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Dormant Ties: Out of Sight, But Not Out of Mind

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Abstract
KEY FINDINGS

* Dormant ties have a strong effect on an employee's organizational commitment. In contrast to employees' active relationships, which can be time consuming to maintain and result in stress at higher levels, the benefits of dormant ties do not appear to diminish at higher levels of connectivity.

* Employees with more adversarial ("negative") active relationships are less committed to the organization. However, negative dormant relationships (i.e., old adversarial ties with whom people lost touch) have no effect on employees' organizational commitment.

* Dormant relationships powerfully affect how people think about and value their active relationships, and vice versa:

- Employees feel less constrained by their active relationships when they have more former contacts to whom they can potentially turn. At the same time, employees feel less dependent on utilizing their former contacts when they successfully build new relationships.
- Trusted dormant relationships make negative active relationships significantly more tolerable.
- Dormant relationships become particularly valuable to employees when they share a mutual active relationship in common with the dormant tie.

Keywords
dormant ties, dormant relationships, active relationships, employee relationships, connectivity, organizational commitment, human resources, talent management, human resources strategy

Disciplines
Human Resources Management | Organizational Behavior and Theory

Comments

DORMANT TIES: OUT OF SIGHT, BUT NOT OUT OF MIND

Overview and Key Findings

- Dormant ties have a strong effect on an employee's organizational commitment. In contrast to employees' active relationships, which can be time consuming to maintain and result in stress at higher levels, the benefits of dormant ties do not appear to diminish at higher levels of connectivity.
- Employees with more adversarial ("negative") active relationships are less committed to the organization. However, negative dormant relationships (i.e., old adversarial ties with whom people lost touch) have no effect on employees' organizational commitment.
- Dormant relationships powerfully affect how people think about and value their active relationships, and vice versa:
    a. Employees feel less constrained by their active relationships when they have more former contacts to whom they can potentially turn. At the same time, employees feel less dependent on utilizing their former contacts when they successfully build new relationships.
    b. Trusted dormant relationships make negative active relationships significantly more tolerable.
    c. Dormant relationships become particularly valuable to employees when they share a mutual active relationship in common with the dormant tie.

Topic: What are the Implications of Unmaintained Relationships Within a Large Organization?

Organizations are fertile grounds for creating informal—yet productive interpersonal relationships. But, at the same time, many people find that they have too many such obligations and too little time to fulfill them. Informal conversations and requests for advice quickly become distracting and may undermine performance. In a word, many people are at risk of becoming over-connected. While research suggests that some level of social connectivity results in higher organizational commitment, it also suggests that over-connected individuals experience considerable stress, which can lead them

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to become less committed and more inclined to leave (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Lee & Kim, 2011).

Yet, just as organizations help to create relationships, popular workplace practices promote intra-organizational mobility and in turn relationship "churn" and decay. As people move in and out of teams or departments, to take common examples, communication between parties is likely to decline sharply or stop altogether. Relationships may fall "dormant" for years or decades, therefore, even if two colleagues remain employed at the same organization (but in a different area or location). Since convenience and proximity are powerful predictors of who communicates with whom and for how long, there are good reasons to think that many people left their former relationships on good terms.

The researchers examined the implications of unmaintained relationships within a large organization. They termed these former relationships "intra-organizational dormant ties" and predicted that they might be widespread, particularly in larger organizations that rely heavily on internal labor markets (i.e., internal promotion or lateral job changes). Though these dormant relationships are usually ignored, the researchers also predicted that they might have powerful implications for how people feel and behave at work.

In addition, this study sought to explore the ways in which one's active relationships affect their dormant ones – in other words, how does the nature and structure of active relationships affect how people perceive their social pasts? Previous research has, by and large, defined a dormant tie as being a two-way interaction between two individuals (Levin et al., 2011; Mariotti & Delbridge, 2012; Vissa, 2011). The researchers investigated the interactions between one's active network and one's dormant ties, and the net effects on one's organizational commitment.

Study Questions

- How do dormant ties affect one's commitment to one's organization?

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- If dormant ties are seen as positive, neutral, or negative, how does that affect one's feelings about one's employer?

- How does the number of active ties one has affect one's dormant ties?

- Do active and dormant ties interact to affect one's feelings about one's employer?

Discussion

Within an organization, employees can find their networks to be a source of support, social satisfaction, and organizational identity, and much research has been done about active interorganizational relationships (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1990; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Some researchers suggest that, while some level of social connectivity results in higher levels of organizational commitment, becoming "overconnected" can stress individuals, eroding their commitment and even prompting them to leave (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Lee & Kim, 2011). And negative relationships – which can be particularly stressful – can likewise undermine one's feeling about one's organization (Sparrowe et al., 2001; Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007; Labianca & Brass, 2006; Venkataramani et al., 2013).

When individuals allow their communications to lapse (perhaps due to relocation or reassignment to different departments or teams), their relationships go "dormant." These dormant ties have largely been ignored by the literature and practitioners, in part because they have no interactional activation, i.e., the individuals are no longer actively involved with one another. However, relationships also have a cognitive-activation component, meaning that the individuals can think about and value each other. And people possess memories of previous interactions that can affect their experiences in the present. Thus, out of sight does not necessarily mean out of mind.

The researchers in this study found that dormant ties have meaning in terms of individuals' organizational commitment. Higher levels of dormant-tie connectivity promoted organizational commitment – in some cases, even years after people lost touch. And, in contrast to active ties, the benefits of dormant

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ties did not appear to decrease after a certain number of contacts: Whereas people with very high levels of active tie connectivity began to experience negative emotions, employees with a very high number of dormant relationships reaped significant psychological benefits from their dormant relationships, without any additional stress or decreased commitment to their organization. Dormant ties, by definition, do not require time-consuming and labor-intensive maintenance. An implication is that social connections from intra-organizational churn may create an underappreciated source of value for potential resources that can be activated in the future.

The interactions that the researchers observed suggest that how people experience their current workplace relationships depends on the relationships they previously held, and vice versa. New relationships can weaken old ones. For instance, college students who have difficulty integrating into their new environment can become homesick and miss their old friends; but, if they make many new friends, they tend to feel less of a need for their old ones (Watt & Badger, 2009). At work, creating new relationships weakens the significance that people attribute to former friends and colleagues (Figure 1, page 5). Yet, at the same time, a large, diverse supply of dormant relationship also makes people feel less dependent on their active support network. This may have important implications for information search in organizations, since these valued dormant ties may help employees search beyond their immediate peers for valuable resources.

Current negative interpersonal relationships can contribute to lower job performance and an unpleasant atmosphere (Sparrowe et al., 2001; Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007; Labianca & Brass, 2006), even leading to feelings of detachment from the organization and higher turnover rates (Venkataramani et al., 2013). When those relationships go dormant, can they still detract from one's organizational commitment? As it turns out, negative dormant relationships (or old adversarial ties in which people have lost touch) have no adverse effect on individuals' organizational commitment. However, the researchers found that negative active relationships made people value their old friends quite a bit more. Employees who have had positive workplace relationships in the past are better able to weather unpleasant interactions they experience in the present. As far as workplace relationships go, in other words,

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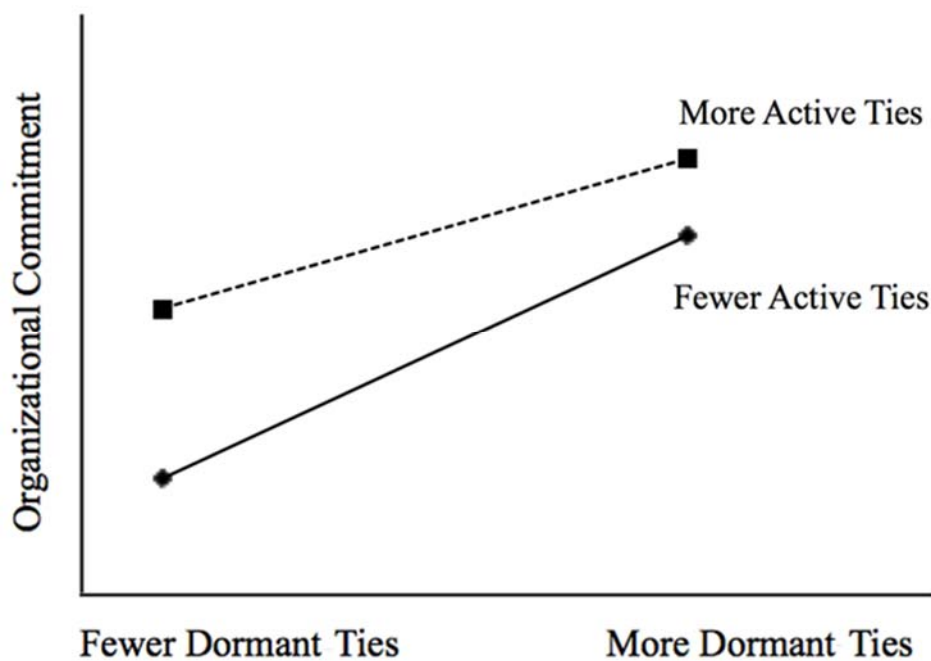
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the bad gets significantly better when it was once good (Figure 2, page 6).

The researchers also found that mutual active ties also matter for dormant ties. When an individual shares a dormant tie with someone with whom he or she is currently interacting, these shared dormant ties can help build trust, organizational identity, and group loyalty. If John is on a team with Alex, and they both have worked with Cheryl in the past, Cheryl's name may come up in conversation; she may even reinforce John's (and Alex's) shared social identity. It may now occur more quickly to John to call Cheryl for advice when he encounters difficulties with the team project. In this way, the mutual dormant tie with Cheryl should increase both John's and Alex's organizational commitment by highlighting the significance of past memories as well as the prospect of

Figure 1: Interaction Between Active-Tie Centrality and Dormant-Tie Centrality

reaching out to Cheryl for information, resources or support. In short, these
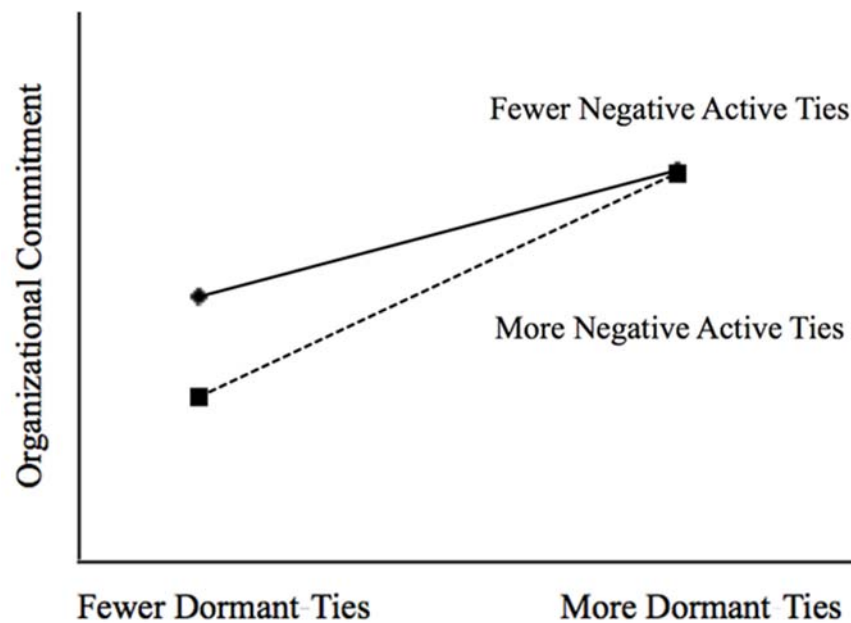
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shared active relationships appear to make dormant ties more salient and actionable for employees.

Further Research

Dormant ties offer the opportunity to examine specifically how ties can be activated in mind but not in practice (i.e., cognitively but not interactionally). Future research could explore situations in which an interaction-based network is critical, e.g., for information access, and when a cognitive network might be more relevant, e.g., for social identity or employee turnover.

The difference between cognitive and interactional relationships could be explored further – for instance, people with high status or very large networks might interact with people about whom they don't necessarily think. Interactional exchanges, in other words, may not always lead to cognitive activation. How cognitive activation comes about, also, could be studied.

Figure 2

Why, when and how does a dormant contact spring to mind, or become forgotten?

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In addition, researchers could further investigate people's perceptions of others' dormant ties. For example, if an employee is thought to still be connected to high-status individuals in the organization, on the one hand, or individuals who have been fired or have fallen into disfavor, on the other hand, might the employee accordingly be more sought out or shunned?

The Data Source

The researchers looked at 19 schools in a single district in the Southeastern United States (the district comprised 20 schools, but one was omitted because of low response rates), for a total of 565 responses. All full-time educators received a confidential survey in the second half of the 2012-2013 school year.

Surveyed individuals were asked about past and present relationships throughout the district; active contacts were those with whom they currently communicated at least yearly, while dormant were those with whom they used to communicate regularly, but had not for two or more years.

For each tie, the respondents were asked if they "trust[ed] that this person will always look after my best interests" and could give a negative, neutral, or positive answer. They were also asked to disagree or agree on a seven-point scale with the statement, "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in my school district." The researchers sorted the ties into the following categories: active ties with high or neutral trust, dormant ties with high or neutral trust, negative active ties with low trust, and negative dormant ties with low trust.

The researchers also counted the number of dormant ties with mutual active ties. They controlled for tenure, education level, school level, and school poverty.

The Takeaway

• In contrast to prevailing beliefs, the necessity of ongoing relationship maintenance may be overstated. Initial investment and maintenance may be

sufficient.

- Even after years of no contact, the goodwill and knowledge that remain from a relationship may cause dormant ties to spring to mind for people.
- Trust-building HR practices may not only provide immediate returns, through improved knowledge sharing in the present, but also may bring about extended returns, even after colleagues move elsewhere in the organization.
- Organizational leaders must be aware not only of employees' current relationships, but also of past ones.
- Numerous HR practices, such as convening and disbanding project teams and moving employees from one location or department to another, create more dormant relationships – which may have important benefits, such as increased commitment to the organization.
- Since previous research has indicated that people get nervous about reconnecting their dormant relationships (even those that might be helpful), HR should strive to embrace a culture and policies that encourage reconnecting dormant relationships as needed. Employees should not see it as a failure to lose touch with someone, especially if there are no hard feelings. The result can be a more interconnected, committed workforce.

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