970 and Ashford, 1986), social integration with co-workers and clients (Morrison, 1993 and Chao, 1994), and organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

DATA ANALYSIS

A Grounded Theory Approach

Data analysis proceeded in three main phases. The goal of the first phase after the first round of interviews was to identify generative elements constituting a networking configuration. Interview transcripts were coded on the basis of statements referring to networking in its widest sense. A codable statement typically consisted of a sequence of sentences conveying a coherent point about a networking partner (e.g. a client, or a peer) and some action undertaken with this partner (e.g. taking a client to lunch or having a drink with a peer after work.). Following Miles and Huberman (1994) we used constant iteration to create exhaustive categories. One author read the entire first round interview transcripts while two other authors each read 50% of the transcripts. Each one coded the data individually thereby ensuring that each transcript was coded by two people. This process generated a variety of first order concepts. For example, service professionals referred to “client entertainment” to describe activities they undertook with existing clients to reinforce their client relationship.

The authors then met to compare their categories and to generate labels based on a more general description that subsumed the first order concepts. We aggregated the categories into generative elements (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for which we created labels through abstraction resulting in a tentative network configuration framework consisting of 12 theme dimensions (partner focus, leveraging relationships, client focus, selling, team focus, nurturing, peer focus, exploration, exploitation, attitude towards networking, selection). The framework was shared with the fourth researcher who had not yet been involved in the coding process, and who recommended in the interests of parsimony, several categories be combined. Eight categories resulted (partner focus, client focus, team focus, peer focus, exploration, exploitation, attitude, select). To assess the reliability of the categorization scheme the author who had not been involved in the coding process independently coded the data thereby checking if the transcripts could be cleanly coded into the eight categories. This process suggested no new categories and resulted in a 92% agreement rate. For the remaining statements without agreement the authors went back to the original statements and discussed any differences in interpretation resulting in a clarification and final agreement on the coding. Table 2 gives an overview of the networking configuration dimensions identified in the first round interview transcripts.

Insert Table 2 about here

While the first four dimensions refer to a specific stakeholder group service professionals aimed at for networking purposes we found that study participants also referred to a networking style in a broader sense. Their activities were not aimed at networking with a specific stakeholder group e.g. a partner but described an unfocused yet not aimless approach to networking through meeting new people. Examples of such behaviour were described as “I really try to participate at the office socials on Thursdays, it's not an obligation at all, sometimes it is boring yet you often just meet interesting and fun people working for the same organization you had no clue they existed. And sometimes this is the beginning of a great contact to have." We labelled this behaviour "exploration". In contrast to "exploration" we also found "exploitation" describing a category of behaviour aimed at extracting something specific out of relationships. Existing literature on professional service firms confirms the relevance of these emerging categories in terms of who are important stakeholders for network development (see for example Linehan (2001) about the role of peers for information exchange and Fosstenlokken et al. (2003) on the crucial role of clients for the development of service professionals) as well as different behavioural strategies how to network (for example Williams (2000) on "aiming to meet as many people as possible" versus "highly targeted networking" thereby referring to exploration and exploitation).

While the first round of interviews aimed at drawing a picture of how the newly promoted managers were coping with their new role and who were key contacts for them for getting their job done the second round of interviews 15 months later aimed at looking much more specifically what the managers were specifically doing to develop their relationships. Based on the generative elements of networking configurations identified in the first phase of analysis the goal of the second phase was to identify any differences in terms of networking configurations among study participants. Our assumption was that with 15 to 18 months in the manager position it would be possible to identify any differences in terms of the networking activities but also the intensity of the activities that managers would be exposing.

To accurately describe the networking configurations employed by each service professional we undertook a second stage of coding of the T2 interview transcripts with the aim to develop scales for the identified dimensions of a networking configuration. Two authors read each the same half of the second round transcripts independently to extract any scale items for the dimensions of networking defined in phase 1. The analysis of the interview transcripts was a comprehensive process of constant iteration (Miles & Huberman, 1994) where the two researchers moved between the interview transcripts to extract and exemplify scales, then compared, discussed and refined their intermediate scale results and went back again to analyse the transcript data. We reduced the data by excerpting key portions for each dimension of networking configuration from the transcripts. We then summarized each excerpt and displayed both summaries and sample quotes from the excerpts in a chart. The emerging scales were discussed one by one whereby we constantly compared and contrasted data and emerging categorization schemes in order to build and refine the scales. If revisited data did not fit well into a category, we revised its defining parameters. To keep track of the emerging scales for each networking dimension we recorded the scale item definitions in a codebook (Boyatzis, 1998). Using such an evolving codebook helped us to capture the common meaning to be represented in the essence of a multitude of observations (Locke, 2001). As we progressed though the reading of the transcripts the inclusion of additional data caused us to verify and enrich, add, or disconfirm our scale categories. The emergent scales continued to be refined as we revisited the data to examine its fit with the scales. We continued this process of gradual fine tuning multiple times until we could not find any more refinement of the scales. Table 3 summarizes the variable scales.

Insert Table 3 about here

Once an agreement on the scale items to be further used was reached, the two researchers continued coding the remaining transcripts individually. As the second half of interview transcripts could be coded with the defined scale items, no new data categories emerged. After this individual round of coding we compared scores among raters. Inter-rater reliability was 84%. For any cases of disagreements the two coders went back to the original transcript and confronted the individual ratings for each participant. After an in-depth discussion of the transcripts we made a final coding decision.

Cluster Analysis

As a networking configuration can be characterized by a bundle of different variables describing the service professionals' networking behaviours we were looking for an appropriate method to classify the participants' networking profiles into coherent groups characterized by similar patterns of networking behaviour. We did not have any prior assumptions about important differences within our population of service professionals in terms of how their networking strategies might differ. The use of cluster analysis to identify any discrete categories and to classify the networking configurations from the raw data therefore seemed the most appropriate empirically based method. As the defining variables (clientfocus, partnerfocus, peerfocus, teamfocus, exploration, exploitation, select) resulting from the coding process used different scales, we standardized the variables (Hair et al. 1992, Harrigan, 1985). We also checked for any interdependencies between the variables through a correlation analysis leading to the elimination of the variable "select" which was highly correlated with the "team focus" variable. To conduct the cluster analysis (using STATA) we followed a two step approach as recommended by numerous authors (see for example Hair et al., 1992, Punj & Stewarts, 1983, Hartigan, 1967 and Milligan, 1980, Ketchen & Shook, 1996): In a first phase we conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's linkage to determine the ideal number of clusters[1]. In spite its' superiority compared to other hierarchical clustering algorithms Ward's linkage is more impacted by the presence of outliers (Milligan, 1980). We therefore screened the data for potential outlier participants and found one case among the 53 study participants. This was the very unusual case of a strategy consultant who

[1] Multiple authors have documented the superiority of Ward's method among the hierarchical clustering approaches, see for example Kuiper & Fisher, 1975, Blashfield, 1976, Mojena, 1977, Milligan & Isaac, 1980, Edelbrock, 1979, Edelbrock & McLaughlin, 1980, Bayne et al., 1980.

had significantly changed her role within the company: Instead of being a “regular” strategy consultant serving external clients this person had decided to take on an exclusively internal role working only on “internal projects” aimed at the positioning and the branding of the strategy consulting company. As a consequence, this person did not have any external client contact anymore nor was she leading an assignment team. As we felt that while still working for a strategy consultancy her role had considerably changed and she was not a “traditional” strategy consultant anymore, we decided to eliminate this outlier from the data set (see also Punj & Stewart, 1983). Calinski’s stopping rule as well as the dendrogram indicated that a three cluster solution was optimal. Once the ideal number of clusters was known we ran a k-means cluster analysis for three clusters. This non-hierarchical clustering method has been shown to yield the most robust results as it is reported to be least affected by outliers, error perturbations of the distance measures or the presence of irrelevant attributes or dimensions in the data (Punj & Stewart, 1983). The following graph depicts the three cluster groups in terms of the defining variables.

Insert Graph 1 about here

To enrich our understanding of the meaning of the three clusters and to validate the criterion related validity of our cluster solution we checked if the cluster solutions resulted in any significant differences for non-defining variables (Punj & Stewart, 1983). We ran Scheffe ranges for each cluster on the non-defining variables (these variables came from the network surveys, the social identity survey as well as the non-defining variable generated in the coding process). The following table summarizes the significance of differences found among the three clusters.

Insert Table 4 about here

An ANOVA analysis for the non-defining variables (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984) showed that the non-defining variables exhibited significant mean differences among clusters thereby confirming criterion based validity. Table 5 summarizes the mean differences between clusters on all variables, with the clustering variables shown first and the non-defining validation variables shown second. Because each measure was standardized cluster mean values represent the number of standard deviations from within-market group means (set to zero).

Insert Table 5 about here

NETWORKING CONFIGURATIONS

As table 5 indicates team focus is the only defining variable where we did not find any significant differences among the clusters. This does not mean that the management of the consulting or audit team would not be an important task for all groups. As indicated by the equal medium score for all three cluster groups team management is a pure everyday necessity, a baseline activity without which they could not function.

What differentiates the three clusters is what other activities the groups focus on (or not). As indicated in table 4 exploration and peer-focus differentiate between all clusters: Comparing the means for each cluster the differences in terms of networking configuration become apparent. The first cluster group we named “Trade-off makers” are engaged in some exploration. They are happy to meet other people, seek and enjoy new contacts, yet do not explore with a planned agenda; a strategy we could call “passive exploration”. In contrast, the third cluster group we call “Game-players” expose a behaviour best characterized as “proactive exploration”: They are aggressively seeking to broaden the network. To increase the number of encounters with contacts within or outside the firm, they are at every party or office event, go to seminars, talks and dinners. Even though they do not know what exactly this explorative behaviour will yield they purposefully seek to meet lots of different partners, clients and all sorts of people. “The more the merrier” seems to be the motto. Coherent with this high level of exploration is the finding that the average network size of Game-players is significantly bigger at 18 months on the job (at time 2) than for the two other groups. Also, as indicated by the number of ties Game-players have significantly higher density networks than the two other groups. On the other hand the second cluster group of Low-keys show very little exploration beyond their existing contacts. They are not actively seeking any new contacts, they are satisfied with the contacts they have, and “are fine” with the current network.

The exploration behaviour is further reflected in participants focus on peer relationships. Trade-off makers keep good neighbour relationships with their peers. Low-keys exhibit only weak or no peer relationships. Peers are not part of their networking strategy and thus they do not make any specific investment effort in building peer relationships. Game-players are building strong bonding and support relationships with some peers. The peers the Game-players network with are mostly carefully chosen as Game-players have a heightened awareness what certain peers may bring to a relationship. The carefully chosen peers can help them not only for information exchange but also provide critical resources at key instances. “Say an audit gets pushed back for a week because the client is not ready, these things happen, but you have the complete team staffed to start with the audit, so you find yourself with one senior *(auditor)* and two juniors. Now what happens in this case is that HR would staff them on something else for this week. But before I tell HR I give a quick call to two of my buddies *(e.g. peers, in this case fellow managers)* and I ask them if they are short on staff.” (Audit manager Big Four audit company).

Game-Players versus Trade-off Makers

A couple of variables differentiate the Game-players from the Trade-off makers. As indicated by the mean comparisons the Game-players exhibit the highest activity levels for all stakeholders, meaning partners, clients and peers, as well as the highest levels of exploration and exploitation. Compared to both other clusters the Game-players not only have the biggest networks but have a significantly higher number of external contacts in their networks than the Trade-off makers at T2. Hence while Game-players seem to be "playing" meaning networking all the time upwards and downwards, inside and outside of the company the Trade-off makers are clearly focused on the inside and upward for their networking activities.

Low-Keys

While Game-players and Trade-off makers both exhibit a planned to calculative attitude towards networking, the Low-keys have a much less deliberate attitude towards networking. Their overall networking attitude can be described as need based meaning that they network only in a very focused and punctual way with a specific question or issue in mind. Networking is therefore limited in time and closely linked to specific needs. In line with this finding the actual exploitation behaviour of Low-keys is significantly lower than for the two other groups. They "exploit" relationships to get the job done, taking advantage of current contacts within the frame of their current work. There is however no particular long-term plan behind their networking, it is present focused. In contrast to this members of both other groups can be characterized either as "planned" networkers, meaning that they are intentionally active networkers exhibiting a general consciousness of how networking is important to their role well beyond the pure need based contact seeking. Some can even be characterized as "instrumental" or "calculative" networkers. This means that the service professional identifies "high return" occasions and people for networking, has a clear game plan with target occasions for networking and assesses the costs and benefits of different networking targets and occasions.

As underlined by the means comparison Low-keys are significantly less focused on partners and clients compared to the two other groups. Even though their team focus is comparable to the other groups it is interesting to notice that their efforts to actively select team members are significantly lower than for the Game-players or the Trade-off makers. In general, Low-keys choose team members from the available HR pool, and, if possible, express their preference for certain individuals of that pool. The two other cluster members pursue a strategy of strong proactive selection, meaning that they actively fight to get specific people on their assignments. This is achieved through working behind the scenes, thereby potentially going around the regular process. Examples of how to achieve this are the use of partner authority to get specific people, through carefully developed friendly relationships with the HR staffing personnel or through resource swaps with buddies. Also, compared to the two other clusters Low-keys have on average been with the smallest number of other employers before joining their current firm.

Networking Strategy, Social Identity Measures and Network Characteristics

Looking at the social identity scores Low-keys feel significantly stronger that they have to work under vague directives and orders than the other two groups and they show consistently lower organizational commitment scores: Low-keys do less "enjoy discussing my organization with people outside it", they do feel a significantly weaker attachment to their organization than the Trade-off makers and the Game-players and they would be significantly less "happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization".

Compared to the Trade-off makers Low-keys have a more inward and downward focus of their network: At both times, T1 and T2, the Low-keys have a significantly higher number of staff from support functions or team member staff in their network suggesting that their networking efforts are more concentrated towards managing downwards. Also at T1 a significantly higher number of people from the Low-keys' networks were from the very same office location indicating that the immediate focus of their networking activities was their actual office environment but that they were less in contact with employees from other offices within the same country or other countries. Considering that the size of their network does on average not differ from both other groups at T1 and is about the same size as for the Trade-off makers at T2, we could characterize their networking style as "a small world approach".

In comparison with the Game-players the Low-keys have significantly fewer people serving them for political buy-in at T2 (3 people compared to 5.5 for the Game-players). Looking at the social integration scores it becomes clear that the Low-keys feel significantly less "comfortable around my co-workers"; "seem to be less accepted" by their co-workers and feel significantly "less attached" to their co-workers than the Game-players. As a final overview the characteristics of the three different clusters in terms of networking configurations are summarized in the following table.

Insert Table 6 about here

VALIDATION

To check for the viability of networking configurations discovered with this exploratory approach we took two steps. As suggested by Hair et al. (1992) we carried out a cluster analysis using a different clustering algorithm. The use of Kmedians as a clustering algorithm resulted in three clusters of 24, 10 and 18 participants, indicating that there was a high degree of consistency between the solutions. Second, to validate the clusters and to establish the practical value of them (Ketchen & Shook, 1996) we used expert opinions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In each firm we interviewed a senior partner who had been an informant for our preliminary phase. Aiming at a “strong form” of qualitative validation (Seale, 1999) we presented to them our insights about generative elements of networking configurations and the three configurations we had identified and invited them to make sense of their own networking experiences as well as any networking patterns they had observed during their tenure at their professional service organization. This “external validation” (Punj & Stewart, 1983) lasted between 1-2 hours and generated very positive feedback with multiple follow-up questions on additional characteristics of the presented clusters. Interviewees recognized the rich cluster descriptions as “familiar types I have come across”.

DISCUSSION

The three networking configurations identified through our study contribute to the topic of social capital development in multiple ways: The study provides an empirical grounding of networking based on rather extensive longitudinal data collection. Even though explorative in its character it combines qualitative and quantitative data gathering approaches allowing data triangulation. Our identification of three networking clusters demonstrates that there is not one way of how people network but multiple distinctive patterns. As this is an explorative study it also raises an entire set of questions about networking in general and specific networking configurations in particular:

As for the Low-keys a couple of important questions have to be raised: Low keys are found to have worked for significantly fewer other companies before joining their current employer than the Trade-off makers and the Game-players. This raises the question of whether networking may be interpreted as a learning process. One hypothesis is that professionals may be transferring past experiences they have gained about networking at previous employers to their new jobs. Following this argument that networking may be a result of experience and therefore a developmental process one hypothesis to be tested is that the different networking configurations indicate different levels of “networking proficiency” that may serve as a process model of networking in professional service firms. The first step of mastering the new management role is mastery in team management before managers start exploring and exploiting other relationships. At an intermediate level of network mastery their growing exploration and exploitation efforts may be more client or partner focused. What seems to be a common denominator at that stage is that managers feel that they cannot do all at the same time but they face trade-offs how to dedicate their time. Growing into their new role and becoming more skilled in network development they learn how to leverage and exploit relationships. At this advanced stage networking has become something that they are comfortable with. Having gained depth in their relationships with key stakeholders they now branch out more and more exploring on a broader scale.

There may however be an alternative explanation: The Game-players for whom networking seems to be a way of life may thus have a natural predisposition for “playing the game” and be therefore be more inclined to also explore other companies and environments. The higher number of previous employers may therefore be a reflection of an individual predisposition to establish new relationships. The question of antecedents is also to be raised about two different aspects: Is it the more negative attitude towards networking that acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy for the Low-keys resulting in this group to network to a much smaller extend than the others? Another aspect that deserves further examination is the role of the social identity measures: Is the fact that the Low-keys show less commitment a root cause of their passive networking behaviour or a consequence of their networking frustrations? Thus on a general level, future research should shed some more light on the old question of what comes first, the social integration perception triggering networking behaviour or the networking behaviour having social integration consequences.

Last but not least another set of questions to further explore is what happens to people who employ one of these strategies. What are their implications in terms of career progression? Does one configuration increase chances of making it on the partner track? One hypothesis to be tested is that the Game-players may be the most successful on partner track. Yet is may be that the networking strategy of the Low-keys must not failing per se. Performance data to follow up on the career development of the three cluster members must be a next step to shed light on these issues. Looking at who has left and who is still around may indicate that service professionals of a certain cluster have themselves a higher preference for staying with the professional service firm. Intermediate results seem to suggest that the Low-keys are less committed to stay with the organization. However the differentiation between Game-players and Trade-off makers seems to be far less obvious for this question.

In terms of practical implications an employer especially in a knowledge intensive industry may be fascinated by the apparent ease of the Game-players to network. A natural first reaction may be to try to attract as many of these species as possible into ones company. A word of caution may be raised: It may not necessarily be the best to have the best versed networkers. One hypothesis to be tested in future research is that the species of Game-players with their incredible ease to establish relationships may also be very comfortable to establish relationships with other employers. Being more inward focused it may very well be that the Trade-off makers may turn out to be the most loyal employees.

Reflecting about the passive situation of the Low-keys another practical implication highlighted by Subramaniam & Youndt (2005) can be derived from this research: “An organization's efforts at hiring, training, work design, and other human resource management activities may need to focus not only on shoring up their employees' functional or specific technological skills/expertise, but also on developing their abilities to network, collaborate, and share information and knowledge.” Professional service firms may not only have to look into supporting their employees to develop their networking capabilities but they may have to realize that the support mechanisms to put in place may have to be tailored to the networking configuration an employee exhibits.

Limits

While we think that this research makes a contribution to shed more light on the question of how people develop their social capital a number of limitations have to be recognized: This research is focusing only on service organizations and is so far limited to two professions, consulting and audit. Further research on other industries will be necessary to confirm the validity of the findings in a different context.

Also, other variables that we have not considered in this study may have an influence on organizational actors' networking behavior: Perretti and Negro (2006) showed that the status of organizational team members is related to the level of exploration taking place in teams (high exploration at low and high status level but less exploration at medium status level). Cross et al. (2005) differentiate in their categorization of networks between customized response networks appropriate for settings were both problems and solutions are ambiguous (needed in strategy consulting) from modular response networks where components of a problem and solution are known but the combination or sequence of those components is not yet known (needed in law firms). The type of industry and service sector may therefore require different types of network formation/development.

Last but not least we cannot make a statement about performance implications of network configurations. Future research has to establish if and if so which network configurations may be more appropriate to make it on partner track.

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TABLE 1:
Sample Characteristics

Company	**Consulting (Germany)**	**Audit 1 (London)**	**Audit 2 (New York)**
# participants	16	15	22
# female participants	2	7	6
Average age	31.9	28.0	28.8
# years with the company	3	5	5

TABLE 2:
Dimensions of Networking Configurations

Variable	Description	Examples
Client focus	Activities aiming to enhance the relationship with existing or potential clients	- Client entertainment activities, e.g. taking the client to lunch, dinner, sport or cultural events - Selling activities, e.g. presenting proposals for consulting/auditing projects
Peer focus	Activities aiming to enhance the relationship with peers within the company	- Doing social activities together, e.g. pub, parties - Doing favours e.g. swapping resources for a client mandate - Seeking peer advice whom to recruit into project team
Partner focus	Activities aiming to enhance the relationship with partners the manager works with or may work with in the future	- Doing social activities together, e.g. playing on the same football team - "Selling oneself" e.g. presenting yourself as an expert in a subject area the partner is covering
Team focus	Activities aiming to enhance the relationship with existing or potentially future team members	- Mentoring team members, e.g. giving them career advice - Doing social activities, e.g. taking team members to lunch or dinner
Exploration	Describes activities aiming at maximizing the number of new relationships, seeking to broaden the network, "exploring possibilities"	- Going to a company social event with the aim to meet as many new people as possible and broaden the network
Exploitation	Describes activities aimed at intensifying selected relationships, striving for depth	- Going to a company social event with the aim to talk to x about topic y
Attitude	Describes a general perception about the topic of networking	- Networking is a great way to meet new people, have fun and develop professionally
Select	Describes how staff for consulting/audit assignments is recruited	- HR assigns staff on projects - Partners intervene to nominate certain individuals for a project assignment

TABLE 3:
Variable Scales

Variable	Scale	Definitions
Attitude (towards networking)	0-4	**0 Passive, emergent:** The respondent does not report any effort to go to events for networking purposes, she/he lets the network build on its own, respondent only reacts if drawn by others **1 Only need based:** The respondent happens to actively network but seems to do this only on a need basis, very focused and punctual networking, limited in time, with an exceptional and specific purpose in mind **2 Active/baseline:** The respondent is a casual networker, that is generally active, yet without any pre-planning, he/she opportunistically would seize opportunities when they present themselves **3 Planned:** This is a conscious networker, intentionally active, though no reference to any specific plans or calculations, it can be inferred that the respondent knows what she/he wants to do and why she/he is networking, general consciousness of where they should go **4 Instrumental/calculative:** There is an explicit reference to concrete plans and actions for networking who to network with an when; The professional identifies "high return" occasions and people, has a clear game plan with targeted events; they pre-plan, create or target occasions and can assess the costs and benefits of different networking targets, occasions and strategies
Select	0-2	**0 No selection effort:** Let somebody else (partner, HR) decide who will be allocated to the job, go with what has been given to you. **1 Some selection:** Choosing team members from the available pool; express your preference from a pool that is available including getting information through the grapevine; the baseline **2 Strong proactive selection:** Actively chasing/fighting to get specific people e.g. implicit deals, through partner authority, HR contacts, swaps with buddies, working behind the scenes, potentially going against/around the regular process or refusing pre-allocated team members
Partner focus, client focus, team focus	1-5	**0 No focus**: The respondent's networking is not focused on this target population or he/she is ignoring this target population. Networking with this population is only a logical consequence of the job but the respondent does not focus on them **1 Light/peripheral focus:** This target population is not an important target for the respondent's networking activities **2 Needed to get job done:** The respondent needs the target only to get the work done and is not particularly focussing attention on them; the respondent only realizes the target's importance whenever there is a problem **3 Subservient focus:** The respondent's focus on this population is subservient to another target of networking (partner, client or

		team), baseline **4 One of the main targets** for networking: it enjoys focused attention to this target **5 Primary focus:** This population is the primary target for networking; it implies a focused and intense attention to this target
Peer focus	0-2	**0 Weak or no peer relationships:** Peers are not part of the networking strategy, no specific investment effort in building peer relationships **1 Keeping good neighbour relationships:** Baseline, part of the firm's social norms **2 Very strong relationships**: Building strong bonding/support relationships with some peers
Exploration	0-2	**0 No exploration beyond existing networks:** Does not go beyond the existing contacts, not actively seeking new contacts, satisfied with the contacts they have, "are fine" with/focused on the current network **1 Some exploration:** The respondent is happy to meet other people, seek and enjoy new contacts, yet not with a planned agenda; "passive exploration" **2 The respondent is aggressively seeking to broaden the network:** Increase number of encounters with contacts, e.g. being at every party/event; actively, purposefully in a planned manner seeks to meet lots of new contacts within or outside the firm, e.g. seminars, talks, parties, dinners; "proactive exploration"; "the more the merrier"; The respondent is trying to contact lots of different partners, projects, clients without a precise objective. His/her objective is to "meet lots of people or "get your name out there".
Exploitation	0-5	**0 Not exploiting:** No declared objective to opportunistically extract value from some key relationships in the network **1:** Awareness that it may be important to extract value from some relationships, but the respondent chooses not to/ or cannot do so **2 Just getting the job done:** The respondent is taking advantage of current contacts within frame of the current work with the objective of getting the job done, no particular long-term plan behind this; this is present focused **3:** Present focused; actively extracting value/benefits from current contacts for higher performance now, optimizing, being the best so extracting more value **4 Exploiting relationships for the future:** Clear objective to exploit relationships for further career advancement (beyond the current project) aiming for partnership within the professional firm (career track and promotion oriented) **5 Effectively extracting value:** Elaborate and precise plan how to exploit relationships for the future; clear extraction of value from the relationship in terms of getting political support/extracting key information/getting access to critical resources from the key contact, very conscious time horizon; future gain beyond the success of the current project

GRAPH 1:
Defining Cluster Variables

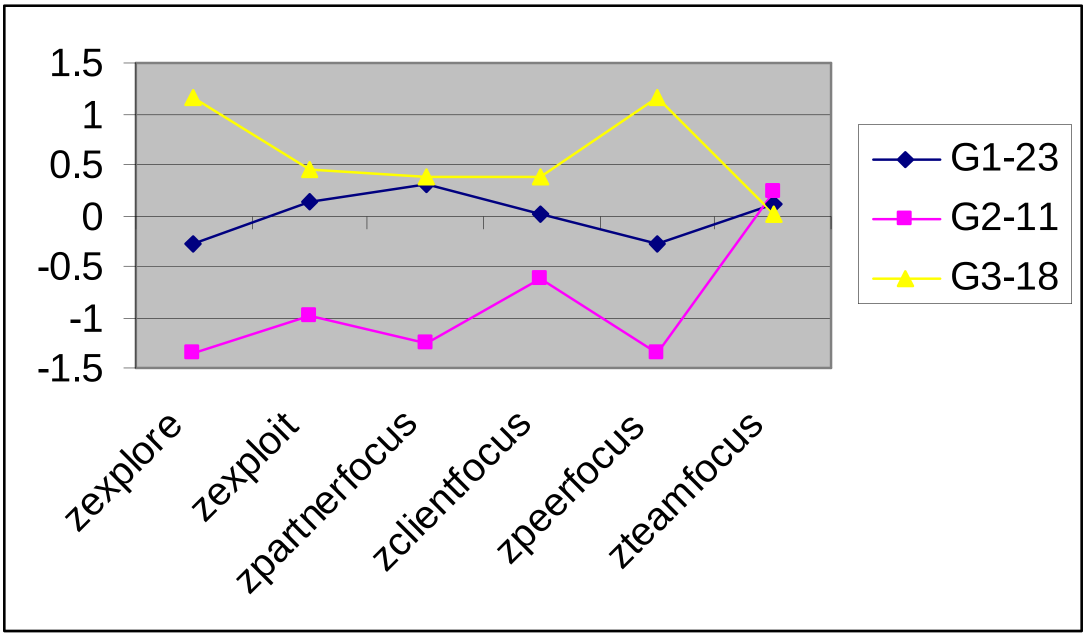

TABLE 4:
Significant Differences Between Clusters (from Scheffe Ranges)

	Cluster 1: Trade-off makers	**Cluster 2: Low keys**
Cluster 2: Low keys	attitude, explore, exploit, partnerfocus, leverage, select, peerfocus, clientfocus, otherfirms, staffT1, staffT2, officeT1, Brole15, Dcommitment1, Dcommitment2, Dcommitment4, orgcommitment	
Cluster 3: Game-players	explore, peerfocus, sizeT2, outsideT2, sizeT2, tiesT2	attitude, explore, exploit, partnerfocus, clientfocus, leverage, select, peerfocus, clientfocus, otherfirms, sizeT2, buyinT2, Brole15, Cintegrationcoworkers1, Cintegrationcoworkers2, Cintegrationcoworkers3, Dcommitment1, Dcommitment2, Dcommitment4, orgcommitment, sizeT2, tiesT2

TABLE 5:
Cluster Mean Comparisons

	Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3		
Defining variables	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**F**
Explore	0.96	0.21	0.18	0.40	2.00	0.00	228.44***
Exploit	3.65	1.03	2.18	1.17	4.06	1.21	9.98**
Partnerfocus	4.26	0.62	2.91	0.83	4.33	0.59	19.12***
Clientfocus	3.65	1.03	2.18	1.17	4.06	1.21	3.75*
Peerfocus	0.96	0.21	0.18	0.40	2.00	0.00	228.44***
Teamfocus	2.87	0.55	3.09	0.83	2.94	0.73	0.4
Validation variables							
Select	3.04	1.07	1.36	1.12	3.39	0.92	14.34***
Other firms	1.48	0.51	0.73	0.47	1.61	0.50	11.77**
Attitude	3.04	1.07	1.36	1.12	3.39	0.92	14.34***
StaffT1	0.73	1.67	2.91	3.45	1.28	1.96	3.49*
OfficeT1	1.04	1.77	2.36	1.69	1.39	1.29	2.54*
SizeT2	13.61	3.45	12.55	6.15	18.28	7.27	4.85*
BuyinTime2	4.05	2.13	3.00	2.05	5.50	2.53	4.49*
OutsideT2	2.26	2.30	3.64	3.61	4.89	4.19	3.16*
TiesT2	78.30	44.62	87.00	104.26	166.65	140.24	4.29*
Role clarity	2.43	0.90	3.30	0.95	2.50	0.99	3.22*
Integration co-workers	2.17	0.98	2.60	0.70	1.67	0.77	4.02*
Organizational commitment 1	3.13	0.87	2.10	0.74	3.67	1.03	9.59**
Organizational commitment 4	2.13	0.87	2.80	1.03	2.06	0.87	4.13*
Organizational commitment total	0.00	0.66	-0.70	0.87	0.27	0.70	5.95*

TABLE 6:
Summary of Cluster Characteristics

Cluster name	Description	Examples from the interview transcripts
3: The Game-players: Networking as a way of life	- Aware, conscious, proactive, calculative and instrumental networking approach - Depth (exploitation) and breath (exploration) - Internal (networking with partners, team members, peers) and external (networking with clients and other externals) - Biggest network size	“Networks are a means to another end: To make yourself more visible, you have to land the best client, this is how you get attention.” “You have to know how to play the game. It’ all about playing the game.” “If I know that x [i.e. a specific partner] is at the social, I go there to talk to him about the new project I want to work on.” “Not every partner is equally important, there is a hierarchy among them and you want to target the most influential ones.”
1: The Trade-off makers	- Upwards focus on partners and clients - Some exploration, some exploitation	“I understand that it [i.e. networking] is important. It’s a give and take and it’s part of my job.” “You cannot be at every event and meet everybody, you have to make a choice of who is the most important, this is what I do.”
2: The Low-keys	- More negative attitude about networking: Networking as artificial or “false”. - Networking is need based, present focused - Low on exploration and exploitation - Focused downwards on the team - Social integration measures: Lower role clarity, lower co-worker integration, lower organizational commitment	"I don't like the falseness of it [i.e. networking] all." “I would only seek them [i.e. contact with more senior managers] in relation to a problem.” “I actually spend quite some time with my team. It is very important to make sure that they know that I am around if they have questions or if something goes wrong.”