

Press release

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ESMT Berlin study: The hidden twist behind women's professional network recall

Women are more accurate at recognizing social ties in the workplace; yet men tend to use networks more successfully for career advancement. New research shows that women hold an advantage, yet they lose it precisely in situations where networks are open, loosely connected, and often critical for career progression.

Women have a more refined sense for social relationships in professional settings. They are more accurate in identifying who is connected to whom and better at remembering these relational structures. Paradoxically, this ability may help explain why women remain underrepresented in certain positions of influence. This is the conclusion of recent research by [Eric Quintane](#) (ESMT Berlin), [Matthew Brashears](#) (University of South Carolina), Helena V. González-Gómez (NEOMA Business School), and [Raina Brands](#) (UCL School of Management), published in the peer-reviewed journal [Personnel Psychology](#).

Across three studies with a combined sample of more than 10,000 participants, a clear pattern emerged: Women demonstrated more accurate network recall, especially in dense and cohesive networks. This advantage was observed in a large-scale survey conducted in the United States, an analysis of real friendship networks among MBA students, and an online experiment with working professionals. However, as soon as professional networks become more open and less connected, meaning they exhibit so-called structural holes, this advantage disappears.

Structural holes occur, for example, in cross-functional project teams where members have limited direct connections and information flows through a few individuals or in informal executive networks where key individuals connect otherwise disconnected decision-makers. In both cases, it is the people at the intersections who gain access to influence.

In these types of networks, women lost their advantage over men. "Women appear to rely more on a triadic closure mental schema, assuming a relationship between two individuals who are both connected to the same third party. This shortcut boosts their accuracy in cohesive teams but creates phantom ties in sparse networks with structural holes, which makes their advantage disappear in those contexts," says Eric Quintane, associate professor of organizational behavior at ESMT Berlin.

The findings suggest that organizations should be aware of these differing cognitive perceptions of social networks to ensure that women and men have equal access to key positions where recognizing and bridging network gaps is essential.

About ESMT Berlin

ESMT Berlin is a leading global business school with its campus in the heart of Berlin. Founded by 25 global companies, ESMT offers master, MBA, and PhD programs, as well as executive education on its campus in Berlin, in locations around the world, online, and in online blended format. Focusing on leadership, innovation, and analytics, its diverse faculty publishes outstanding research in top

academic journals. Additionally, the international business school provides an interdisciplinary platform for discourse between politics, business, and academia. ESMT is a non-profit private institution of higher education with the right to grant PhDs and is accredited by AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS, and ZEvA. It is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion across all its activities and communities. [esmt.berlin](https://www.esmt.berlin)

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