

**NET GAINS:  
A Handbook for Network Builders  
Seeking Social Change**  
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“BUILDING THE CIVIL SECTOR’S NETWORKS: FIVE STRATEGIES”  
is an excerpt from the full report  
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## 20. BUILDING THE CIVIL SECTOR'S NETWORKS: FIVE STRATEGIES

In our work with nonprofit network builders we have seen that some networks unleash effects that have great power to innovate, disturb, ignite, and dramatically change systems. Other networks are much more modest in their impact. Although the potential power of networks attracts much of the interest in connectivity, most people seem to want to build networks that they can control, stabilize, and use instrumentally for their own ends. Thus, they may end up sacrificing much of the power that networks can unleash. Their more “conservative” networks tend to become more like organizations over time. Perhaps this is sensible; dramatic effects are not needed for all purposes. But a better understanding of networks could allow more fully informed and intentional choices to be made.

If our Handbook provides some useful ideas about networks in an accessible way, then it probably also stimulates a desire to learn more. For some readers it may also raise this additional matter: if networking approaches are currently positioned in just a small corner of the civil sector's brain—at the experimental edge of innovation—how can they be moved into its heart and bloodstream? How can the sector progress from stirring anecdotes to systemic arrangements?

It is easy to collect stories about nonprofit networks. The storytellers—all sorts of network organizer who are gaining practical experience in the art and science of networking—enjoy telling their tales. They may be short on theory and big on questions, but nonetheless they believe that network approaches promise important benefits for philanthropic and nonprofit organizations.

Yet it is commonplace to observe that the civil sector lags behind the “edge of innovation.” Many explanations are offered. The organizations work in isolation from each other, so there are no good ways to spread examples of excellence.<sup>117</sup> Civil organizations have limited resources, so they cannot pay much attention to adopting new approaches.<sup>118</sup> Nonprofits may simply lack the know-how and tools to move in new directions.

These and other systemic barriers to change may be impeding the testing and adoption of networking approaches by nonprofits and philanthropies. The spread of networks “is taking place more slowly within civil society organizations” than in the private sector, observe Creech and Willard of the International Institute for Sustainable Development: “There still appears to be a separation between institutions, with their internal management structures, and networks that have identities of their own—rather than organizations internalizing and capitalizing on their participation in networks.”<sup>119</sup> Jon Pratt, head of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, also sees slow progress with the sector's adoption of networking, but points to a different reason: Nonprofit managers and boards don't yet have the capacities to become avid networkers, he says. They need ways to “assess the strength of their network relationships, map the linkages and understand how network strategies can advance the work of their organization.”<sup>120</sup>

In spite of these difficulties, it is evident that innovative leaders in the civil sector are already pursuing activities to embed networking in the sector's way of working. We

can see five strategies for accelerating the penetration of network approaches that will build the sector's long-term ability to more effectively improve life in communities.<sup>121</sup>

### Strategies for Network Approaches

1. Discover the “hidden networks” already embedded in the civic sector—and be more intentional about using them.
2. Develop far-flung communities of practice—hives—that create, adapt, and spread network tools and skills.
3. Develop numerous experiments to demonstrate how civil organizations can improve their capacities by embracing network approaches.
4. Pioneer the use of network analysis and strategies as ways to dramatically change large-scale systems in society.
5. Use *viral marketing* to spread the idea of networks throughout civil society.

**1. Discover the “hidden networks” already embedded in the civic sector—and be more intentional about using them.** It is time for the civil sector to eyeball its own networks. Mapping the sector's own connectivity and making these maps visible to all would help generate and awareness of the extent to which networks are part of the sector's way of working and where the potential lies to activate and strengthen networks. In short, the sector should figure out where its *hives* and *hubs* are. Translation: within the sector, what are the existing networks through which ideas could flow?

We are not aware of many maps of the linkages among nonprofit and philanthropic organizations and individuals, but we suspect they would reveal several patterns: the civil sector's hives are largely *local* phenomenon (bounded by geography); mostly based in *niches*, such as economic development, education, or environment; quite *fragmented* (many gaps due to isolation); and *dominated* by a few hubs (either a relatively large organization or a funder focused on a niche in a place). These sorts of maps could lead to decisions to bridge holes, span boundaries, or develop new hubs—to increase connectivity.

Gideon Rosenblatt argues that the environmental movement is a sprawling network “made up of very real interconnections between people and organizations that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.”<sup>122</sup> The network's health would be improved, he continues, by redesigning its loose, unintentional structure around a set of specialized organizations. Whether you agree or not, he is using network thinking to examine an entire field in the civil sector and coming up with ideas about how to use connectivity to strengthen the field.

**2. Develop numerous experiments to demonstrate how civil organizations can improve their capacities by embracing network approaches.** Most people are not “early adopters”; they want more certainty of success than early experimenters can have. For them, seeing is believing; when it comes to adopting an innovation, they want to know that it works. This is a crucial step in reaching scale with change: risk-taking innovators demonstrate what does and does not work. Many experiments with networking approaches should be attempted. A “learning agenda” should be articulated.

(We can say right off the bat that it is critical to learn much more about the economics of networks.) But that is not all. Experiments should be designed with feedback loops so that others can learn what happened and why it happened. Nor is that enough. The feedback from many experiments should be assessed visibly and candidly using clear standards; this should be about learning, not about burying failures or burnishing public images.

**3. Develop far-flung communities of practice—hives—that create, adapt, and spread network tools and skills.** The civil sector has a long history of organizing to create and spread knowledge products, such as books and online tools, which practitioners can use. Information about and assistance with network tools and skill building can be spread through market mechanisms and through “communities of practitioners” that meet to learn from experts and each other. Learning communities of this sort usually require funding to prime the pump.

**4. Pioneer the use of network analysis and strategies as ways to dramatically change large-scale systems in society.** Networking is not just about building the capacity of the civil sector. Network strategies can also be used as levers for change in communities. The many “systems” the civil sector entities try to change—health care, education, real estate development, and the forest product industry, to name just a few—all have networks at work within them. The health care system has practitioner networks and economic linkages among, for instance, laboratories, physicians, hospitals, and insurers. Education systems have networks of teachers and administrators, and networks of policy developers and decision makers. The real estate sector has networks of developers who take on projects together, and the forest products sector has networks of tree growers, loggers, manufacturers, and retailers. These networks can be analyzed, their interactions, structures, and dynamics assessed. And this sort of analysis may inform the civil sector’s strategies for influencing these systems.

**5. Use “viral marketing” to spread the idea of networks throughout civil society.** “Viral marketing is an ideavirus in which the medium of the virus is the product,” explains Seth Godin, author of *Unleashing the Ideavirus*. “It’s an idea where the idea is the amplifier.”<sup>123</sup> In this case, networking may be both the idea and the medium for the transmission of the idea; a network may be its own virus. More networking can beget more networking.

Of course, it won’t be this simple, considering some of the barriers to innovation in the civic sector. Is the civil sector in an adaptive posture that is open to change or is it in a condition of equilibrium, of excessive order or disorder that is closed to change? We claim no special insight into the answers, but it seems useful to note that forces for both change and continuity are at work in the sector. When it comes to potential sources of equilibrium, most veterans of efforts to help civil sector organizations improve point to the fundamental relationship between nonprofits and funders (the capital market for nonprofits).<sup>124</sup> “Lack of collaboration is mostly due to stupidity and competition,” one consultant in a network building process told us.

*Every organization has a sense that they need to be first out of the box with new ideas to impress funders. They have pride of authorship. At the same time, there is a lack of market discipline. Not all funders perform good due diligence on proposals; many support duplicative efforts.*

The likelihood of resistance means that viral marketing approaches will need to be quite strategic. Should the virus of networking be aimed at influential hubs in civil society? Or should it “attack” many different entry points at the same time and later focus on a target. Or should the virus “piggy back” into the sector on some other innovation? Or will it be necessary to develop entirely alternative pathways for the virus?

Whatever the answers, the aim is the same: to help the “ideavirus” and practices of networking to reach a tipping point in civil society.