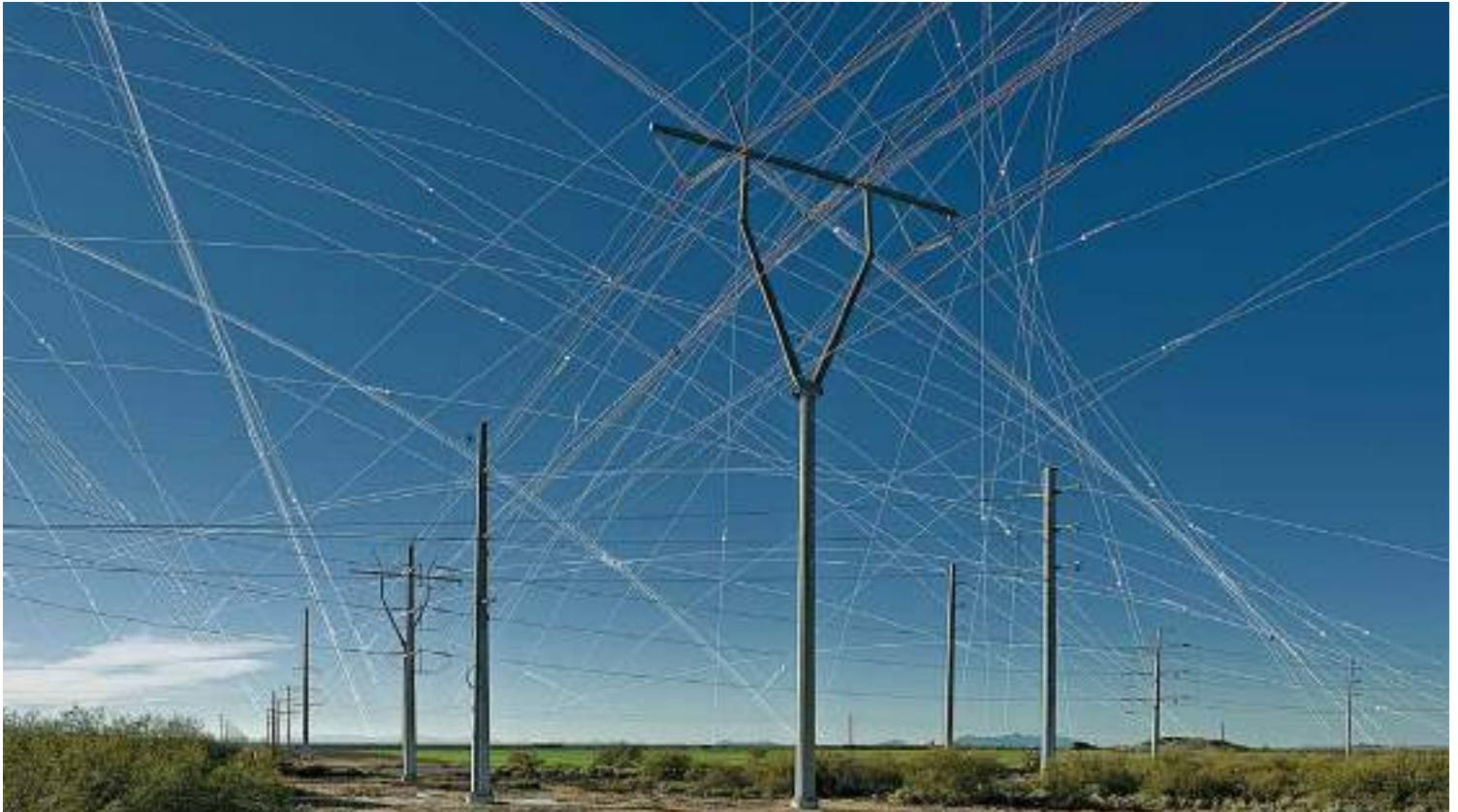Harvard
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Professional Networks

How to Succeed Quickly in a New Role

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Summary.   A role transition, whether it's a promotion, a move to a new organization, or a fresh challenge in an existing job, can be a huge boost to one's career. But in today's hyper-collaborative and dynamic workplaces, successful moves aren't as easy as they once… **more**

A role transition—whether a promotion, a move to a new organization, or a fresh challenge in your existing job—can be a huge boost to your career and a chance for you to blossom and thrive. You know the drill heading in: Apply your experience and talents to the position, make sure you are accepted by the

hierarchy (including your own direct reports), and clinch a few big wins in the first couple of months to demonstrate what you can do.

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But in today's hyper-collaborative and dynamic workplaces, successful moves aren't as easy as they once were, even for the most qualified and hardworking people. Too often, transitioning managers and employees don't live up to their organizations' expectations. Gartner surveys indicate that a full 49% of people promoted within their own companies are underperforming up to 18 months after those moves, and McKinsey reports that 27% to 46% of executives who transition are regarded as failures or disappointments two years later. They have the right skills and experience. They understand the company's goals. They've been vetted for cultural fit. So why didn't they quickly excel in their new roles?

We analyzed employee relationships and communication patterns across more than 100 diverse companies and interviewed 160 executives in 20 of them. Our research points to one overlooked prerequisite for transition success: the effective use of internal networks. The people who are the most productive, innovative, and engaged in new roles—the "fast movers"—are those who establish extremely broad, mutually beneficial, uplifting connections from the start. Specifically, they surge rapidly into a broad network; generate pull; identify how they add value, where they fall short, and who can fill the gaps; create scale; and shape their networks for maximum thriving.

In most cases, individual managers must do these things on their own. Only 43% of people surveyed in 2021 by the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) said their organizations ensured that transitioning employees were onboarded with guidance and support. Only about a quarter said their employers encouraged transitioners to build connections early or create networks to address skills gaps. That should not be the case. Organizations and team leaders can help people in new roles work through the five strategies as part of a well-designed program.

In this article we'll explain why successful transitions are so important to both career and company success, describe how rising demands for collaboration have made networks increasingly critical, and give some advice on implementing each of the fast-mover practices.

Many Transitions + Poor Onboarding = Big Problems

In today's organizations, transitions occur all the time and take many forms. Managers and employees—Millennials and Gen Zers in particular—change jobs far more often than previous generations ever did. A January 2021 survey of 14,000 consumers in nine countries by the IBM Institute for Business Value found that about 20% of workers voluntarily changed employers in 2020, citing desires for such things as job-location flexibility and more-meaningful work, and more than 25% were looking to make a move in 2021. And a Microsoft study of more than 30,000 people in 31 countries indicated that 40% of them were considering leaving their employers in 2021.

Internal moves are increasingly common too. For example, research from i4cp shows that 64% of organizations have recently undergone or are currently undergoing some form of deliberate culture change. To support such efforts, nearly half of those

companies moved leaders at all levels around or out of the organization. According to Gartner, one in three leaders is in transition at any point in time.

Although many companies tout their onboarding processes, it's not clear that those methods are working. In another i4cp survey, only 44% of respondents said their organizations' efforts to onboard external hires achieved desired outcomes, and 88% said that onboarding programs weren't offered to employees who'd been promoted or transferred into new jobs.

Gallup research shows that the cost of replacing an employee is typically one-half to two times that person's salary, depending on seniority and the sophistication of his or her skills. At pre-pandemic (2017) turnover rates, that translates to nearly $1 trillion a year for U.S. businesses. And that picture may be comparatively rosy, for a few reasons. First, surveys indicate that as workers seek new opportunities and more flexibility post-Covid, voluntary turnover is likely to rise. Second, Gallup's calculations don't factor in the very real network effect of departures. For example, the company suggests that a hypothetical 100-person organization paying an average salary of $50,000 might face staff-replacement costs of $660,000 to $2.6 million a year. But at the Connected Commons—an intentional network dedicated to enabling individuals and organizations to thrive—we've found that the fallout from failed transitions goes beyond acquisition and compensation, because when people underperform and leave, it hurts their coworkers' productivity. Our research shows that, on average, most employees are relied upon by five to 12 colleagues. Let's say someone leaves and five teammates are affected, all of whom take a 5% hit to performance for six months (three months to locate a replacement and three months to get the new hire up to speed). That conservative estimate adds another $845,000 for inefficiencies in the network. (A free calculator is available at network-toolkit.com/connectedtalent.)

Even transitioners who don't fail so badly that they must leave create negative, often unseen ripple effects. According to Gartner, the direct reports of a struggling transitioning leader perform, on average, 15% worse than people who report to a high-performing

manager, and they are 20% likelier to leave the organization or be disengaged. The productivity of peers, too, suffers if their work depends on the transitioning employee.

The Hyper-Collaborative Environment

Just as important as the frequency and impact of transitions is what's going on in day-to-day work. More and more companies have identified collaboration across disciplines and units as a way to meet the new business goal of ever-greater agility.

In a 2017 Gartner survey, 67% of organizations indicated that they were using collaborative business models to focus on digital transformation and ranked collaboration as the second-most-important workforce skill, after innovation. Other Gartner research shows that work interdependence is very high. In one study, 82% of organizations reported that their employees must work closely with colleagues to achieve their objectives. In another, 50% of employees said that in the previous three years they had experienced a greater need to coordinate and collaborate to complete their work. (Only 16% said that such demands had shrunk.)

Our own (pre-pandemic) research showed that collaboration in even the most transactional roles had risen markedly, with most leaders and knowledge workers spending 85% or more of their time in collaborative activities—on the phone, on email, and in meetings. For many kinds of jobs, this figure has since increased by five to eight hours a week as a result of remote working, with collaboration earlier in the morning and later at night as employees struggle to keep up with technologies and always-on expectations.

This environment has changed companies' thinking about what's most valuable in their employees' contributions. Gartner reports that companies now view "network performance"—effectiveness at enhancing and capitalizing on others' performance to improve one's own—as equal in importance to the ability to handle tasks individually. A decade ago the former was seen as one-third as important as the latter. And yet only 20% of companies surveyed by i4cp indicated that helping new hires establish critical organizational networks is an objective of their onboarding process. That needs to change.

The Fast-Mover Strategies

In our collective study and analysis of networks, collaboration, and transitions in organizations, we noticed that 10% to 15% of movers became well-connected in a quarter to a third of the usual time, even if they started with few or no contacts, and were reaping the benefits: rapid productivity, innovation, higher engagement, and lower risk of departure. These fast movers showed that people making transitions today don't have the luxury of allowing their network connections to form serendipitously. To be successful, you (and those who onboard you) must be intentional. Here's how.

Surge rapidly into a broad network. Fast movers act as quickly as possible to discover the informal org chart of key boundary-spanning, energizing opinion leaders who are able and willing to help them get things done.

Consider a manager we'll call Holly, who took on the challenge of improving workforce planning in her global professional-services firm. This was not a formal promotion, but it was an important transition. She saw that she needed to talk to helpful and passionate experts who had been thinking about the topic for a long time and weren't afraid to float unusual ideas. Within six

weeks she met with dozens of people across various groups to understand the business environment, how the groups operated, and each person's most pressing concerns. Importantly, she ended every conversation by asking for the names of others with whom she should meet or work.

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For example, after convening members of the HR function to discuss current processes, she asked each of them to name one or two people in the business units who were well-connected, were frequently tapped for help, or seemed to make a real impact in meetings. She then met with each of those individuals to hear their perspectives on workforce needs. She quickly began to build a broad network encompassing her group, the larger HR function, and people in other business units, corporate functions, levels, and locations who might have a disproportionately positive or negative impact on her success in implementation. She set out to ensure that their impact was uniformly positive.

Holly understood that her transition success depended on creating connections to and goodwill with not only key stakeholders and customers or clients, the organization's formal leaders, and her own team and direct reports, but also people who might not necessarily be viewed as important, such as the *deputies of formal leaders,* who can help transitioners learn about the leaders' goals, motivations, interests, schedules, and workloads so that it becomes easier to make the most efficient use of their time; *colleagues in functional and support roles,* who can

facilitate the transitioner's work; and *peers,* who can be sounding boards and sources of information about opportunities and others' views.

Generate pull. John Hagel III, John Seely Brown, and Lang Davison addressed "the power of pull" in a 2010 book of that name, describing how people who attract like-minded colleagues and "shape serendipity" benefit themselves and their organizations. Once you've put yourself out there, as Holly did, you want people to come to you, to offer advice, suggest new ideas, and bring you into new projects and your next role.

We noted that while broadening her network, Holly focused on asking questions and listening to better understand others' thinking, needs, and objectives. She also worked to build real relationships, displaying curiosity about others' professional and personal interests and looking for points of commonality. And she left people feeling good, by making it clear that she recognized their status, value, and contributions and by showing that she cared about what she could do for them as much as what they could do for her.

Holly and other fast movers also understand the value of modesty. When transitioning and meeting new people, many of us are tempted to oversell ourselves—to describe our skills and experiences and immediately explain how we'll add value. But heed the adage: "Show, don't tell."

Consider Meredith, an executive who transitions frequently in her industrial-packaging company because others want her, rather than because she requests a transfer or a promotion. She told us that before relating any experience or sharing how her expertise

might be relevant, she asks herself whether it will help the person she's speaking to or just cast herself in a better light. If the latter, she keeps it to herself.

Fast movers get clarity on their value add and then work to improve in the areas where they're weak or find people whose knowledge and skills fill the gaps.

Successful transitioners also adjust their approaches and ideas to mesh with new members of their networks. For example, in one new role, Meredith saw that her colleagues were much more consensus-oriented than she was. So when she wanted to move forward on a plan to begin sourcing paperboard from Brazil, which involved weighing cost, quality, and sustainability concerns, she diligently worked to bring everyone on board, rather than making a unilateral decision or settling for a majority vote.

Of course, the fastest way to generate pull is through mutual wins that benefit new contacts as much as they do you. One of the people with whom Meredith linked up was the company's sustainable development officer, who at first opposed her idea because of the rampant falsification of Forest Stewardship Council certification in Brazil. While acknowledging that reality, Meredith made the case that a newly developed grease-barrier coating on the Brazilian paperboard would eliminate the need for plastic liners for food applications. The SDO saw this as a big win for him, so he reversed his position and supported her plan.

Impressed by her knowledge and flexibility, he became a friend and an adviser, frequently coming to her with questions, information, and ideas for new initiatives.

Much transition advice focuses on how people should present their own stories and define themselves in others' eyes. We found that fast movers do it differently: They engage with collaborators to cocreate a joint narrative of success.

Identify how you add value, where you fall short, and who can fill the gaps. Whether your main contribution is your knowledge of a key technology, your ability to inspire people, or other skills and intangibles, you can use traditional connections, such as bosses, direct reports, and internal clients, to help you pinpoint exactly what others are expecting you to bring to the table. One executive we interviewed felt completely out of her depth in a new C-suite role that involved meetings on highly technical issues. "I had no idea what to say," she told us. "I didn't think I'd ever be able to speak in those terms." But the CEO reassured her. She recalls his saying, "The reason I picked you for this role was your ability to build momentum and communicate success. You don't have to know all of this."

He also noted that she would need to rely on her network for help. Transitions invariably create skills gaps like this. Most of us either fail to see them or try to bluff our way through. But fast movers get clarity on their value add and then work to improve in the areas where they're weak or find people whose knowledge and skills fill the gaps—which is often a faster and more effective way to come up to speed.

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Consider Gary, a manager in an industrial firm, who was promoted to an executive role for his knowledge of a particular product line. He was a 20-year veteran of the organization who was staying within his area of expertise, and yet he soon realized that he was out of touch with some of the terminology being used in his unit. Instead of pretending to understand, he made a list of 33 terms he'd heard but didn't know and asked his team for help. One phrase in particular—"But is it A and K?" which meant "But is it awesome and kewl [cool]?"—opened his eyes to a new way of thinking about the production line. It was said half in jest, but it reflected very real concerns about the company's ability to make its factories more appealing to young workers.

Create scale. Fast movers can not only quickly integrate into their new roles but also get big things done by harnessing the power of those they know. They tap their networks for both *ideation* and *implementation*—that is, they seek help from innovators across the organization who can offer novel solutions to pressing problems and from influencers who can help execute on, spread, and sell those ideas.

A physician we'll call Calvin, who led a palliative-care group in a teaching hospital, illustrates how ideation within a transitioner's network can help achieve scale. When his hospital was integrated into a larger health care system that had little understanding of his field—the discipline of providing relief rather than aggressive treatment for seriously ill patients—Calvin feared that his group might be disbanded, so he started working to broaden his network in the newly merged organization. One contact led to another, and he was soon connected with doctors from specialties such as oncology and geriatrics, who were intrigued by his work, and with people in the health system's communications department. Those conversations sparked an idea: He could use internal publications, speeches, news-media interviews, and other tools of the PR trade to help more colleagues understand palliative care. Because he'd cultivated his new relationships with deliberation, generating pull just as Holly and Meredith did, those new communications-savvy contacts also helped him with implementation. They enthusiastically took up his cause, lending their time and talents to write press releases, edit his blog posts, set up interviews with media outlets, and coach him on public speaking.

Calvin and the other fast movers we've studied make a point of connecting with four types of influencers to achieve scale: *central connectors,* who have big, informal networks that help them socialize ideas and garner support from specific groups; *boundary*

spanners, who have ties across groups and geographies and can bridge silos; *energizers,* who create passion and enthusiasm in their interactions, thereby amplifying ideas and engaging the broader organization; and *resisters*—those contrarians and naysayers whose viewpoints must be taken into consideration early, both to improve the idea and, ideally, to get them on your side.

Working through his network, Calvin not only saved his team but established its members as go-to consultants for doctors throughout the hospital system.

Shape the network to maximize personal and professional well-being. Despite the stress inherent in taking on a new role, and all the networking they're doing, fast movers also manage to prioritize their physical and mental health. They don't allow the breadth of their networks to undermine the quality of their relationships or overwhelm them with too many demands for collaboration. They find people who understand, energize, adapt to, and create mutual wins for them just as they did for others. They rely on people who can fill their skills gaps and free them up for more valuable, meaningful, and scalable work.

A carefully crafted, supportive network shields them from some of the pressures of their new roles. As Jerome, a consumer-products marketing-analytics expert tasked with a new initiative, explains, "If I get stuck on one thing, I have six or seven people I can talk to….If the problem is more cerebral, more strategic, there are other people I reach out to." Another transitioner told us that because he has created a larger circle of people "who know me, who I have shared my story with…almost like an advisory board," he knows it's always "OK to pick up the phone and talk to somebody."

Some of your new connections should be role models—contacts who show you a path to better work/life balance. An engineer and project manager we'll call Barry told us that his networking efforts in a new role led him to people whose successful management of career and family gave him the confidence to rethink his own patterns of behavior. "When I see them, it gives me a clear understanding that I can have that too, if I take actions to make it happen," he said. He now leaves work early to avoid a traffic-clogged commute, stays offline on weekends, and serves on the board of a local charter school.

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If organizations want to ensure that everyone who transitions has a reasonable shot at becoming a fast mover, leaders must develop a networks-first mindset—an understanding of the prime importance of connections in today's highly mobile workforce and how they really function. Many companies pay lip service to supporting networking for new hires and promoted employees. But then they simply provide social hours, urge involvement in external associations, or assume that the bigger your network, the better. Not so. Some of the most effective fast movers make a point of engaging more intentionally with smaller subsets of superhelpful people.

Organizations can further help transitioners by thoughtfully establishing norms for sharing expertise in meetings, pairing newcomers with veterans, and continuing onboarding programs well into the first year. They can develop leadership training that intentionally cuts across silos, conduct "connections audits" to help employees build their networks, and flag ineffective networking practices. And they can deploy coaches and mentors to spread best practices.

Networking for transition doesn't have to be a do-it-yourself exercise. Employers can lead the way in showing people how to quickly build the connections that will help them thrive.

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