

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA? NETWORKING

Some call it gossiping, others call it networking. It's also only a single letter away from not-working, which explains why many offices ban social networking sites. Yet, like gossip, it's unstoppable. The desire to know who's doing what, to make oneself look good in public, to feel liked and to know that one belongs are human universals. Networks are the invisible architecture of social life. And they are not just a gift for marketing but can be instruments of revolution in autocratic states. Look across any group – people at work, for example – and you will find telling patterns. Cosmopolitans who don't know their neighbours but whose networks span global boundaries sit alongside locals who know everyone in their village and almost no one outside. Although networks are democratic and unifying, they can also be discriminatory; minorities can be disadvantaged because of their failure to access the networks that matter. So it's ever more vital for managers to understand these hidden landscapes of connectedness that surround them.

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