

Assigning workers to new networks boosts sustainability

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Organizations looking to lead quests for sustainability can train troops within their ranks, but the traditional boundaries like experience, seniority and departments aren't where the payoffs lie.

Social scientists at Michigan State University (MSU) and The Nature Conservancy joined to explore how best sustainability practices can be shared among employers working on big efforts. They learned it's effective to position employees so they can learn from innovative colleagues who work in different units of the same project. Counterintuitively, those workers who may be behind the curve on these innovations are the ones to pick up the new skills.

These findings are reported in this month's journal *Organization & Environment*.

"The finding that you might be best able to learn from those in different organizational units is consistent with longstanding sociological theory," said Ken Frank, MSU Foundation Professor of Sociometrics.

"Innovation comes from people in different units who have knowledge that is new to you. It suggests organizations should encourage employees to think and act outside of their network boxes from time to time."

The group mixed surveys with qualitative evidence to look at the social networks that flow through a complex sustainability project—water resource management. The Nature Conservancy has expanded its guiding science principles and strategic framework for its work across the globe. This ramped up an emphasis on connections between people and nature, opening the door to more systemic changes. It also posed a question on how best to get that information out effectively to its thousands of staff without hiring or training.

It's important to understand how practices that worked could go viral throughout a vast organization, especially since this model has been adopted by other conservation organizations. The team surveyed [full-time](#) The Nature Conservancy North America Region staff as well as examined ways the staff received professional development and opportunities to work with colleagues in other departments.

A practical recommendation from this study is that project team assignments that enable staff to learn from innovators may be a simple and cost-effective way to promote organizational learning for sustainability. And, surprisingly, workers who weren't familiar with some of the newest methods and practices were the ones quickest to adapt to them.

"For individuals collaborating in a workplace, the ability to communicate and work together is imperative," said Kaitlin Torphy, lead researcher and founder of the Teachers in Social Media Project at MSU. "Using new methods and practices that have already been adopted by one's peers makes sense in terms of being able to work together most efficiently. Rather than wanting to be rooted in one's way, those individuals are more open to new practices and methods."

They also found that as effective as internships or mentoring can be, the group observed that the top-down hierarchy isn't necessary. Peers were learning from peers.

In April 2018, several members of this team lead a study that examined which employees in vast conservation organizations were best positioned to adopt those in an organization who may be more receptive to new information, and share it with co-workers regardless of what department they're in, or what project they work on.

More information: Sheila M. W. Reddy et al, How Different Forms of Social Capital Created Through Project Team Assignments Influence Employee Adoption of Sustainability Practices, *Organization & Environment* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1086026619880343](https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026619880343)

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