

# Plugging the holes left by exiting colleagues can pay off, says researcher

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Colleagues who leave an organization vacate not only their jobs, but also their collaborative relationships with other employees—relationships that are an increasingly prominent feature of modern workplaces. The

exit of a colleague is already known to open vacancy-driven promotion opportunities for employees who remain.

In a [study](#) recently published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, Tracy Anderson (Bocconi Department of Management and Technology) argued that the vacated collaborative relationships left by an exit can also enhance the [promotion](#) of employees who remain, in particular those who used to collaborate with the colleagues who have left.

These employees are ideally placed to start new collaborations with others who also formerly worked with departing colleagues, and these new collaborations provide employees with opportunities for learning. This in turn can lead to competency-driven promotions, that recognize improvements in employees' knowledge and skills but are not dependent on the existence of a job vacancy.

"In my paper, I show that collaborator exits increase the likelihood of employees' competency-driven promotion in a way that non-collaborator exits do not, and that this is related to the formation of new collaborative relationships. These effects are particularly notable for younger employees who are earlier in their careers and therefore most likely to benefit from learning opportunities," Professor Anderson stated.

Her hypotheses were tested using data that covered 1,326 scientific and technical staff employed by a not-for-profit research organization between 2010 and 2017. Collaborations between employees were identified using published articles in peer-reviewed journals, while data about promotions were provided by the organization's HR database. During the study period, there were 993 promotion events among the research staff, of which 779 promotions were classified as competency-driven.

As expected by Professor Anderson, the exit of a collaborator has a

larger effect on promotion than the exit of a non-collaborator, with an additional exiting collaborator increasing the likelihood of competency-driven promotion by 10%, compared to an increase of only 1% for an additional exiting non-collaborator. Furthermore, the effects are greater when the exiting collaborator is in a higher job grade: an additional exiting collaborator in a higher grade increases the likelihood of competency-driven promotion in any month by 29%, while the exit of an additional collaborator not in a higher grade increases it by only 3%.

Supporting the learning mechanism Prof. Anderson proposed, collaborator exits are positively associated with the likelihood of remaining employees starting new collaborations, particularly with colleagues with whom they have not previously collaborated but who previously collaborated with those who left. These new collaborative relationships are, in turn, positively associated with competency-driven promotion. Furthermore, the associations detected are stronger for younger employees who still have more to learn.

"Employees who are left behind do not necessarily fall behind; in fact, they may benefit in ways that would not have been possible had their collaborators remained, and through routes that are unrelated to the creation of job vacancies," Prof. Anderson said.

"The findings suggest that employees may work with the same collaborators past the optimal point in terms of their own learning. Managers could attempt to intervene to aid employee learning, which should then bring benefits to the whole organization. Just as some organizations implement job rotation programs to aid learning among [employees](#), it may be time for managers to consider the viability of [collaborator](#) rotation programs," she added.

**More information:** Tracy Anderson, Left Behind? Understanding the Career Consequences of Collaborator Exits, *Academy of Management*

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