

Understanding and valuing engagement in professional networks for health promotion – a social network analysis

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Introduction/background/issues

Research has identified the importance of understanding network structure to support information-sharing and 'best practice' in a range of professions. Using social network methods, this project surveyed health promotion practitioners about information-sharing network ties, describing the characteristics of these ties spanning different organisational boundaries and the resources and support being shared, and evaluates various associations between network measures and work-related outcomes.

Methods

A survey instrument was developed in consultation with a research advisory group comprising health promotion practitioners, policy officers and professional association representatives. Elements to identify and characterise professional networks were drawn from the organizational research literature, including items relating to resources, opportunities and assistance; and job-related social capital, satisfaction and self-efficacy. The survey was refined through a pilot among a sample of respected health promotion researchers and practitioners. The CO-OPS collaboration and the Public Health Association of Australia agreed to support sampling for the study, and members were randomly selected to participate. The survey was implemented online in March-April 2015.

Results/discussions

In total, 1000 health promotion practitioners and policy makers were invited to participate in the study. The results of this study provide emerging evidence about the information, skills and resources sought and gained from professional networks, and about how network ties may assist professionals to achieve work-related goals and outcomes in the health promotion sector. The information- and resource-sharing potential of professional network ties may take on particular importance where workforce shifts and funding priority changes occur.

Conclusions/implications

This study provides new information about the characteristics of professional ties and how the diversity of networking impacts on the professional outcomes of health promotion professionals. It demonstrates how information-seeking patterns differ by structural factors and identifies critical success factors for new and established professional networks.

Advantages may be inherent in various professional social ties. By examining key elements of networking behavior of health promotion practitioners, it is possible to better understand how network ties might be assisting the health promotion sector's goals and outcomes.

Mobilising local knowledge through voluntary network governance

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In the past decade there have been shifts towards networked forms of voluntary governance, additional to state regulations and programs, coordinating the fragmented health initiatives in society and remain responsive to new globalised risks. An important driver underlying this shift is government awareness that the reach and impact of national level policies and programs is limited and lacks crucial information on the conditions for implementation, accountability and revision at the local level. An example is the National Prevention Program 'Everything is Health' in the Netherlands (2014-2016). This program aims to improve the health of the public by creating a social movement for health, in which responsibilities are shared between governmental authorities, the market, and civil society. The most important working mechanism is to facilitate new networks to arise across different domains, and mobilise existing networks to share knowledge and early or advanced experiences among the partners. Experiential knowledge is articulated, accessed, made available more broadly, and assessed to other experiences by other partners. The program theory is that such an exchange will induce positive ways of monitoring, benchmarking and non-hierarchical accounting among the peers, which may lead to a social movement for the self-governance of health.

We will address the question how this program is able to create a sustainable coherence in (a) activities; (b) goals and ambitions towards a 'social movement'; (c) in network relationships.

Based on literature and documents study, observations and interviews, in this paper we explore whether and how the program is enacted: how experiential knowledge is articulated, accessed, made available more broadly, and assessed to other experiences by other partners, and to what consequences for health. We also address the boundaries of what can be reasonably expected from such a pledge strategy, and the conditions for actually contributing to a sustainable social health movement.