The key roles in the informal organization: a network analysis perspective

Alberto F. de Toni
Engineering Management Laboratory, University of Udine,
Udine, Italy, and
Fabio Nonino
International Telematic University UNINETTUNO, Rome, Italy

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify the key roles embedded in the informal organizational structure (informal networks) and to outline their contribution in the companies’ performance. A major objective of the research is to find and characterize a new key informal role that synthesises problem solving, expertise, and accessibility characteristics.

Design/methodology/approach – A framework for an in-depth informal structure analysis based on social network analysis (SNA) methodology is structured and applied in a case study of a knowledge-based enterprise operating in the information systems industry.

Findings – The paper identifies and characterizes the key informal roles (namely opinion leaders, central connectors, bottlenecks, experts, consultants, or helpful people) and a new one, called pilus prior (first lancer) that synthesises problem solving, expertise, and accessibility characteristics.

Research limitations/implications – Future research will move through the enlargement of the sample that will allow a better generalization of the results and the development of a model to quantitatively evaluate the performances of individuals recognized as informal leaders.

Practical implications – The proposed framework has a general applicability and can be a valuable tool for an in-depth organizational analysis based on SNA methodology. Consequently, some directions are provided to increase cooperation and knowledge sharing flows inside the company and to align the formal organizational processes to the informal one.

Originality/value – The results of the research have been achieved by using an original approach, the joint analysis of three informal networks. The case suggests that pilus priors are the informal emerging leaders in the company who outperform their colleagues.

Keywords Networking, Social networks, Organizational structures, Company performance

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The fundamental role of informal relationships inside an organization has been widely recognized in organizational studies. As a matter of fact, the concept of informal organization was, historically, conceived in the “human relations school” founded by Mayo (1933) and deepened by Barnard (1938), Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), and Argyris (1957). Simon (1976) revised this concept stressing the relationship with the formal organization and studying the emerging of roles within an organization. These informal roles have a great influence on the operative and the decision-making processes and on the knowledge/know-how sharing inside companies.

Recently, some scholars and consultants have addressed their studies on the analysis of informal organizational networks, which are “the networks of relationships