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## Gossip can make or break careers

Sociologist Ronald Burt, a professor at the University of Illinois, said people who avoid work cliques do best

By Barbara Rose  
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

Worried about what people say about you at work? It's more than a paranoid's concern.

Reputations are built as much by the stories people tell about one another as by the quality of their work.

"Good work has the duration of morning dew," sociologist Ronald Burt told managers at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business' 52nd annual management conference in mid-May. "It's not enough to do good work."

Reputations flourish not simply because you do good work but because people tell stories about your good work, said Burt, Hobart W. Williams Professor of Sociology and Strategy.

How widely this gossip circulates is influenced by your position in workplace networks.

Some people work in tightly defined teams and seldom communicate with people outside. Others talk to people in many networks and carry ideas from one part of an organization to another.

These so-called network entrepreneurs have a wider view of the organization and are judged to be smarter and more creative. They get better evaluations, get paid better and fired less often, Burt's research suggests.

"Creativity is no more than finding someone more ignorant than you," Burt said.

Positive buzz shows up in paychecks.

A study of senior executives at an investment bank found a correlation between executive bonuses and positive constituencies—or clusters of people who spoke well of them. A single standard deviation higher on the curve added \$700,000 to their bonuses, while a notch lower cost \$350,000.

Reputations are important because people are inclined to accept ideas from those they trust. But you can't "own" your reputation, Burt said. "You are the object of your reputation."

"What we do when we tell stories is to strengthen ties with one another," he said. "The person we're discussing is grist for the mill."

If the person asking an opinion of someone seems to be looking for a negative spin, we're likely to offer unflattering stories — and vice versa, research shows.

Network entrepreneurs come off better even when the gossip takes a negative drift, according to research. Burt cited a study of "character assassination" that asked why a person made it hard to get a job done.

The situation rather than the person was blamed 50 percent of the time when the person discussed was a network entrepreneur. By contrast, the person was blamed 70 percent of the time when the subject was someone who worked in clique, where the velocity of gossip is high. Some words used to describe the person included "charlatan," "back-stabber," "nasty" and "ill-tempered."

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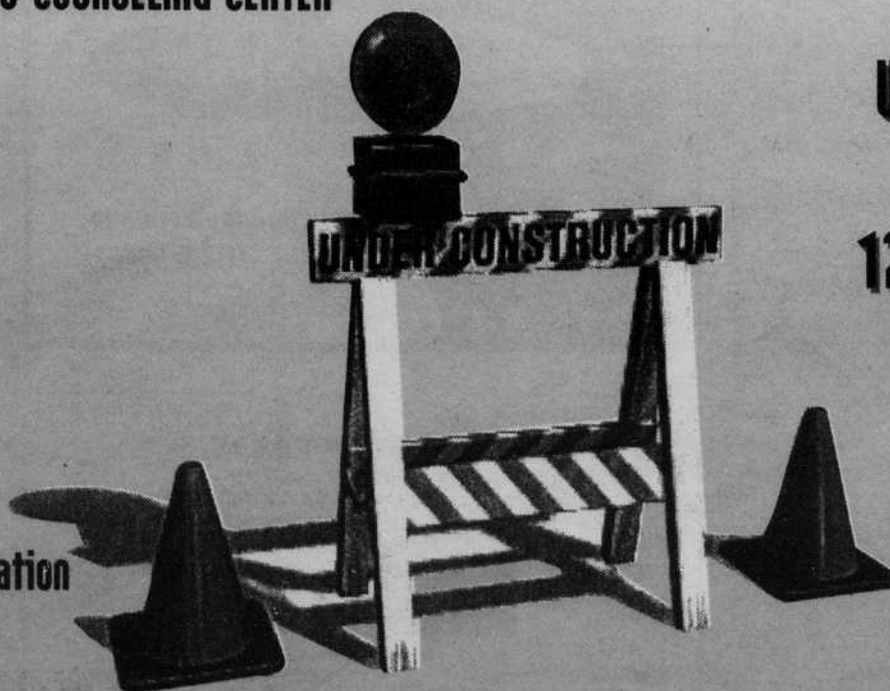
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