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EVIDENCE BRIEF
NOVEMBER 2026

EVIDENCE BRIEF · INNOVATION AND NETWORKS

Networking Skill Turns Ties Into Results

Does network capability raise performance?

Seventy percent of business-event stakeholders say face-to-face relationship building is the hardest part of events to replace, and firms spend heavily on meeting partners. Surveys of 179 Iranian biopharmaceutical firms, 270 Chinese makers of complex products and 286 Chinese firms show whether the ability to build and manage networks raises performance.

By Eventamin · How we work 12 November 2026 Iran, China

3 studies · 1 industry source

network capability | networking capability | firm performance | innovation networks | network heterogeneity | network centrality | biopharmaceutical firms | complex products | digital orientation | business networking

EDITION	Evidence brief · Published 12 November 2026
DOI	https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24378240
CITE AS	Eventamin. (2026). Networking Skill Turns Ties Into Results: Does Network Capability Raise Performance? [Evidence brief]. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24378240
WEB EDITION	eventamin.com/evidence/innovation-and-networks/does-network-capability-raise-performance, with interactive charts, chart data and the corrections log
LICENCE	Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) · © 2026 Eventamin

KEY FINDING

Network capability, the ability to build, manage and use partner networks, raises performance in all three studies: it carried most of the benefit of diverse networks in Iranian biopharma, lifted innovation in Chinese complex-product firms partly by moving them to the center of their networks, and amplified the effect of digital orientation. The evidence rests on single-country, cross-sectional surveys.

Three studies, 2023–2024; industry data 2026

Key findings

- **Diverse networks pay with capability.** Among 179 Iranian biopharmaceutical firms, a diverse partner network raised performance, and more so when firms had strong network capability[1].
- **Capability carries the effect.** The route from network diversity through network capability to performance was stronger than the direct effect of diversity, and the capability to manage networks as a hub mattered most[1].
- **Capability moves firms to the center.** Among 270 Chinese makers of aircraft, machinery, cars and telecom equipment, dynamic network capability raised innovation, with around 48 percent of the effect running through greater centrality in the network[2].
- **Turbulence raises the payoff.** The effect of network capability through centrality was around 2.5 times larger under high technological turbulence than under low turbulence, and smaller when products were more complex[2].
- **Central firms gain more from going digital.** Among 286 Chinese firms, digital orientation raised exploratory innovation more than exploitative innovation, and network centrality strengthened both effects[3].

FOR THE MARKET

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Market outcomes

What the studies mean for each part of the industry.

Exhibitors & sponsors	Meeting diverse partners pays when the firm can manage what follows: scanning, selecting, coordinating and maintaining partners turns contacts made at events into performance.
Organisers & associations	Formats that help firms build network capability, such as structured partnering, follow-up meetings and hub roles for large firms, add value beyond the number of contacts made.
Investors & advisers	Network capability is a measurable asset; firms that occupy central positions and adapt their networks quickly perform better in turbulent technology markets, though the evidence comes from single-country surveys.

Networks as a capability

Firms invest heavily in meeting partners. In the Events Industry Council's 2026 survey, 70 percent of stakeholders said face-to-face relationship building was the hardest part of events to replace[4]. Whether those relationships pay depends on what firms do with them: network capability is the ability to find, build, coordinate and use partner networks.

Three surveys of firms in Iran and China test whether network capability raises performance.

SETTING	FIRMS SURVEYED	MAIN RESULT
Biopharmaceutical firms, Iran	179 of 200 sampled, two managers each [1]	Network capability strengthens and carries the effect of network diversity on performance [1]
Complex-product firms, China (2021)	270 in eight cities [2]	Dynamic network capability raises innovation, partly through centrality [2]
Firms in collaboration networks, China	286 in two waves six months apart [3]	Network centrality strengthens the effect of digital orientation on innovation [3]

Diverse networks need capability: Iranian biopharma

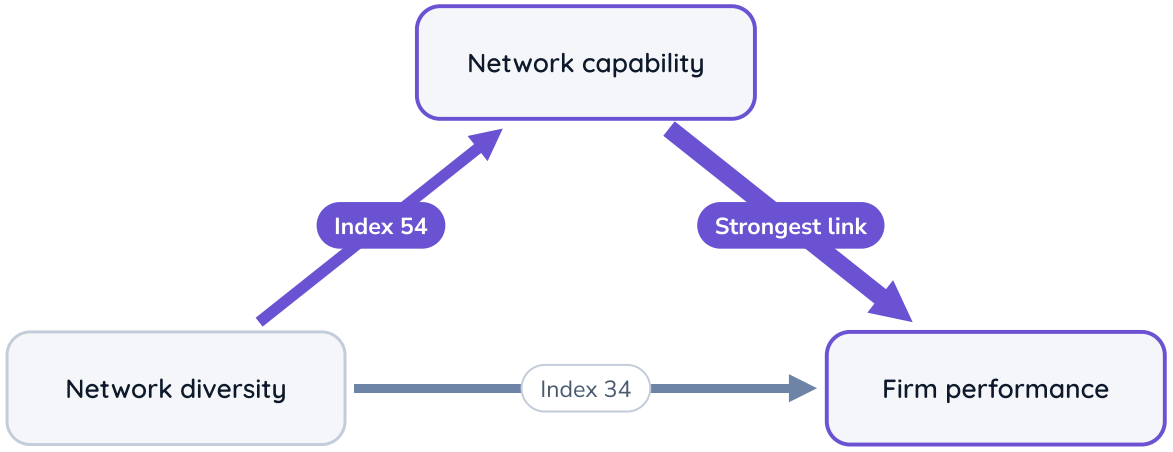
Diversity in a network helps only as far as firms can manage it. Among 179 Iranian biopharmaceutical firms, in a sector where more than 95 percent of managers in a pretest saw networking as important, partner networks that were diverse in type, knowledge and location raised performance [1]. The effect was stronger when firms had high network capability [1].

Most of the benefit ran through capability: the route from network diversity through network capability to performance was stronger than the direct link [1]. The capability to manage the network as a hub had a slightly larger role than the capability to take part in it [1].

Links between network diversity, network capability and performance among Iranian biopharmaceutical firms

Strength of each link as an index: strongest link = 100.

Main route Other links Thicker arrow: stronger link · dashed: no measurable link



Source: Safardoust et al. · Release date: 2023 · Region: Iran · Number of firms: 179

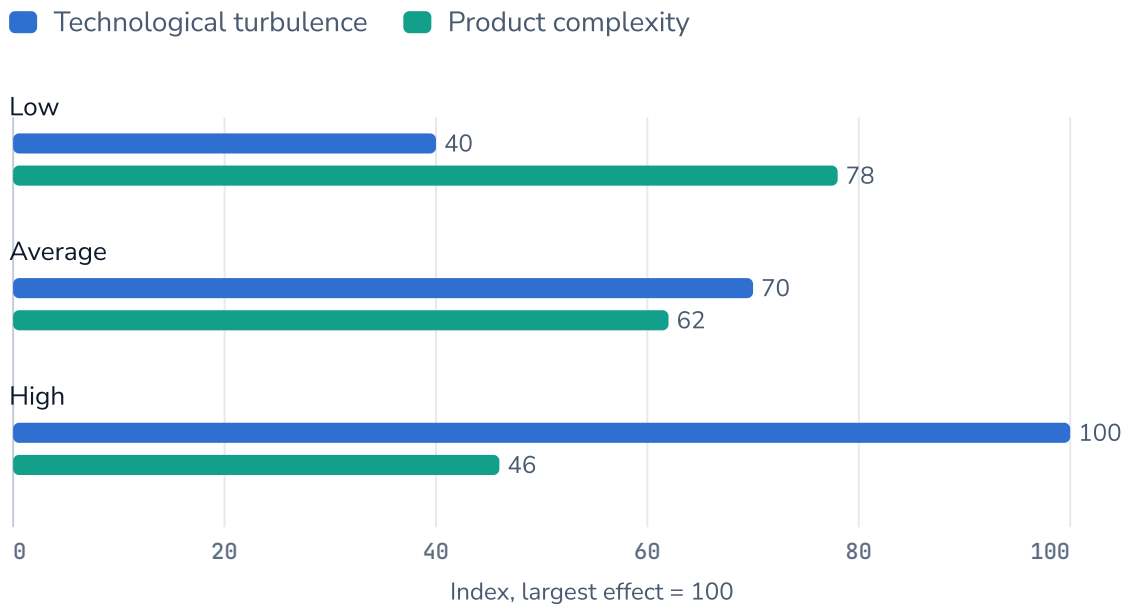
Capability and centrality: Chinese complex products

Network capability pays partly by moving firms to the center. Among 270 Chinese firms making complex products in aerospace, machinery, cars and telecom equipment, surveyed in eight cities in 2021, dynamic network capability raised innovation performance[2]. Around 48 percent of the effect ran through greater centrality in the firm's network[2].

The technical environment changed the payoff. Under high technological turbulence, the effect through centrality was around 2.5 times larger than under low turbulence, while greater product complexity weakened it[2].

Effect of dynamic network capability on innovation through network centrality, by technical environment, among Chinese complex-product firms

Index: largest effect = 100.



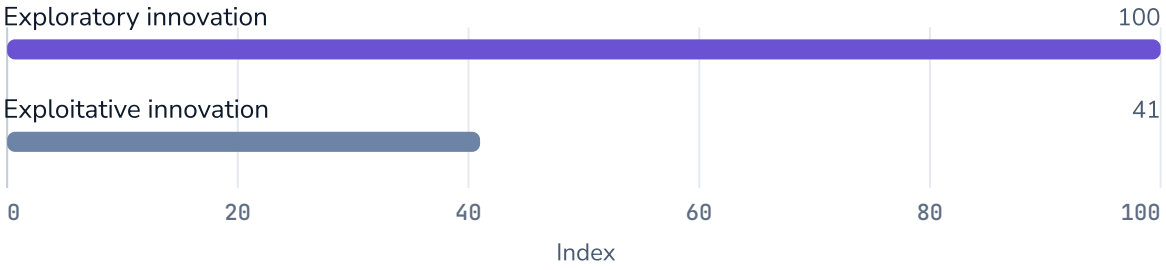
Source: Wang et al. · Release date: 2024 · Region: China · Number of firms: 270 · Survey period: September to October 2021

Centrality amplifies digital orientation

Firms at the center of collaboration networks gain more from digital strategies. Among 286 Chinese firms surveyed in two waves six months apart, a stronger digital orientation raised exploratory innovation more than exploitative innovation, partly by improving knowledge acquisition[3]. Network centrality strengthened the effect of digital orientation on both types of innovation[3].

Effect of digital orientation on innovation among Chinese firms in collaboration networks, by type of innovation

Index: largest effect = 100.



Source: Wang et al. · Release date: 2024 · Region: China · Number of firms: 286

Notes on the data

The figures are based on three studies published between 2023 and 2024: a survey of 179 Iranian biopharmaceutical firms with two informants each, a survey of 270 Chinese complex-product firms in 2021 and a two-wave survey of 286 Chinese firms[1–3]. All three are single-country surveys with self-reported measures, so they show association, not cause. Index values are calculated by Eventamin from the reported effects and compare effects within each study only.

Sources

● Study ○ Industry source

1 Safardoust, A., Ghazinoori, S., Manteghi, M., Naghizadeh, M., & Soofi, J. B. (2023). Network Heterogeneity and Firm Performance: the Role of Network Capability [Journal article]. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy, 15(2), 8020–8052*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-023-01203-1 First-hand

2 Wang, Y., Yang, N., Sharif, S. M. F., Zhang, M., & Guo, M. (2024). Technical environment matters: The effect of dynamic network capability on innovation based on a moderated mediation analysis [Journal article]. *Technovation, 138, 103116*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2024.103116 First-hand

3 Wang, J., Nie, Y., Guo, M., & Liu, H. (2024). Digital Orientation and Innovation Outputs in Collaboration Networks: Inside the Black Box [Journal article]. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy, 15(1), 732–750*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-023-01104-3 First-hand

4 Events Industry Council and Oxford Economics. (2026, May). 2026 Global Economic Significance of Business Events [Report]. Retrieved November 9, 2026, from news.eventscouncil.org First-hand

The evidence

3 studies · 1 industry source

SAMPLE

Three studies: surveys of 179 Iranian biopharmaceutical firms, 270 Chinese complex-product firms and 286 Chinese firms in two waves; one industry survey

YEARS

2023–2024 (studies); 2026 (industry data)

METHOD

Cross-sectional firm surveys analyzed with structural and regression models

About Eventamin

Eventamin reads the peer-reviewed research on events, exhibitions and hospitality, sets it against industry data and states what it means for the market. Every brief is published by Eventamin as an organisation: its sources, method and corrections are open.

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