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Recommended Citation

Nakamura, Yoshie Tomozumi (2009). "Global Corporate Executives' SOCIAL CAPITAL Formation Experiences," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2009/roundtables/>
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Global Corporate Executives' SOCIAL CAPITAL Formation Experiences

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Abstract: There is growing interest in examining social capital and how it influences communities, organizations, and individuals. This research seeks to determine how social capital is developed among senior executives in a global organization.

This study explores to what extent and in what ways perceptions of business executives' social networks are reportedly impacted as a result of participating in in-person seminars arranged by their organization. More specifically, this study seeks to understand the effect of a seminar that acts as a social intervention and impacts the participants' perceptions of: social networks and their benefits, barriers, facilitating elements, and institutional support factors.

In today's global business environment, organizations must respond quickly to ever-changing business conditions (Cohen & Prusak, 2001). Business leaders increasingly are responding to these challenges with proactive efforts to build institutional social capital. Social capital can be defined as the actual and potential resources of an individual or social unit embedded in and derived from network relationships (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Social networks can be defined as social structures made of nodes (individuals, groups, or organizations) that are joined by various interactions such as business and personal relationships (Tichy, Tushman & Fombrum, 1979). Through social networks, which include business and personal relationships intersecting with adult learning practices, executives can support one another through the exchange of useful informational resources. These in turn become valuable assets known as social capital.

As companies recognize the importance of networking opportunities among their executives, they often create circumstances and settings whereby their employees can meet with each other and exchange useful informational resources. Social capital-building interventions include workshops, seminars, receptions, and the like. A significant concern that research can inform is that global executives need a better understanding of how valuable social networks are formed and maintained through such resource-heavy social interventions. Executives can benefit by utilizing social networks from past meetings as resources. By carefully examining aspects of social capital formation, they may be able to use findings to positively impact future interventions for improved organizational performance. However, little research exists that examines the ways that global executives' social networks are impacted through such social interventions.

The purpose of this study is to understand how senior executives' perceptions of their work-related social networks are reportedly impacted by attending an annual leadership development seminar sponsored by their employing global organization. I identify key components that are required for networking activities mainly from the social capital literatures. My queries include key components including trust, norms, obligations, expectations, and identity as reflected in survey scales in the quantitative design. I plan to investigate possible facilitating factors for and barriers to networking in the survey instruments as well. In this way, I will be able to obtain information on key networking indicators, perhaps extending findings to larger populations. Selective research subject interviews will hopefully generate related episodes surrounding social capital as well.

In view of the organizational leaders supporting my research, I anticipate that the findings from this study will help senior human resource professionals and senior managers interested in social networks improve event design for greater impact. Early indications suggest benefits from fostering productive networking in the for-profit sector. I am encouraged that the findings from this research will contribute to providing a base-line approach for adult educators interested in facilitating productive social networks in the workplace. Adult learning theories focusing on collective reflection with dialogue or critical discourse (Cressey, 2006) are implicit in the research design and questions of this study. Critical reflective practice theory helps explain learning processes as executives interact with others and effectively share ideas and opinions, as well as when they are discussing valuable solutions.

This study incorporates interview data, online surveys, archival research, and onsite observation. The first phase is individual (telephone) interviews. Concurrently, based on the themes, the second phase is a modified and further developed instrument to survey the executives about their social networks. Onsite observation occurs between and among the three surveys' administrations. The study completion is anticipated for the fall of 2009. Data collection and analysis are on-going during the Adult Education Research Conference.

The AERC round table presents an opportunity to discuss topics surrounding social capital within the critical community. Questions that may stimulate interactive discussion can vary by audience. How important is social capital to modern organizational leaders? Does global distribution make social capital more or less important? What do scholars believe might be institutional motivating or supporting factors for, or barriers to, collaborative networking practices? How can adult learning theory better inform our understanding of social capital construction and maintenance?

Clearly, social capital can be a great asset among business executives, and one that effectively helps them better respond to competitive conditions. Literatures and empirical research show us that social capital theory definitions, concepts, and models frame networking phenomena among executives in organizational environments. This allows us to examine how social networks support community, organization, and individual development. I feel that discussions of my research at the conference will be generative for my work and hopefully additive for others.

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