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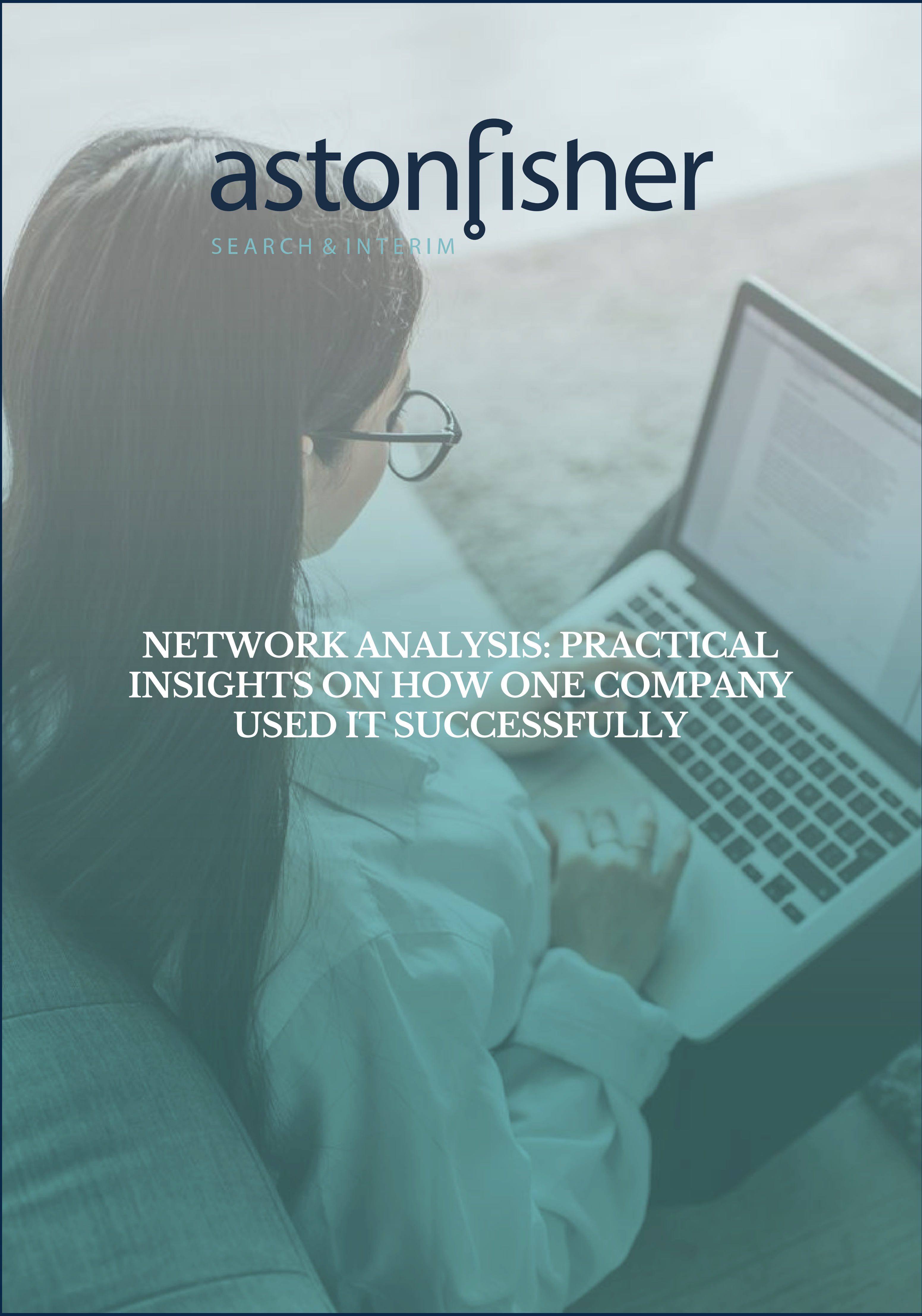

NETWORK ANALYSIS: PRACTICAL INSIGHTS ON HOW ONE COMPANY USED IT SUCCESSFULLY

Executive Summary

Network analysis is fast becoming a vital part of the HR director's role. But how do you actually collect data on the interpersonal connections within a business? How do you draw meaningful insights from network maps? How do you use them to drive change? And how do you keep your employees' trust while doing it?

We gathered HR leaders from different sectors for a Q & A session with the HR director of a world-leading food company which has implemented network analysis successfully.

Q: How do you do network analysis in your organisation?

A: We ask people who they would turn to for different needs: learning, energy, support, and action. Then we ask, "Are you comfortable with your level of access to those people?"

Q: Is network mapping a similar principle to T-shaped careers?

A: Network mapping enables you to see the connectivity between individuals, between functions across a business, or between businesses across a group. You can slice the data in different ways to identify the individuals who connect different departments. It also gives you a visual aid.

Q: Do you put every employee on these maps?

A: No, we've drawn the line at a level within our management population.

Q: Do you do this yourself or do you use an external agency?

A: We do use an external agency. However, we analyse the data for ourselves.

Q: What's your purpose behind using network analysis?

A: To help each business understand what's going on within itself, to support knowledge-sharing, and to support onboarding and succession.

Q: Can you zoom in on just one function within just one business?

A: Absolutely. In one case, we identified a worker who was absolutely critical to the lines of communication across that function, and he was going to retire.

Q: Does the software sit in your mobile, the fixed line, or the emails you send to each other?

A: We use an active network analysis. It's simply a survey. But you can analyse digital exhaust systems out of Teams or out of email.

Q: How do you use it in onboarding?

A: We map the outgoing employee's contacts, so the new hire knows who they turned to get things done.

Q: How do you stop employees claiming to be Mr. or Mrs. Connectivity when they're not? Do you check reciprocal connections?

A: Yes, absolutely. Outgoing connections are useful for onboarding, but almost all the work we do is about incoming connections.

Q: Do you share that with individuals? Do you say, "I know you said that you connect regularly with 50 people, but only one person shows you"?

A: “No” is the simple answer!

Q: Do your insights about individual connections give you ideas for how to improve things on the organisational level?

A: Yes – you can identify who your cultural influencers are and use them to help share the message. You can also identify why something went wrong or spot issues like gender bias.

Q: Has anyone found the use of this kind of tool a bit too Big Brother? And if so, have you overcome it?

A: Yes – we’ve overcome it by talking about the value of collaboration and making it clear that we're using this data for good, to improve collaboration, not to catch people out.

Q: Do you overlay the engagement data with your network data to see whether there’s any form of interaction there?

A: Yes, we've found that people with more connections are more highly engaged. Also, the more engaged people tend to connect more together, and the more disengaged people tend to connect more together.

Network analysis is fast becoming a vital part of the HR director's role. But how do you actually collect data on the interpersonal connections within a business? How do you draw meaningful insights from network maps? How do you use them to drive change? And how do you keep your employees' trust while doing it?

We gathered HR leaders from different sectors for a Q & A session with the HR director of a world-leading food company which has implemented network analysis successfully. With subsidiary businesses across the globe, this organisation is not short of networks to analyse. Below, he explains how his department has been crunching this vast amount of data to create actionable insights.

Q: How do you do network analysis in your organisation?

A: We ask people simple questions, like "Who would you turn to for learning? Who would you turn to for energy? Who would you turn to for support? Who would you turn to for action?" They may be the same people or different people. And that enables us to cut the data in different ways.

We also ask questions such as "Are you comfortable with your level of access to that person? Would you like greater access? Is it essential that you have greater access to make you successful in your role?" That enables us to see the people who need help and those who are potentially getting overloaded because everyone wants greater access to them.

Q: We talk a lot about T-shaped careers, for example, in technology, where you can be a specialist in a vertical and then you collaborate across the top of the T. Is network mapping a similar principle?

A: What network mapping tools enable you to do is to see the connectivity between, say, a group of people doing similar roles. You can see what the collaboration is like between those individuals and what their interaction is with other functions. Maybe they all talk to each other, but they don't actually talk with colleagues across the business.

Organisational network maps tend to look like lots of dots and lines, the dots being people and the lines being relationships between them. So, if people in the IT department are all clustered together, then they might be extremely well-connected within themselves. But you might get group thinking taking place and they might not be drawn upon by other parts of the business.

We can draw these maps to look at how functions are collaborating across the business or how businesses are collaborating across the group. You can slice the data in different ways to identify the individuals who connect different departments. It also gives you a visual aid to help the conversation, especially where there are long lines of communication.

Q: How long have you been doing network analysis?

A: Since 2013. We tend to do it every couple of years – we do an engagement survey one year and a network analysis survey the following year. That way, you don't overdose it, but you get to see the change that's taken place during that period of time. Recently, we've started to try and mix it up a bit with different data sets – so can we overlay some engagement data, or can we overlay our learning management system data, just to see whether that gives us different overlays?

Q: Do you put every employee on these maps?

A: No, we have tens of thousands of employees. So far, we've drawn the line at a level within our management population. A typical network analysis might go out to 1500 people but give them a list of 5000 contacts to pick from.

Q: Have you ever done a vertical analysis in one business unit or one function?

A: No, we haven't just done that, but we do cut all of the data in that way. So for instance, if I'm talking to a head office in one country, we'll only use the data from that country and filter out the others.

Q: Do you do this yourself or do you use an external agency?

A: We do use an external agency who specialise in network analysis. Their network mapping tool is extremely accessible and good value. However, we don't really use their consultancy. Many of these businesses offer lots of consultancy to slice the data for you, but we find most value if we analyse the data for ourselves, although it is time-consuming.

Q: What's your purpose behind using network analysis?

A: We always talk about it within three main themes. One is to help each business understand what's going on within itself: what's going on between different locations and head offices? Is the leadership team connecting with other leadership teams across our different businesses? Another is knowledge-sharing, which we do under the banner of 'communities of practice'. We also look to see who we can bring in and help connect better in that area. And the third is onboarding and succession.

You have to be quite cautious with network maps, in that people suddenly go, "Where am I? Am I the big dot or am I the small dot?" You've got to really pull back and emphasise that this is a snapshot at a point in time. Some people have longer tenure. Some people have been in different businesses for longer. But what we are looking for is for our senior team across the business to be connected together. So when we compared data maps from 2015 and 2019, we were encouraged to see a greater level of connectivity within the map.

Q: So I guess if you were thinking about how you work with the HR team across all your businesses, that would be very useful.

A: Spot on – we do have a slice just like that for HR across the board.

Q: How about zooming in on one function within just one business?

A: Absolutely. We had a fascinating insight from that. We did an analysis of a critical function in our Spanish business, and we found out that there was one individual guy who was absolutely critical to the lines of communication across that function, and he was going to retire. Everybody knew that he had a good network and was key in that business, but it was only when we showed the Spanish team this diagram that it really brought about action. When we redid the analysis in 2019, it was encouraging to see that the web had increased.

This ties in to our second use of network mapping, what we call our communities of practice, our social learning sites. We can map a business function and put blue dots for all the people who've joined those sites, and red dots for those who haven't. That enables us to pick out key people who might have valuable knowledge to contribute and invite them to join.

Q: Does the software sit in your mobile, the fixed line, or the emails you send to each other?

A: There are different options, but what we've always used is what we call an active network analysis, where people actively participate. It's simply a survey. But you can absolutely do what's termed the passive way, where you analyse digital exhaust systems out of teams or out of email traffic. So far, we've not stepped down that pathway. We have started sucking digital exhaust out of our knowledge management system, our communities of practice, to see how people are connecting together, and that's been really useful.

I think the other element, although this always sounds a little bit corny, is that we've always said we use the data for good. So we could load in performance management data, we could load in grades for people. But we've chosen not to do that. And I think because we've always said it's about how the businesses are working and how we operate across the group, I think that's actually developed a level of trust and confidence in people taking part, rather than it being perceived as a way of snooping on people or ranking people.

But what's powerful with this sort of dataset is that even after you've done the survey, you can add other metrics. For instance, if you want to add a gender column, you can just download the spreadsheet, add that, and reupload it again. So you don't have to do every little bit of thinking in advance.

Q: How do you use it in onboarding?

We map the outgoing employee's contacts, so the new hire knows who they turned to get things done. Normally, in induction programmes, you introduce the person to their direct reports, their boss, and their peers, but you miss people in doing that. So we've found that it's really valuable.

Q: How do you stop employees claiming to be Mr. or Mrs. Connectivity when they're not? Do you check reciprocal connections?

A: Yes, absolutely. Outgoing connections are useful for onboarding, but almost all of the visualisations and the work we do are about incoming connections. So it's not about who someone picks, but about who actually picks them.

Q: Do you share that with individuals? Do you say, "I know you said that you connect regularly with 50 people, but only one person shows you"?

A: "No" is the simple answer! Partly because of the amount of energy and legwork that would take. We have done individual network reports for people in the past, but it's a huge undertaking. We've just elected to spend more time focused on how each business is physically operating, how the functions are operating, and how the group as a whole is operating, and using it to improve the effectiveness of the group and people.

If we saw a real potential issue in some of the network analysis, like if somebody was saying they desperately needed greater access to everybody, we'd let the MD and HRD of that business know, because we've seen some correlation between people doing that and leaving the business.

Q: Do your insights about individual connections give you ideas for how to improve things on the organisational level?

A: Yes – you can identify who your current communication agents or cultural influencers are, and that's really powerful. You can then use those individuals to help share the message. You can use them in town hall meetings or as champions for knowledge-sharing. In our last survey of one of our businesses, we found out that the most sought-after person in the whole business was someone who wasn't known to the senior team – and he'd only been in the business for two or three years.

You can also use it when something goes wrong. Recently, we had a case of employee fraud. When we found out about it, we were disappointed that that information hadn't come to light earlier, so we looked at the network analysis for insights. We found out that the location where the fraud took place was more isolated than others. Connectivity with the head office was weak.

However, it's important to think carefully before drawing conclusions from results. For example, if someone is in high demand, it might be simply because they're project leading something at that moment in time, or it could be the way we've got that role designed, or any number of different factors.

It's also been really interesting looking at it from a gender perspective. Our data showed that males and females in our business have similar numbers of connections and similar numbers of people who turn to them. But the propensity is for females to turn to females and males to turn to males was where it was at. We found females would turn to females 50% more than they would turn to males. So we worked on that, and now it's down to 20%.

The other really helpful insight we took away from it was that when we asked, "Who do you turn to for career advice?" we found out that for females just two levels down from our CEO, the number of people that they turned to was really low. There was a huge statistical difference between how many career-related advisors males and females had. And even within that, the females tended to turn to females rather than men.

So we started trying to increase mentoring and female representation in our operations areas. How many females are turning to our operations director in that business for career advice? And in some cases, it was zero, whereas the whole fleet of males were turning to him. So we could then have a conversation with that director about reaching out more to offer mentoring to females.

Q: Have you had any resistance from people? Has anyone found the use of this kind of tool a bit too Big Brother? And if so, have you overcome it?

A: Yes, we did – more so in the earlier years, when we first started to use it. One way we've overcome it is by talking about collaboration. We talk about networking a lot within our business and the value of it. So it's a bit of a common theme anyway, which is useful. We bring different people and operations together.

But we definitely did have some concerns in the early days about how the data was going to be used. So when people have then said to us, "Can we use this data to help us with our restructuring exercise?" we've then declined, and I think that's helped bring some credibility to it, so people have. We always say we're using this data for good. We use it to see how we can improve collaboration. We haven't been going out and nobbling people for not having enough connections, because it may be that they just have a really poor induction programme, or they may have only just joined recently, or there may be other factors in terms of where the role is located or what they're doing.

We’ve also spent quite a lot of time with different functional leaders, not just MD's, actually sitting alongside them and taking them through a dataset for their area so they can see the value. For example, in one of our businesses, the commercial director was bringing a lot of new ideas and insight, but it was one of his direct reports that everyone was turning to. The commercial director was still adding huge value, but it was the combination of these two individuals working together that was turning the cogs.

I must say that we really drive things in terms of participation rates. These things are really quite sensitive to participation rates, because otherwise you're left with structural holes in your network. So I don’t think we've done one of these where we haven't had 95+% participation. We make it into a competition – we have league tables between businesses.

Q: Do you overlay the engagement data with your network data to see whether there’s any form of interaction there?

A: Yes, we've only just started doing that. And what we found so far is that those people with more connections are more highly engaged. Also, the more engaged people tend to connect more together, and the more disengaged people tend to connect more together. It was quite problematic to do that dataset, because the companies that you use for engagement services don't like to share the data on an individual basis as well. So we ended up getting our engagement partner to do a data transfer to our network analysis agency so that when we visualised the data, it was correctly anonymised.

We’re still working through that data, but it does look as if there are insights in there. And the next time we do a network analysis and an engagement survey, we'll absolutely be doing an overlay of them.

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