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Poor villagers and digital migrants in project teams

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Abstract

Woolcock & Narayan (2000) published research on the topic of social capital and concluded that both bonding and bridging ties are required to improve relations within and among other organizational entities such as community groups and firms. This paper seeks to combine that concept with the theory of Structural Holes (Burt, 2000) in the context of developing effective project management teams that leverage their networks to fill gaps in specific expertise. The experience of the researcher indicates that project teams can easily become introspective and adopt 'satisficing' solutions to meet immediate priorities. This becomes a problem when the project team does not have adequate diversity or expertise to address the issue effectively.

The research by Woolcock & Narayan concluded that poor but ambitious people would migrate from tightly bonded communities to urban areas to expand their network and improve their business outcomes. However, Woolcock & Narayan argue that a number of 'bonding' ties are still critical for protection, risk management and solidarity functions. Failure to do so would just shift them from being 'Poor Villagers' to 'Urban Migrants'. The same could be said for project teams - that a balance of bonding and bridging ties are required to span structural holes and maintain team cohesion. By developing an effective external network, project teams can more easily access expertise and diversity lacking in the project team and make better decisions, but to what extent? At the other end of the spectrum, our digital natives can be seen as developing extensive external ties almost to the detriment of maintaining strong team values and bonds. This paper reports on current research that explores the extent and use (or not) of peer networks by project management personnel to avoid being Poor Villagers or becoming Digital Migrants, and what might the optimal balance be.