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Vision & Intelligence

EVIDENCE BRIEF
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EVIDENCE BRIEF · INNOVATION AND NETWORKS

Connecting Pays, Dividing Burns Out

Is brokerage worth its cost?

AI-based matchmaking is the most common AI feature exhibition organizers now offer, and connecting people is the core of their business. Studies of Chinese manufacturers, employees on a digital experimentation platform, a Belgian R&D network and brokers in three studies show when bridging positions pay, and who pays the price.

By Eventamin · How we work 12 November 2026

China, Belgium, U.S., South America, Worldwide

5 studies · 1 industry source

network brokerage | structural holes | innovation networks | burnout | matchmaking | knowledge networks | network orchestration | collaboration networks | network centrality | business networking

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KEY FINDING

Brokerage pays for innovation but its cost depends on behavior: bridging positions raise firms' patent output and employees' innovation success, yet brokers who keep contacts apart burn out and turn abusive, while brokers who bring contacts together show no more burnout than others. Orchestrators who broker for their members create the most value.

Five studies, 2022–2026; industry data 2026

Key findings

- **Bridging positions raise firm innovation.** Among 454 Chinese listed manufacturers with 34,888 joint patents from 2014 to 2021, firms bridging otherwise unconnected partners and close to all others filed more patents[1].
- **Too many strong ties backfire.** The intensity of firms' patent partnerships had an inverted U-shaped link to innovation output[1].
- **Position shapes employee innovation.** On a digital experimentation platform with 2,962 employees, bridging positions raised both the number and the success of experiments, while many direct ties raised the number but lowered success[2].
- **Dividing burns brokers out.** In an experiment with 273 U.S. employees, brokers who kept contacts apart reported burnout of 4.75 on average, against 2.51 for brokers who brought contacts together and 2.35 without brokering[3].
- **Orchestrators broker for members.** A Belgian R&D network of 63 member organizations runs ten five-hour meetings a year, where the orchestrator connects members and builds trust rather than gaining from its own position[4].

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FOR THE MARKET

Market outcomes

What the studies mean for each part of the industry.

Organisers & associations	Matchmaking, hosted visits and curated meeting formats create value when the organizer brings participants together and steps back; formats that make the organizer a permanent gatekeeper between parties raise costs for staff and members.
Exhibitors & sponsors	Firms gain from partner portfolios that bridge otherwise unconnected groups, but very intensive partnerships with the same partners deliver diminishing returns; meeting new partners at events keeps networks diverse.
Academia	Network position predicts innovation, but behavior inside the position decides its cost; measuring whether brokers join or separate their contacts explains outcomes that position alone does not.

Brokers at the heart of events

Connecting people is what event organizers sell. In UFI's Global Exhibition Barometer, AI-based matchmaking was the most common AI feature exhibition companies offered in 2026[5]. In network research, such go-betweens are brokers: they span structural holes between people or firms who are not otherwise connected, a position that brings information and control[6].

Studies of firms, employees and knowledge networks show when brokerage pays, and what it costs those who do it.

Bridging positions and firm innovation

Firms in bridging positions innovate more. Among 454 Chinese listed manufacturing firms with 34,888 joint patents between 2014 and 2021, those that spanned structural holes and were close to all others in the network filed more patents[1]. The intensity of partnerships had an inverted U-shaped link: repeated joint patenting with the same partners helped up to a point, then hurt[1].

Regulation amplified the benefits. Stricter environmental regulation raised innovation output and strengthened the advantage of central and bridging positions[1].

Network position and employee innovation

Inside firms, different network positions help in different ways. On the internal experimentation platform of a large Chinese internet company, 2,962 employees ran experiments between 2020 and 2021[2]. Employees with many direct collaborators ran more experiments but fewer successful ones; those in bridging positions ran more and more successful ones; those with short paths to everyone ran fewer but more successful experiments[2].

Collaboration across departments strengthened the link between network position and the number of experiments[2].

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Effect of network position on employee innovation on a digital experimentation platform in China

Direction of the measured effect.

Raises · Mixed · Lowers · No data

	Number of innovation attempts	Success of innovation attempts
Many direct ties	✓	✗
Bridging position between groups	✓	✓
Short paths to everyone	✗	✓

Source: Dai et al. · Release date: 2025 · Region: China · Period: April 2020 to December 2021 · Number of employees: 2,962 · Classification: Eventamin

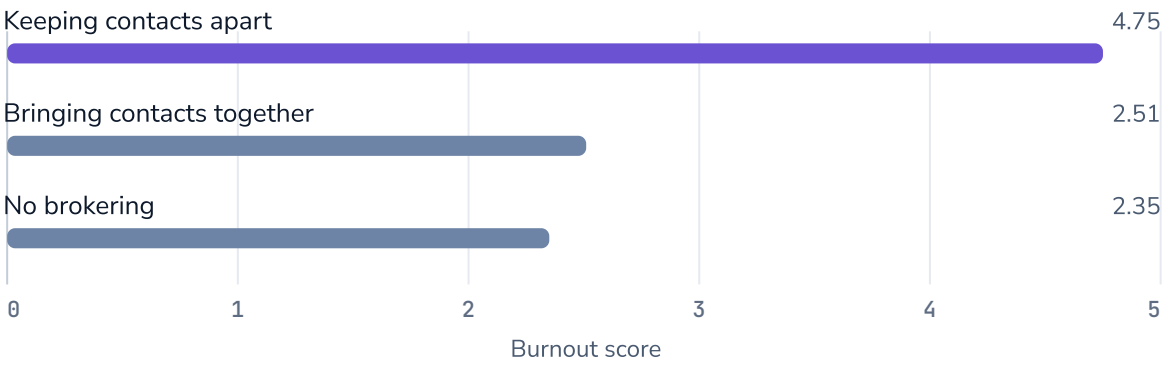
The cost of keeping people apart

Brokers can either keep their contacts apart or bring them together. Three studies with 1,536 employees of a South American university, 242 U.S. employees and an experiment with 273 U.S. employees found that keeping contacts apart leads to burnout, and burnout to abusive behavior toward coworkers[3].

Bringing contacts together carried no such cost. In the experiment, brokers asked to keep two contacts apart reported an average burnout score of 4.75, against 2.51 for those asked to connect them and 2.35 in a control group without brokering[3]. The demands of brokering fall when the contacts deal with each other directly[3].

Burnout among U.S. employees by type of brokering in an experiment

Average burnout score.



Source: Lee et al. · Release date: 2023 · Region: United States · Number of participants: 273

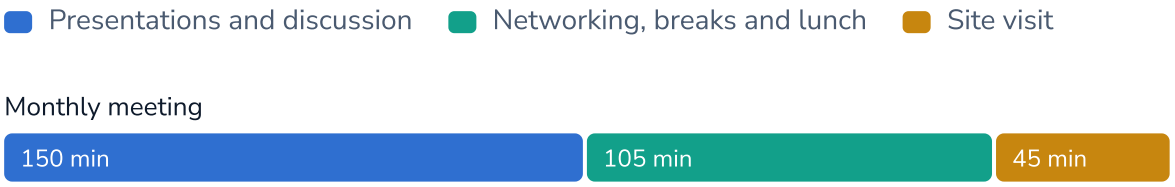
Brokering for members: a Belgian R&D network

Network orchestrators can broker for their members rather than for themselves. GRD, a Belgian network of 63 R&D managers and experts from firms, universities, clusters and research centers, meets ten times a year for around five hours, hosted by members in rotation, with networking, three to four presentations and discussion, and a site visit[4].

Interviews with 51 members show the orchestrator selecting topics and speakers, introducing members to each other and maintaining trust, which helped members generate knowledge, discover ideas across fields and build social capital[4]. The network did not broker formal deals, but new ties led to collaboration outside it; some members missed start-ups, excluded because they could not host meetings[4].

Structure of a monthly meeting of the GRD knowledge network in Belgium

Approximate minutes of a five-hour meeting.



Source: Ritala et al. · Release date: 2023 · Region: Belgium · Members: 63 · Calculation: Eventamin

Notes on the data

The figures are based on five studies published between 2022 and 2026: a panel of 454 Chinese listed manufacturers, a panel of 2,962 employees at one Chinese internet company, 51 interviews in one Belgian network, three studies of brokering with 2,051 participants in total, and a review of structural hole theory available to Eventamin as an abstract[1–4,6]. Patent counts measure innovation output only. Burnout scores come from a vignette experiment. Minutes of the GRD meeting are approximate, with networking time derived by Eventamin from the five-hour total.

Sources

● Study ○ Industry source

1 Li, M., Zhu, Y., Gao, Y., & Chen, F. (2026). Characteristics of collaborative innovation network and enterprise technological innovation performance: based on the moderating effect of environmental regulation [Journal article]. *Environment, Development and Sustainability, 28(9), 21737–21759*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-024-05830-9 First-hand

2 Dai, H., Li, L., & Li, J. (2025). The impact of network centrality on employee innovation on a digital experimentation platform [Journal article]. *Journal of Organization Design, 14(2), 107–125*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41469-024-00181-1 First-hand

3 Lee, J. W., Quintane, E., Lee, S. Y., Ruiz, C. U., & Kilduff, M. (2023). The Strain of Spanning Structural Holes: How Brokering Leads to Burnout and Abusive Behavior [Journal article]. *Organization Science, articles in advance*. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2023.1664 First-hand

4 Ritala, P., De Kort, C., & Gailly, B. (2023). Orchestrating Knowledge Networks: Alter-Oriented Brokering [Journal article]. *Journal of Management, 49(3), 1140–1178*. https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063221086247 First-hand

5 UFI. (2026, July). Global Exhibition Barometer, 37th edition [Survey report]. Retrieved November 7, 2026, from ufi.org First-hand

6 Lin, Z., Zhang, Y., Gong, Q., Chen, Y., Oksanen, A., & Ding, A. Y. (2022). Structural Hole Theory in Social Network Analysis: A Review [Journal article]. *IEEE Transactions on Computational Social Systems, 9(3), 724–739*. https://doi.org/10.1109/TCSS.2021.3070321 First-hand

The evidence

5 studies · 1 industry source

SAMPLE

Five studies: 34,888 joint patents of 454 Chinese manufacturers, 2,962 employees on a digital platform, 51 interviews in a Belgian R&D network, three studies of brokers with 2,051 participants and a review of structural hole theory; one industry survey

YEARS

2022–2026 (studies); 2026 (industry data)

METHOD

Panel regressions, a field study, a survey, an experiment and a qualitative case study

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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