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Sub-theme 07: [SWG] Relational Pluralism in Organizational Networks

Ambidextrous managers and the idea journey: an intra-organizational network perspective

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1. Introduction

Organization studies increasingly recognize the importance of social networks as a lens through which to understand the effect of social context on creativity (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003; Sosa, 2011). Creativity is particularly important in entrepreneurship because it is associated to innovation, which is a crucial factor for the success and survival of organizations (Anderson et al., 2014). However, different types of social networks may exist between individuals, and in particular between employees of an organization: when considering the development of new ideas and creative solutions, advice networks play a relevant role (Li et al., 2018; Lomi et al., 2014), since the combination and recombination of knowledge – necessary for becoming innovative – is supported by informal advice sharing (Aalbers & Dolfsma, 2015).

Through advice networks employees are able to deliver and receive information regarding their work-related tasks; moreover, central positions in the advice network provide individuals with tangible and intangible resources needed for innovation (Cangialosi et al., 2021; Gulati & Srivastava, 2014). According to Cangialosi et al. (2021), there are two main reasons explaining the importance – in terms of creativity and thus innovative performance – of centrally positioned individuals in the advice network: first, a central position exposes employees to a wider array of professional information that can be combined to generate and implement new ideas; second, central individuals are likely to be seen as having higher status, which leads to an increase in support from their colleagues and supervisors. At the same time individuals need to engage in high levels of both exploration and exploitation to successfully generate and implement ideas (e.g. Rosing & Zacher, 2017). Ambidexterity represents ‘successful management of both exploration (e.g., creating new products) and exploitation (e.g., production and implementation of products)’ (Anderson et al., 2014), and at individual level these two activities are conceptualized as ‘searching for, discovering, creating, and experimenting with new opportunities’ (exploration) and ‘selecting, implementing, improving and refining existing certainties’ (exploitation) (Mom et al., 2007). However, while the concept of ambidexterity has been widely explored in organization and management studies, as well as its relationship with individual-level centrality in innovation networks (e.g. Rogan & Mors, 2014), there is still a lack of studies focusing of its association with individual-level centrality in advice networks towards novel ideas.

Therefore, the main aim of this study is to address this gap by investigating the association between ambidexterity and network centrality – at individual level – when considering idea generation and implementation within an organization, i.e. the path followed by a novel idea from its conception to its successful dissemination (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). For our empirical analysis, we use original data collected in 2021 from an Italian consultancy company offering advanced services in the field of environmental analysis and health and food safety.

2. Theoretical background and research gap

Perry-Smith and Mannucci (2017) pointed out that innovation scholars, in their studies, emphasized the importance of the idea journey, from its generation to the practical implementation. Moreover, these authors suggest that individuals activate different contacts while relying on specific network structures, in order to facilitate the idea journey process.

Innovation requires the generation of new ideas that can be developed by learning mechanisms involving social interaction among organizational actors; therefore, social networks have a central role in the innovation process, as they drive sharing knowledge and its recombination together with new ideas (Carnabuci & Operti, 2013; Provan & Kenis, 2008). Previous research addressed the role of social networks in the innovation process and linked the networks of informal work-related exchange of advice to improved innovative performance (Obstfeld, 2005; Rodan & Galunic, 2004). Moreover, Aalbers and Dolfsma (2015) described the relevance of the network of informal relations within organizations, which provides insight into internal organizational activities, possibly undermining the formal structure.

To the extent that diversity enhances innovation, social interaction and advice exchange facilitate the recombination of diverse information that may be crucial for the generation of new ideas (Aalbers & Dolfsma, 2015; Burt, 1992). Advice relations enable ideas creation within organizations, as they provide information required for problem solving tasks, especially when diversity is essential to deal with a specific issue (Hansen, 2002). They facilitate sharing opinions among individuals belonging to differing organizational units or divisions, or functions, hence fostering cross-sectional learning and innovation.

An increasing body of research has investigated the association between the existence of networks and a variety of effects across organizational levels including a range of innovation outcomes. Previous studies addressed, among others, absorptive capacity (Tortoriello, 2015), knowledge sharing between sub-units (Tsai, 2002), and patent innovation (Brennecke & Rank, 2017). However, to the best of our knowledge, there are no empirical studies adopting a network perspective to investigate the insights characterizing the idea journey process aimed to BMI. As idea journey relies upon social interaction (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017), the features of the advice network activated among individuals may be crucial for improving managerial decisions.

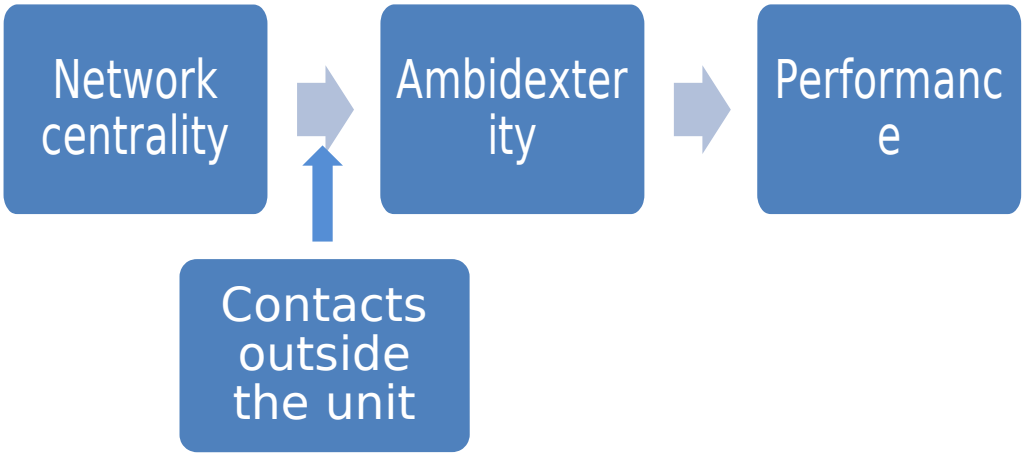
3. Data and methodology

In this study, we focus on a multi-unit Italian consultancy company based in Reggio nell'Emilia and offering advanced services in the field of environmental analysis and health and food safety. This company is controlled since 2017 from one of the largest Italian holding companies active in the utilities industry, and in October 2021 it had 166 employees. Its productive structure implies specialization and cooperation between different units, and a continuous exchange of advice amongst individuals – who are specialized in different branches of engineering, chemistry, biology, and natural sciences in general. From September to December 2021, we collected individual-level data using an online questionnaire; this questionnaire was shared with each employee via email by the company's CEO, who also pre-tested the questionnaire in advance to validate our questions. For collecting relational data, we used a roster method asking to the respondents to indicate – from the list of all company's employees – who they contacted in the last year for receiving advice on how to generate, elaborate, championing, or implementing a new idea (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). Information on individual ambidexterity have been collected using the approach developed by Mom et al. (2009), which is a combination of measures for exploration and exploitation at individual level – seven employees' exploration activity items and seven employees' exploitation activity items. Moreover, we also collected demographic information such as age, educational qualification, and

tenure, in addition to the information on team composition and internal hierarchical structure provided by the company.

By mapping the employees' exchange of advice related to the idea journey process, we are able to estimate individual-level centrality measures, which are used in a hierarchical regression model as independent variables, while our dependent variable is the employees' ambidexterity scale created by using the Mom's et al. approach (2009). Moreover, since employees' experience may influence their ambidexterity, we include the employee's age and tenure within the company, which are expected to positively relate to their ambidexterity (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996).

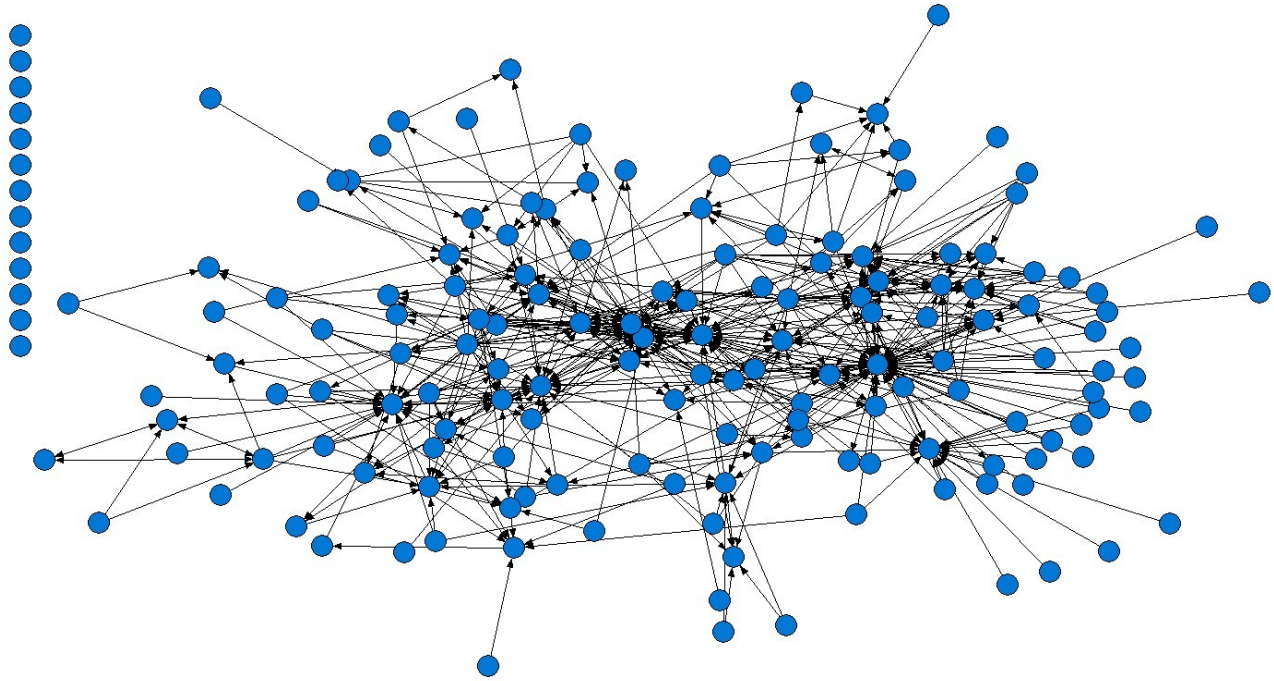
Figure 1. Modelling.



4. Main findings (in progress)

We received 120 questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 72 per cent. Studies using network data require high response rates, because even a few missing nodes (i.e. individuals, in this study) in the network could be characterized by high connectivity, therefore producing biased results if they are not included in the analysis (Cronin, 2016). Response rates higher than 60-70 per cent are usually considered acceptable (Kossinets, 2006); moreover, in this research we controlled for statistical differences, in terms of personal attributes such as gender and tenure, between respondents and non-respondents (following an approach similar to Maoret et al., 2020), and we found no significant differences between the two groups. The graph representing the advice network is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Advice network.



The majority of the respondents (33%) has between 26 and 35 years, has a bachelor (54%), and works for the company from more than 10 years (47%). Overall, the average degree in this network is 3.41, the average distance is 3.37, and the density is 0.02. The highest out-degree score detected amongst employees is 22, while the highest in-degree score is 60.

We have not been able to estimate the first regression models yet because we have concluded the data collection process at the end of December 2021. We are still working on data cleaning, since a few individuals have filled the questionnaire multiple times, and the codification of the data provided by the company (team composition and internal hierarchical structure). Our findings will shed light on the relationship between individual ambidexterity and network positioning – in a context where employees exchange advice supporting idea creation and implementation. Furthermore, we will test how employees' attributes impact on this relationship.

5. Contribution

This paper contributes to the empirical literature on the idea journey process, trying to understand its association with the presence of ambidextrous individuals within an organization. By adopting an intra-organizational network perspective and looking at the network patters determining the exchange of advice for supporting creativity – and thus innovation – our work is one of the first studies investigating the relationships between individual ambidexterity and network centrality, considering the intra-organizational advice network supporting the generation and implementation of ideas. However, this research suffers from two main limitations. First, we have not been able to disentangle the different phases of the idea journey process and therefore understanding if ambidextrous individuals behave differently according to specific phases, i.e. if they establish advice social connections based on the specific phase (generation, elaboration, championing, and implementation). Second, our database is a cross-section; a longitudinal analysis would have enabled the detection of a causality effect between advice network evolution and individual ambidexterity – this would be a potentially novel research stream in the literature, and our future efforts will be dedicated to structuring a data collection in different waves. Future directions will

focus on the role of teams in shaping advice networks – and therefore the interaction between formal hierarchy and informal structures – and the importance of research units in supporting more or less ambidextrous approaches.

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