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TECHNOLOGY

Six Degrees of Exploitation?

New Programs Help Companies 'Mine' Worker Relationships for Business Prospects

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It's not what you know. It's who you know.

Turning that old maxim into a commercial concept, several new companies are developing software to help employers mine their employees' acquaintances for new business prospects. The programs scan workers' contacts from their computerized address books, instant-message buddy lists, electronic calendars and e-mail correspondence. They then make maps of all the relationships they finds among the employees and all their contacts.

The goal is to identify people within the company who have potentially useful contacts elsewhere and could make a personal introduction, say, linking a salesperson with a potential customer, an attorney with a prospective client or a fund-raiser with likely donors.

New York-based Visible Path, and Spoke Software Inc., of Palo Alto, Calif., are both rushing to get final versions of their so-called relationship-mining software out later this year. ZeroDegrees Inc., of Santa Monica, Calif., just unveiled a test version of software with a similar concept that can be used by individuals who want to share their contact lists with selected others.

Antony Brydon, president of Visible Path Inc. says programs like this wouldn't have worked well until recently, because people remembered the phone numbers of their closest friends and never wrote them down. Today, with cell phones and 10-digit dialing in many cities, almost everyone stores contacts in computers, he says, where software programs can easily mine them.

The software companies trace their origins to the academic field of social-network analysis, which merges psychology and statistics to create social maps that show how people are connected. They cite the sociological theory that no more than six degrees of separation exist between any two people in the world and say their maps help discover those often unknown links.

The business-oriented software programs are variants of the increasingly popular Web-based social networks such as Friendster.com, a dating service, and Ryze.com, which aims to help people network for business purposes. But those services build from the bottom up, with members submitting contacts to the network, rather than top-down with search-engines pulling contacts from their e-mail and other desktop sources.

Visible Path and Spoke Software boast their services, which will cost upward of \$100,000 for large organizations, can help companies utilize "relationship capital" -- that is, to wrest value from their employees' personal contacts. But even proponents of the idea know they have to overcome fears that it invades employees' privacy.

Many people don't want to have their relationships exploited, no matter how much it helps their company. "On the surface, yeah, it's Big Brother looking over your

shoulder," says Stan Wasserman, a University of Illinois professor and expert in social-network analysis who is working with Visible Path. But Mr. Wasserman says Visible Path has provided numerous safeguards to assure employees retain control of their contact relationships -- including the option of even ignoring the request.

Clay Shirky, an adjunct professor of telecommunications at New York University, says computerized searching of contact lists "makes everyone uncomfortable." However, he thinks the ability to reject requests makes Visible Path and Spoke less objectionable than some early sales-software programs that attempted to force people to share their contact information. Those he says were like "cracking people's heads open to see what's inside."

Here's how Visible Path works for one early client, CMJ Network, a New York-based publisher and concert producer specializing in undiscovered performers: A CMJ salesperson who hopes to sell an ad to a particular record label asks the system to identify another CMJ employee who has contacts at the label's company. Visible Path sends the salesperson a note naming the people at the target record company who are in touch with employees at CMJ.

If the contact sounds promising -- say, the label's vice president of marketing -- the CMJ salesperson can send an e-mail to the co-worker requesting an introduction. The system never tells the salesperson who the co-worker is. It is up to the co-worker to identify him or herself and agree to help. If the co-worker doesn't want to use the relationship in that way, he or she has the option of not replying.

Jay Ziskrout, CMJ Network's chief operating officer, says "I was blown away by the concept." At CMJ, 18 writers, ad sales people and concert producers use Visible Path to find co-workers who know a group's manager or an agent for a particular band, he says.

There was some hesitancy at first, Mr. Ziskrout says. "We have independent-minded people, and they were initially concerned" about being forced to share their contacts. But he says the system allows employees to block access to specific names or folders in e-mail, and employees can deny access to individuals they don't want to help.

CMJ is waiting for the next version of Visible Path, which will allow it to offer to link its own Visible Path system to that of a promoter or record label, greatly expanding the accessible network.

Indeed, a future selling point of these programs is that they will be able to find contacts more than one degree apart. An employee might not know any record producers himself, but may have a contact at a different company who knows a record producer and would be willing to make an introduction. The second company would have to be part of the software system as well to have its employees' contacts scanned.

The programs can't always identify a contact exactly. The "Bill Gates" in an employee's address book could be an old friend from camp, not the chairman of Microsoft, in which case, the employee could set the record straight after receiving an introduction request. More likely, a salesperson would ask the program, "Do any of my co-workers know anybody at Microsoft?" and be given the names of people identified as being at Microsoft within co-workers' contact lists.

Many of the programs can evaluate how strong a link is between an employee and his contacts. Visible Path's "Relationship Mining Engine," for example, considers a contact closer if the employee has the contact's cell-phone number as opposed to just an office number. It also checks to see if a contact regularly responds to the employee's e-mails -- a sign of strong links -- or just receives it. Names on an instant-messenger buddy list are automatically considered strong links. So are repeated face-to-face or telephone

meetings that show up in a calendar. "In aggregate, they give very strong indications," Mr. Brydon says.

Spoke Software went live in June with 3,200 users in seven enterprises and should be ready for a full launch before the end of the year, says Chief Executive Ben T. Smith. Like Visible Path, Spoke's software analyzes employees' contact information and messaging traffic, as well as public data from the Web. The program assigns numerical values to connections so users can determine which path might be the most productive.

ZeroDegrees' software also combs through users' Microsoft Outlook accounts and compiles a list of contacts, with recommendations on which contacts should be invited into the network.

Users can then select their network and sort names into three categories of familiarity. Those in each other's "Inner Circle," the highest level, can access full contact information of everyone in each other's networks, bypassing the intermediary. Outside of the Inner Circle, users must request an introduction through the owner of the contact, and the connector's identity is kept secret. "Our connectors are senior business people who value relationships much more than people who just want to get introductions," says Jaz Dhillon, president of Zero Degrees.

But fans say the real value is finding someone to make the introduction. Neal Williams, an attorney for Carr & Ferrell in Palo Alto, has just installed software from Visible Path, which is a client. "Important folks are often impossible to get to because they have so many barriers," he says. "You have to have an in."

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