Networking for Innovation

I wrote the short responses below for a discussion board in Understanding and Leveraging Networks with Noshir Contractor, Ph.D. The prompt for these responses was to identify myself as an idea scout, idea connector, idea influencer/diffuser, idea broker, and/or idea implementer, and then to elucidate the advantages and disadvantages of my role in terms of facilitating knowledge sharing and innovation. Formulating these responses provided me with an opportunity to explore the ways in which I assess and navigate my networks – and thus can best utilize my talents – during the process of converting external knowledge into innovative outcomes.

I'm going to focus on responding to the last two questions that address the reading by Whelan et al. It was super interesting to me because they provide a complementary view of the roles Nosh talked about in one of the prior videos: how to be "important" in a network as a connector, pulse-taker, or broker. I would imagine those roles are more so a reflection of communication networks rather than innovation networks, but I could be wrong.

With all that said, I'd say my professional roles typically require me to be an idea scout, connector, diffuser, and implementer/exploiter. I am always in the role of idea scout because I love learning, staying on top of my industry (marketing/communications) and sector (nonprofit), and strategizing ways to improve. And if the ideas apply to my own work, I can usually jump straight from scouting to implementing/exploiting. (Such is life when you're a one-person department. Freedom!)

Other times, though, I'm in the position of receiving other people's ideas and trying to figure out if they're feasible. This happens constantly because of the ties I usually have to maintain with every department, position level, office location, etc. So yes, I am often connecting people internally, diffusing ideas directly to the implementer/exploiter, or even implementing them myself. It runs the gamut.

I think one of the risks of playing so many roles is being unaware or unconscious of the role I'm currently playing. That can lead me to make decisions that don't align with what I need or am being asked to do – and waste valuable resources in the process. It can also negatively impact my relationships. For example, if a coworker (or boss!) comes to me with a great idea, I might mistakenly assume they're expecting me to implement/exploit it when, in reality, they're better served by me helping diffuse it to others.

The benefits, on the other hand, are primarily that I have deep knowledge of the organizations in which I work. I'm also constantly networking – externally as an idea scout and internally as an idea connector, diffuser, and implementer/exploiter. I end up being able to connect lots of folks, and I enjoy being: 1) an integral part of their work, and 2) hopefully a small part of their success.