

# **The Invisible Architecture**

**How Networks Shape Your Life**

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THE  
**INVISIBLE  
ARCHITECTURE**

*How Networks Shape Your Life*



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SULTAN ZAVRAK

**FREE PREVIEW**

Introduction + Part I (Chapters 1–3)

PREVIEW

# Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
The Structure You Can't See . . . . .	1
Why This Matters Now . . . . .	1
What You'll Discover . . . . .	2
How to Read This Book . . . . .	3
A Note on Stories and Sources . . . . .	3
A New Way of Seeing . . . . .	3
<b>I. Part I: Where You Are (Preview)</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. The Next Step</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1. The Gap . . . . .	6
1.2. The Problem Is Universal . . . . .	7
1.3. The Insight . . . . .	8
1.4. The Science, Simply Told . . . . .	9
1.5. See It in Action . . . . .	11
1.6. Back to Life . . . . .	11
1.7. The Limits . . . . .	14
1.8. What To Do . . . . .	15
<b>2. Closer Than You Think</b>	<b>17</b>
2.1. The Impossible Connection . . . . .	17
2.2. The Problem Is Universal . . . . .	18
2.3. The Insight . . . . .	19
2.4. The Science, Simply Told . . . . .	20
2.5. See It in Action . . . . .	22
2.6. Back to Life . . . . .	23
2.7. The Limits . . . . .	25
2.8. What To Do . . . . .	26
<b>3. Where You Stand</b>	<b>28</b>
3.1. The Invisible Hub . . . . .	28

*Table of contents*

3.2. The Problem Is Universal . . . . .	29
3.3. The Insight . . . . .	30
3.4. The Science, Simply Told . . . . .	31
3.5. See It in Action . . . . .	33
3.6. Back to Life . . . . .	34
3.7. The Limits . . . . .	36
3.8. What To Do . . . . .	37

# Introduction

## The Structure You Can't See

You wake up every morning inside an invisible architecture.

Your alarm goes off, and you check your phone—scrolling through updates from people two, three, four connections away from you. Your commute follows paths designed by algorithms that route millions through an urban network. At work, an email reaches your inbox because someone you barely know forwarded it to someone who forwarded it to your colleague. At lunch, you mention you're looking for a new apartment, and somehow, by Friday, a friend-of-a-friend has a lead.

None of this feels like mathematics. It feels like life.

But beneath every coffee chat, every job offer, every viral post, every unexpected connection lies a structure—an architecture of relationships that determines what reaches you, what opportunities find you, and what possibilities remain forever invisible.

This book is about learning to see that architecture.

## Why This Matters Now

We've always lived in networks. Humans have formed tribes, traded across routes, gossiped through villages, and built empires on relationships for millennia. But something has changed.

In the past century, scientists have developed tools to *see* these networks—to map them, measure them, and understand the principles that govern them. What they've discovered is profound:

- **Your position matters more than your effort.** Two equally talented people can have wildly different outcomes depending on where they sit in the network.

- **Your acquaintances are more valuable than your close friends**—at least for finding jobs, learning new ideas, and escaping your own echo chamber.
- **Small changes can tip entire systems.** A few early adopters can shift an entire market. A few key connections can change the trajectory of a career.
- **Inequality isn't just about greed or luck.** It emerges naturally from how networks grow.
- **Resilience isn't about strength.** It's about structure—redundancy, distribution, diversity.

These insights aren't abstract academic theories. They're practical truths that can change how you navigate your career, build relationships, find communities, spread ideas, and survive disruption.

## **What You'll Discover**

This book takes you through thirteen fundamental patterns that govern human networks:

**Part I: Where You Are** explores how to find your way and understand your position. You'll learn why the next step matters more than the final destination, why you're closer to anyone than you think, and why *where* you stand in a network shapes *what* you can achieve.

**Part II: Who You Know** reveals the surprising architecture of relationships. You'll discover why acquaintances open more doors than close friends, how communities form around you, why "good enough" matches beat perfect ones, and how trust travels through chains you'll never see.

**Part III: How Things Spread** shows what moves through networks and why. You'll understand why some ideas go viral while better ones die, when small changes trigger massive shifts, and why we all live in bubbles we don't know we're in.

**Part IV: Why The World Looks This Way** uncovers the hidden forces creating inequality. You'll see why success breeds success, why a few platforms dominate everything, and why this isn't inevitable.

**Part V: What Survives** teaches you how to build for resilience. You'll learn what makes some networks fragile and others unbreakable—and how to apply this to your own life.

## How to Read This Book

Each chapter follows the same structure:

- A **human story** that grounds abstract concepts in real experience
- The **universal problem** that makes this relevant to your life
- The **network insight** that shifts how you see the situation
- The **science** behind it—explained through analogy, not equations
- **Visualizations** that make invisible structures visible
- **Real-world applications** across career, relationships, and society
- **Honest limits**—where this thinking doesn't apply
- A **practical exercise** you can try immediately

While the book builds progressively, each chapter also stands alone. If you're facing a specific challenge:

- Career transition? Start with Chapter 1
- Networking feels fake? Read Chapter 4
- Looking for community? Jump to Chapter 5
- Trying to spread an idea? See Chapter 8
- Building something that lasts? Go to Chapter 13

## A Note on Stories and Sources

Most chapters open with documented real cases, using named individuals and verifiable events to make the network pattern concrete. A few chapters open with stories based on documented cases but with names changed to protect privacy; these are identified in the notes.

In all cases, scenes are reconstructed from known facts, public reporting, and published interviews, not from original reporting by the author. Where a quote appears, it is sourced. The notes at the back identify the basis for each opening and the research traditions behind the book's claims.

## A New Way of Seeing

By the time you finish this book, you'll see the world differently.

You'll notice the invisible architecture in your workplace, your social media feed, your neighborhood. You'll understand why some people seem

to have endless opportunities while others struggle despite equal talent. You'll recognize when you're trapped in an echo chamber, when a tipping point is approaching, and when a system is fragile.

Most importantly, you'll have tools to navigate these structures intentionally rather than stumbling through them blindly.

This isn't about becoming a "networker" in the superficial sense—collecting business cards and LinkedIn connections. It's about understanding the deep patterns that govern human connection, and using that understanding to build a better life.

The invisible architecture has always been there. Now it's time to see it.

Let's begin.

**Part I.**

**Part I: Where You Are (Preview)**

# 1. The Next Step

## 1.1. The Gap

In November 2012, Stewart Butterfield stood in front of his team at Tiny Speck and delivered news that no founder wants to give. Glitch, the massively multiplayer online game they had spent four years building, was shutting down. The whimsical, non-violent world of giants and butterflies had never attracted enough players to sustain itself. The company would close. The staff would be laid off.

Butterfield was thirty-nine years old. He held a bachelor's degree in philosophy from the University of Victoria and a master's in philosophy from Cambridge. He had never taken a computer science course. He had taught himself to code in the mid-1990s, building a small web startup that helped people reconnect with former classmates. That side project had led him to co-found a company called Ludicorp, which set out to build a multiplayer game called Game Neverending. The game failed. But buried inside it was a photo-sharing feature the team had built as a utility, almost an afterthought. That feature became Flickr, which Yahoo acquired in 2005 for an estimated \$25 million.

Now history was repeating itself in an uncomfortable way. Another game company. Another failure. Another team facing layoffs. Butterfield had spent years building something the market did not want.

But there was something else. Over the course of building Glitch, the team at Tiny Speck had created an internal communication tool to coordinate their distributed workforce. It was fast, searchable, organized by channels, and had become indispensable to their daily work. The game was dead. The chat tool was alive.

Butterfield looked at it the way a philosopher might look at an unexpected argument: not as a detour, but as a new premise. He had gone from philosophy to web design to photo sharing to gaming to... workplace communication? None of these steps had been planned. Each had grown

from the last. He had never mapped a career path from Plato to enterprise software. He had simply asked, at each turning point, the same question: *What is the next interesting thing I can do with what I already know?*

The gap between a philosophy degree and a \$27.7 billion company—Slack was acquired by Salesforce in 2021—looks unbridgeable in hindsight. But Butterfield never crossed that gap in a single leap. He crossed it one adjacent step at a time, and at each step, the next move was obvious only because of where the previous one had placed him.

Which raises a question: if you are standing at your own gap right now—staring at the distance between who you are and who you want to become—how do you find the next step?

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### 1.2. The Problem Is Universal

Butterfield's story might feel like an outlier—a Silicon Valley fairy tale. But strip away the specifics, and you'll find one of the oldest human problems: *How do I get from here to there?*

A patient named Priya in a village outside Jodhpur, India, faces the same problem in different form. She needs specialist care for a heart condition, but the nearest cardiologist is in Jaipur, four hours away. The question isn't just geographic distance. It's a sequence of decisions: Which bus route? Which hospital will accept her insurance? Who can refer her? Each step depends on the last, and the wrong choice means backtracking, delays, money she doesn't have.

In San Pedro Sula, Honduras, a young man named Carlos dreams of joining his uncle in Chicago. The "path" north isn't a line on a map. It's a network of contacts, safe houses, border crossings, and calculated risks. One wrong step doesn't just delay him—it could cost him everything. He needs to know the next reliable move, not the entire route.

In Lagos, Nigeria, a market trader named Adaeze faces a different kind of pathfinding every morning. She sells tomatoes at Balogun Market, but her suppliers are in Kaduna, 800 kilometers north. Multiple routes, multiple transport options, multiple prices—and tomatoes rot. Time is her real currency. The "shortest path" isn't the one with fewest kilometers; it's the one that gets produce to her stall before it spoils.

And in Manchester, England, a first-generation university student named James is trying to navigate something no one in his family has done before: landing an internship at a London finance firm. There's no map for this. The path involves knowing which societies to join, which alumni to email, which skills to highlight, which unwritten rules govern a world his parents never entered.

Different continents. Different circumstances. The same underlying problem: when the destination is clear but the path is not, how do you move forward?

Most of us respond to this problem in one of two ways. We freeze—drowning in research, waiting for the “perfect” path to reveal itself. Or we flail—jumping at the first option, hoping momentum substitutes for direction.

Both approaches miss something crucial.

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### 1.3. The Insight

What if we stopped thinking about the journey as a straight line from A to B?

Picture Butterfield's career not as a gap to leap across but as a landscape to navigate. In this landscape, there are locations: his current skills, the skills he needs, tools he could build, people he could meet, problems he could solve. And there are paths between these locations—some short, some long, some well-marked, some hidden.

This is a network.

In network terms, Butterfield is a *node*—a point in a web of possibilities. Every skill, every credential, every connection is another node. The paths between them are *edges*, and each edge has a cost: time, money, effort, difficulty.

Suddenly, the problem transforms. You're not staring across a void. You're standing at one point in a vast network, trying to find the best route to another point. And here's the crucial insight: *you don't need to see the whole network to start moving.*

Water doesn't "plan" its route to the ocean. It simply flows downhill at each moment, taking the path of least resistance from wherever it happens to be. And yet, it arrives.

When you open a GPS app, you don't study the entire map before driving. You just need clear instructions for the next turn. The app has done the hard work of finding the best path, but from your perspective, navigation is simple: follow the next instruction, then the next, then the next.

The same principle applies to life transitions. The question isn't "What's the complete path from accountant to data scientist?" The question is: "What's the single best step I can take from exactly where I stand right now?"

This shift—from mapping the whole journey to finding the next step—is more than a mindset trick. It's backed by one of the most elegant algorithms in computer science. And its origin story begins with a young man, a café, and twenty minutes of thought that would shape the modern world.

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### 1.4. The Science, Simply Told

In 1956, a twenty-six-year-old Dutch computer scientist named Edsger Dijkstra was sitting at a café in Amsterdam with his fiancée. They were planning a shopping trip, talking about the best routes between cities in the Netherlands. Dijkstra's mind wandered to an abstract version of the problem: given a network of cities connected by roads of different lengths, how do you find the shortest path between any two cities?

Twenty minutes later, he had the answer.

"The algorithm was designed in about twenty minutes," Dijkstra later recalled. "One morning I was shopping in Amsterdam with my young fiancée, and tired, we sat down on the café terrace to drink a cup of coffee. I was just thinking about whether I could do this, and I then designed the algorithm for the shortest path."

He didn't publish it until three years later, in 1959, in the journal *Numerische Mathematik*. The paper was just three pages. But the algorithm it contained would become one of the most important in history—used

today in everything from GPS navigation to internet routing to airline scheduling.

So how does it work?

Imagine you're trying to find the shortest path through a maze of rooms. Each room is connected to other rooms by doors, and above each door is a number showing how many steps it takes to pass through. You start in the entrance room and want to reach the treasure room.

Here's the Dijkstra approach:

First, you write on the floor of your starting room: "0 steps to get here." You write on the floor of every other room: "infinity steps to get here"—meaning you don't know yet.

Now, look at all the rooms you can reach directly from where you stand. For each one, calculate: "Steps to here" plus "steps through the door." If that total is less than what's written on that room's floor, cross out the old number and write the new one.

Pick the room with the smallest number that you haven't visited yet. Move there. Repeat the process: look at all connected rooms, update their numbers if you've found a shorter path.

Keep going until you reach the treasure room. When you do, the number on its floor tells you the shortest distance, and you can trace backward to see the exact path.

That's it. The algorithm doesn't try to examine every possible route. It doesn't get overwhelmed by complexity. It simply expands outward from the starting point, always taking the next cheapest step, updating its knowledge as it goes. It's greedy—always choosing the locally best option—but in a clever way that guarantees a globally optimal result.

Think of it like a spreading stain. Drop ink on your starting point, and watch it spread through the network, always flowing first into the paths with lowest resistance. The moment the ink reaches your destination, you know you've found the shortest path—because any longer path would have taken more time to reach.

The beauty of Dijkstra's algorithm is that it doesn't require you to understand the whole network. You can navigate a map of millions of nodes without ever holding the entire thing in your head. You just need to know your current position, your immediate options, and a way to keep track of what you've learned so far.

This is why GPS works. Your phone doesn't send your route to a supercomputer that contemplates every possible path across the country. It uses Dijkstra's algorithm (or modern variants of it) to efficiently expand outward from your location, finding the best route step by step.

And this is the principle that explains Butterfield's trajectory—and can unstick anyone frozen by the gap between where they are and where they want to be.

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### 1.5. See It in Action

Let's visualize a career transition as a network—the kind of landscape Butterfield navigated intuitively. Each node represents a skill, credential, or milestone. Each edge represents a learning path, with weights showing the estimated effort (in months of part-time study).

Notice something surprising? The shortest path doesn't go through the master's degree—even though that might seem like the “official” route. Instead, it builds on existing strengths (the accountant already knows Excel), adds SQL (which connects to existing accounting work), then progresses through Python and practical projects. This is exactly the pattern Butterfield followed: he never enrolled in a computer science program. He built on what was adjacent—philosophy to web design, web design to photo sharing, photo sharing to game development, game development to workplace communication.

The algorithm doesn't care about prestige or conventional wisdom. It cares about actual effort required. And sometimes, the path that looks indirect is actually the fastest way forward.

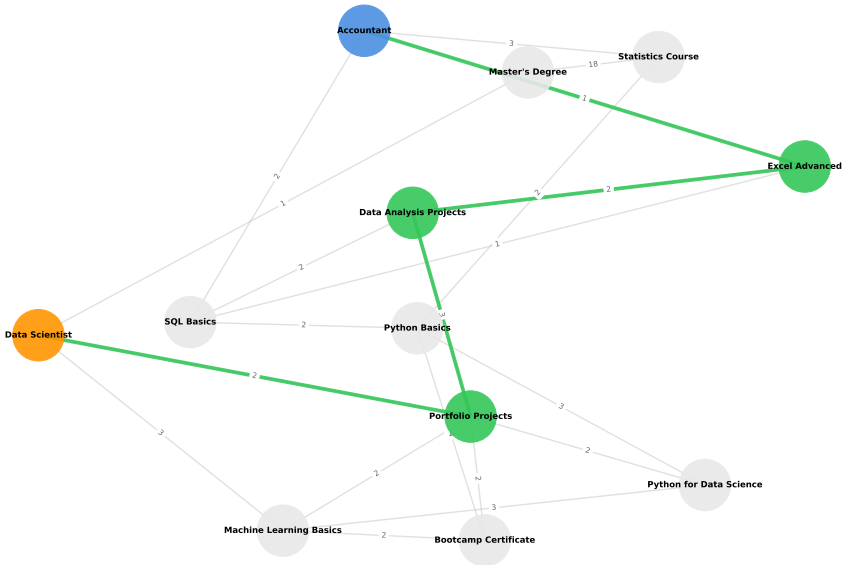
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### 1.6. Back to Life

Dijkstra's insight applies far beyond career transitions. Once you see the world as a network of paths, you start noticing shortest-path problems everywhere.

# 1. The Next Step

Shortest Path: Accountant → Excel Advanced → Data Analysis Projects → Portfolio Projects → Data Scientist  
Total effort: 8 months



**Figure 1.1.:** A career transition as a network. The highlighted path shows the shortest route from Accountant to Data Scientist—not through a master’s degree, but through building on existing strengths.

## **The Patient's Journey**

Remember Priya, the woman in rural Rajasthan who needed cardiac care? India's public health system is, at its core, a network problem. Patients don't simply "go to the hospital." They navigate a web of community health workers, primary care centers, district hospitals, and specialty facilities—each connected by referral pathways, transportation options, and bureaucratic requirements.

Organizations like the National Health Mission have begun mapping these networks explicitly, identifying bottlenecks where patients get stuck. Often, the problem isn't distance. It's a missing connection: a referral pathway that doesn't exist, a transportation link that's too expensive, a specialist who doesn't visit that district. Adding one edge to the network—a monthly specialist visit, a subsidized bus route—can dramatically shorten the path for thousands of patients.

## **Navigation in Informal Economies**

In Lagos, Adaeze the market trader has become an informal network scientist. She maintains relationships with multiple transport operators, each representing a different path for her tomatoes. When the Kaduna road floods, she knows which operator has connections to the alternative route through Minna. When fuel prices spike, she knows who has a fuel-efficient truck.

Her mental map of the supply network isn't written down anywhere. It exists in relationships, phone contacts, and accumulated experience. But it follows the same logic as Dijkstra's algorithm: from where I am now, what's the next step that gets my goods to market fastest and cheapest?

Across informal economies worldwide—from Vietnamese fish markets to Kenyan mobile banking networks—traders navigate these invisible networks daily. The most successful aren't those with the most resources. They're the ones who best understand the network's structure and can quickly find alternative paths when obstacles appear.

## **The First-Generation Student**

James, our Manchester student aiming for London finance, faces a network problem that remains invisible to those who've always been inside it. For students from wealthy families, the path to elite internships is well-lit: parents' connections, school alumni networks, summer programs that serve as unofficial feeders.

For first-generation students, these edges don't exist. The network looks completely different from their starting node. Research by sociologists like Anthony Jack at Harvard has documented how low-income students often possess tremendous talent but lack the network edges that convert talent into opportunity.

The solution isn't just "try harder." It's building new edges. Programs like SEO London and Rare Recruitment explicitly create connections between first-generation students and finance professionals—adding edges to the network that make previously impossible paths suddenly navigable.

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### 1.7. The Limits

The shortest path isn't always the best path.

Dijkstra's algorithm optimizes for one thing: total cost. But life is rarely so simple. The "shortest" career path might take you through a miserable job that pays well but crushes your soul. The fastest route to a destination might skip the scenic overlook that would have changed your perspective. The most efficient path through a health system might ignore the patient's need for dignity and understanding.

Networks also shift. The path that was shortest yesterday might be blocked tomorrow. Butterfield invested years in Glitch, only to discover the market didn't want it. The market trader's best route might flood. The student's key connection might change jobs.

And perhaps most importantly: not everyone starts from the same place. Dijkstra's algorithm finds the shortest path from *your* starting node. But if your starting node has few connections—if you're isolated by poverty, geography, discrimination, or circumstance—even the shortest path might be much longer than someone else's.

The algorithm doesn't create fairness. It reveals the paths that exist. And sometimes, the most important work isn't finding the shortest path through an existing network. It's building new edges that make better paths possible for everyone.

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## 1.8. What To Do

**The Principle:** You don't need to see the whole path—just the next step.

When you're stuck, overwhelmed by the distance between here and there, resist the urge to map the entire journey. Instead, ask: *From exactly where I am, what single step opens the most doors?*

### Try This: Map Your Next Three Steps

Take 20 minutes with a pen and paper:

1. **Write your current position.** Be specific: your job title, your main skills, your current situation.
2. **Write your goal.** Where do you want to be in two years? Don't worry about whether it's realistic.
3. **Now, ignore the destination.** This is crucial. Stop looking at the horizon.
4. **List every possible "next step" from where you stand right now.** Not steps that lead directly to your goal—just steps you could take tomorrow. A course. A conversation. A small project. A book. An email to someone who's done what you want to do. Aim for at least five options.
5. **For each option, estimate two things:**
  - Effort required (1-10)
  - New options it opens (list them)
6. **Pick the step with the best ratio.** Which option requires modest effort but opens multiple new paths?

**What you'll discover:** The step that feels most "logical" often isn't the best one. Like Dijkstra's algorithm, you might find that building on an existing strength (your "Excel") opens faster routes than starting from scratch with the "obvious" requirement (jumping straight to "Python").

**Remember:** Butterfield didn't leap from philosophy to a \$27.7 billion acquisition. He went from philosophy student to web tinkerer. From web

## 1. The Next Step

tinkerer to startup co-founder. From failed game to Flickr. From Flickr to another game. From another failed game to Slack. Each step was adjacent. Each step opened new edges in the network.

The destination matters. But the next step matters more.

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*In the next chapter, we'll explore a surprising truth about these networks we navigate: whatever destination you're trying to reach, you're probably closer than you think. The world is smaller than it appears—and understanding why changes everything.*

## 2. Closer Than You Think

### 2.1. The Impossible Connection

Budapest, 1929. The smell of strong coffee and cigarette smoke hung in the air of the New York Kávéház, the grand cafe on Erzsebet korut where writers, actors, and intellectuals gathered to argue about everything and nothing. Frigyes Karinthy, one of Hungary's most celebrated writers and satirists, was holding court at his usual table. He was forty-two, prolific, restless, the kind of mind that treated conversation as a competitive sport.

Someone proposed a game. It may have been Karinthy himself—accounts vary—but the premise was simple and audacious: pick any person on Earth. Any person at all. A rice farmer in China. A factory worker in Detroit. The claim was that you could connect yourself to that person through at most five intermediaries. Five handshakes. No more.

The cafe erupted. This was precisely the kind of provocation that Budapest intellectuals lived for. Someone issued a challenge: connect the group to Selma Lagerlof, the Swedish novelist who had won the Nobel Prize in Literature twenty years earlier. Lagerlof lived in the Varmland countryside, a world away from a Budapest cafe.

Karinthy thought for a moment. The chain was short. Lagerlof had received her Nobel Prize from King Gustav V of Sweden—that was public knowledge, a ceremony witnessed by thousands. And King Gustav was a passionate tennis player. His regular tennis partner was a man named Kehrling—one of the best-known players in Central Europe. "And I know Kehrling quite well," Karinthy said.

Two links. Budapest to Stockholm in two handshakes.

Another challenge was issued, this time more extreme: connect to Henry Ford, the American industrialist. Karinthy's group traced a chain through Ford's European business contacts, through someone in the German auto industry who knew someone who knew someone at the table. Again, no more than five steps.

Karinthy was so taken with the idea that he wrote it into a short story called “Lancszemek”—“Chain Links”—published that same year. In it, he argued that the modern world had been quietly shrinking. New technologies—the telephone, the steamship, the railroad—had woven invisible threads between distant lives. “Planet Earth has never been as tiny as it is now,” he wrote. “It shrunk—Loss of it due to the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, and the whole means of transportation.”

The story proposed something that would take the rest of the century to prove: that despite the billions of people on Earth, despite oceans and languages and borders, any two human beings were connected by a remarkably short chain of personal acquaintances.

Thirty-eight years before Stanley Milgram’s famous letter-forwarding experiment, a Hungarian writer in a Budapest cafe had seen the shape of the network. The question was whether he was right—or whether the world only felt small from the privileged vantage of a well-connected European intellectual.

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## 2.2. The Problem Is Universal

### **i** Recall from Chapter 1

We learned that navigating toward a goal isn’t about seeing the whole path—it’s about finding the best next step. Dijkstra’s algorithm showed us that you can traverse vast networks by simply choosing the closest unvisited node, again and again. Now we discover something remarkable about those networks: they’re much smaller than they appear.

Karinthy’s cafe game might sound like a party trick—the kind of thing clever intellectuals do to amuse each other. But here’s the thing: variations of this game play out constantly, everywhere. And the answer isn’t cleverness—it’s structure.

Think about the last time you met a stranger and discovered, within minutes, that you shared a mutual acquaintance. “Small world!” you probably said. It happens so often we have a cliché for it.

But is it actually a small world? Or does it just feel that way sometimes?

Consider the numbers. The world has eight billion people. Your city probably has millions. Your industry has thousands or hundreds of thousands of people. When you want to reach someone you don't know—a potential employer, a mentor, a collaborator, a decision-maker—the distance feels astronomical. They exist in a different sphere, surrounded by gatekeepers, inaccessible.

This feeling of distance shapes behavior. People don't reach out because they assume there's no path. They don't ask for introductions because they assume none exist. They apply through formal channels—the slush pile of resumes, the open submission portals, the cold emails that go straight to spam—because they believe that's the only route available to them.

But the feeling is wrong.

The world isn't just a collection of isolated clusters. It's a web of overlapping connections, and in that web, almost everyone is surprisingly close to almost everyone else.

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### 2.3. The Insight

Imagine two very different kinds of networks.

In the first, everyone knows their neighbors and no one else. Picture a fishing village where people marry the girl or boy next door, work with their cousins, socialize with people who live on the same street. Information travels slowly in this world. A rumor might take weeks to cross from one end of the village to the other, passing from person to person to person.

In the second network, connections are completely random. You might know someone in Tokyo, someone in Buenos Aires, someone in your own city, chosen seemingly at random. In this world, information travels fast—because random connections create shortcuts across the network. But this world feels chaotic. There's no community, no clustering, no sense of local belonging.

Real social networks are neither. They're something stranger and more elegant: they combine the tight local clustering of the village with the long-range shortcuts of random connections. You have your close-knit group—

family, colleagues, old friends—but you also have a few connections that reach far outside that bubble: the college roommate who moved to another country, the cousin who married someone from a different world, the former colleague in a completely different industry.

These occasional long-range connections change everything.

In a world of only local ties, reaching someone across the network might take hundreds of steps. But add just a few random shortcuts, and suddenly the average distance collapses. Not to one step—you still have to traverse the network. But to a surprisingly small number.

How small? That's what a social psychologist set out to discover in the 1960s, with an experiment that would become one of the most famous in the history of science.

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## **2.4. The Science, Simply Told**

In 1967, Stanley Milgram had an audacious idea. He wanted to measure the actual distance between strangers in American society—not in miles, but in social connections.

His method was elegantly simple. He recruited volunteers in Omaha, Nebraska, and Wichita, Kansas—places deliberately chosen for being far from the East Coast establishment. Each volunteer received a folder with basic information about a target person: a Boston stockbroker who lived in Sharon, Massachusetts. The volunteers' task: get the folder to the target, but with a rule. You can't mail it directly. You can only send it to someone you know on a first-name basis, who you think might be closer to the target, with instructions for them to do the same.

It was a human-powered navigation algorithm—each person making their best guess about the next step, passing the folder along, hoping it would eventually reach its destination.

Many folders got lost along the way. People forgot to forward them, or gave up, or sent them to dead ends. But the ones that made it through told a remarkable story.

The average number of steps? Six.

## 2. Closer Than You Think

From randomly chosen people in the Midwest to a specific stockbroker in Boston—a journey that could have required hundreds of intermediate connections—the folders arrived in about six handoffs. The phrase “six degrees of separation” entered the popular imagination, spawning a play, a film, and countless party games.

But here’s what Milgram actually demonstrated: not just that chains were short, but that ordinary people could navigate them. Without any map of the network, without knowing who knew whom, people made shrewd guesses about who might be “closer” to the target. They routed the packets through their best hunches—and it worked.

For decades, Milgram’s result was famous but also controversial. Critics pointed out that many chains never completed—maybe the short ones were exceptions? Maybe the true average was much longer? Without seeing the full network, it was hard to know.

The mathematical breakthrough came in 1998, when two scientists named Duncan Watts and Steven Strogatz published a paper in *Nature* that changed how we understand networks. They asked a simpler question: what does it take, mathematically, to create a “small world”?

Their answer was startling. You start with a regular network—imagine people arranged in a circle, each connected to their immediate neighbors. In this network, the average path length is long. To get from one side of the circle to the other, you have to traverse half the circumference.

Now randomly rewire just a small fraction of the connections. Take some edges that connect neighbors and instead connect them to random distant nodes.

The result? The local clustering stays high—most of your friends still know each other. But the average path length collapses dramatically. A tiny number of random shortcuts transforms a “big” network into a “small world.”

The metaphor that works best is airline routes. Most airports connect only to nearby cities. But a few—the hubs—connect to destinations far away. Because of these hubs, you can fly from almost anywhere to almost anywhere else with just one or two layovers. The network of flights is locally clustered (regional routes) but globally short (hub connections).

Social networks work the same way. Most of your friends live in your city, work in your industry, share your background. But a few of your

connections bridge into completely different worlds—and those bridges make the entire network navigable.

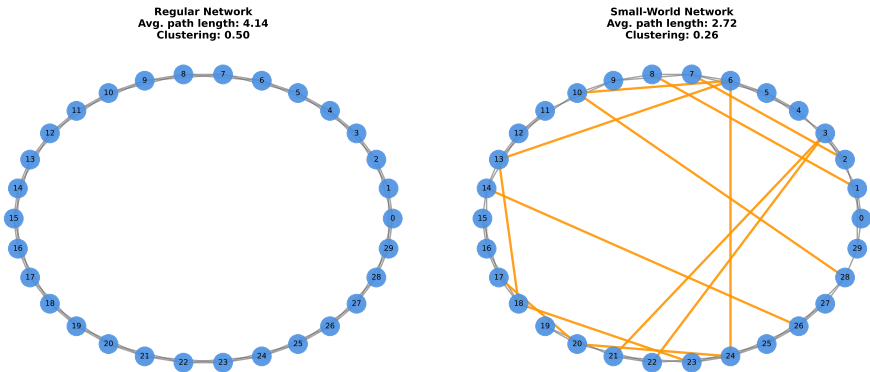
This is why the cocktail party coincidence happens so often. It's not luck. It's not that the world contains few people. It's that social networks have a structure that makes them inherently small, despite their size.

You aren't separated from distant strangers by an impossible gulf. You're separated by a handful of steps through people you already know.

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## 2.5. See It in Action

Let's visualize how small-world networks work. We'll compare a regular network (where everyone knows only their neighbors) to a small-world network (with a few random long-range connections added).



**Figure 2.1:** The small-world effect: Adding just a few random shortcuts (orange edges) to a locally clustered network dramatically reduces the average path length. Left: Regular lattice (high clustering, long paths). Right: Small-world network (high clustering, short paths).

Notice what happens. The regular network on the left has high clustering (your friends know each other) but long average paths—to reach someone on the opposite side, you have to traverse half the circle. The small-world network on the right adds just a few random shortcuts (shown in orange). The clustering stays nearly as high, but the average path length drops dramatically.

This is the mathematical essence of “six degrees of separation.” A few long-range connections don’t destroy local community—they create shortcuts that make the whole world accessible.

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## 2.6. Back to Life

The small-world property isn’t just a curiosity. It shapes how diseases spread, how ideas travel, how careers are made, and how societies function.

### Tracking an Epidemic

In 2014, when Ebola broke out in West Africa, epidemiologists faced a terrifying puzzle. The disease seemed to be appearing in new locations faster than geographic distance could explain. A case in Guinea would be followed by cases in Liberia, then Sierra Leone, in patterns that didn’t match the roads.

Contact tracers eventually mapped what was happening: the social network was denser than the map suggested. Market traders crossed borders weekly. Extended families spanned multiple countries. A funeral in one village might draw mourners from three nations.

The disease wasn’t traveling by geography. It was traveling by social connection—and those connections created shortcuts that made the network frighteningly small. Understanding this structure became crucial for intervention. Instead of setting up checkpoints at every road, health workers focused on the network’s hubs: the markets, the funeral gatherings, the family connections that served as bridges.

### The Diaspora Effect

When the Syrian civil war displaced millions of people, observers expected refugees to end up isolated—cut off from their former lives, alone in unfamiliar countries. But the reality was more complex.

Researchers studying Syrian refugees in Germany, Canada, and Brazil found that diaspora networks formed with remarkable speed. A new arrival in Berlin would discover, within weeks, that a friend-of-a-friend was already there. A small business owner in São Paulo would find suppliers through chains of connection stretching back to Aleppo.

The social network hadn't been destroyed by displacement. It had been stretched across continents, but the small-world property held. People who seemed impossibly far apart—a barber in Hamburg and a textile merchant in Toronto—turned out to be two or three connections away from each other.

These networks became lifelines: for finding housing, jobs, emotional support, and navigating unfamiliar bureaucracies. The small world saved lives.

### **Scientific Discovery Across Borders**

Consider a marine biologist — call her Maria — studying coral reef degradation in the Philippines. She had been struggling for years to understand a particular phenomenon in her local waters. Then a colleague mentioned a paper by a researcher in Brazil studying similar patterns in Atlantic reefs.

At first, the Brazilian researcher seemed completely outside her world — Portuguese-language journals, different ocean, different ecosystem.

But when she looked closer, she discovered that her PhD advisor had once co-authored a paper with someone who had collaborated with the Brazilian researcher. Two steps. She sent an email with that connection in the subject line. Two months later, they were planning a comparative study.

Scientific collaboration networks have been extensively mapped, and they consistently show small-world properties. The average “collaboration distance” between any two scientists—measured in co-authorship links—is typically four to six steps. This isn't because all scientists know each other. It's because a few highly collaborative researchers act as hubs, connecting disparate fields and geographies.

### **The Afrobeats Revolution**

When Burna Boy, Wizkid, and other Nigerian artists began appearing on global charts, music industry observers tried to trace how Afrobeats had “suddenly” gone worldwide. The answer was networks.

The path from a Lagos studio to a global playlist turned out to be surprisingly short. A Nigerian producer might know a British DJ of Nigerian heritage. That DJ might know a playlist curator at a streaming service. The curator might feature a track, exposing it to algorithmic amplification.

Traditional gatekeepers—record labels, radio stations, music journalists—could be bypassed entirely. The small-world structure of social media and digital music networks created shortcuts that made geographic distance irrelevant. An artist in Lagos was just two or three connections from global distribution.

This pattern isn't unique to Afrobeats. Korean pop, Latin reggaeton, South African amapiano—genre after genre has exploded globally through the same mechanism. The music industry assumed that geography created walls. The network revealed they were already full of doors.

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### 2.7. The Limits

The small-world structure offers no guarantees.

Yes, you're probably just a few steps from almost anyone. But those steps aren't always available to you. The connections exist, but you might not know about them. Or you might know about them but lack the social capital to activate them.

Milgram's experiment had a dark footnote. When he ran versions of the study with Black starting participants trying to reach white targets, the chains were much more likely to fail. The network had shortcuts, but they didn't cross certain divides. The world was small—but not equally small for everyone.

Social networks also exhibit *homophily*—the tendency for people to connect with others like themselves. Your friends are statistically likely to share your race, education level, profession, and political views. This creates clustering that can trap information in bubbles, even as the overall network remains technically connected.

And knowing that a short path exists doesn't mean you can find it. Milgram's participants had to guess their way forward, relying on intuition about who might know whom. Many packets got lost. In a complex social network, even a short path can be invisible if you don't know where to look.

The small-world property is a structural feature—a mathematical possibility. Turning that possibility into an actual connection requires knowledge,

effort, and sometimes courage. The bridge exists. But someone has to cross it.

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## 2.8. What To Do

**The Principle:** You're not six degrees from everyone—you're six degrees from *anyone*.

The obstacle you perceive isn't distance. It's visibility. The connections exist; you just can't see them yet. The work isn't crossing an impossible gulf. It's uncovering the short path that's already there.

### Try This: The Two-Degree Inventory

Take 15 minutes to discover how close you already are to someone you'd like to reach.

1. **Pick a target.** Someone you'd love to connect with—a potential mentor, employer, collaborator, or person whose work you admire. Someone who feels impossibly distant.
2. **List 10 people you know.** Not your closest friends—think broader. Former colleagues, college acquaintances, neighbors, people you've met at events. Include people from different parts of your life.
3. **For each person, ask one question:** "Who might *they* know who could be one step closer to my target?" Think about their background, their industry, their social circles.
4. **Map the chains.** You might find:
  - Your former coworker's spouse works in the target's industry
  - Your college friend lives in the target's city
  - Your neighbor used to work at the target's company
5. **Count the steps.** How many connections separate you from your "impossible" target?

**What you'll discover:** The target who felt infinitely far away is probably two or three connections from someone you already know. The path exists. Now you know where to start walking.

**Remember:** Karinthy didn't need to know Selma Lagerlof personally. He needed to know someone who knew someone who did. The chain turned out to be just two links—and it ran through a tennis player. The path was already there, waiting to be traced.

The world is smaller than it looks. Your opportunities are closer than they feel.

Now the question becomes: if we're all so close, why do some people seem to reach opportunities so much more easily than others? That's not about distance. That's about *position*—and it's what we'll explore next.

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*In the next chapter, we'll discover that being close isn't the same as having access. Where you stand in the network—not just how far you are from others—shapes everything you can see and reach.*

## 3. Where You Stand

### 3.1. The Invisible Hub

When Enron collapsed in December 2001—at the time the largest bankruptcy in American history—federal investigators seized the company’s email servers. Over half a million messages, sent and received by 158 senior employees, became public record. It was an unprecedented window into the inner workings of a major corporation, and researchers around the world began downloading the dataset almost as soon as it was released.

What they expected to find was a network shaped like an org chart. The CEO, Kenneth Lay, at the center. The CFO, Jeffrey Skilling, close behind. Senior vice presidents radiating outward, with information flowing up and down the hierarchy in orderly channels.

What they actually found was something else entirely.

When researchers computed *degree centrality*—a simple count of how many distinct people each employee exchanged emails with—the person who ranked first was not Lay, not Skilling, not any member of the executive committee. It was Jeff Dasovich, Enron’s Director of Regulatory Affairs, a mid-level employee whose name had never appeared in a headline. Dasovich showed up in the top ten on five of six different centrality measures. He was, by the data’s reckoning, the most connected person in the company.

Louise Kitchen, a trader who served as COO of Enron Wholesale Services, ranked first in *betweenness centrality*—the measure of how often someone lies on the shortest communication path between two other people. Kitchen was the bridge. Information flowing between different parts of Enron’s sprawling empire passed through her more than through anyone else.

And the executives the public knew by name? CEO Kenneth Lay appeared in only one top-ten centrality list, ranking seventh in betweenness. Former CEO Jeffrey Skilling appeared in *none*. The two men whose names

would become synonymous with Enron were, in the actual communication network, peripheral figures. They sat in corner offices at the top of the org chart, but in the web of who-actually-talked-to-whom, they were near the edges.

The org chart said one thing. The network said another. The people who formally ran the company were not the people through whom the company's information actually flowed. The real hubs were mid-level employees whose structural importance was invisible to every formal system of recognition—titles, salaries, org charts, annual reports—that Enron possessed.

The Enron email dataset has since become one of the most studied networks in social science. And the lesson it teaches is always the same: the people who matter most in an organization are often not the people you think.

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## 3.2. The Problem Is Universal

**i** Recall from Chapters 1 and 2

We've learned that paths through networks can be found one step at a time, and that the world is far smaller than we assume—most people are just a few connections from almost anyone. But here's the puzzle: if everyone is so close, why do some people have so much more access than others?

The Enron finding is puzzling only if you think of organizations as hierarchies. On the org chart, Dasovich and Kitchen were mid-level—important but not prominent. But in the actual network of who-talks-to-whom, who-routes-information-to-whom, and who-bridges-which-departments, they were at the center of everything.

Their positions gave them power that didn't show up on any formal measure. And the disconnect between the org chart and the network reflects a blind spot in how we think about influence.

This disconnect appears everywhere.

In hospitals, nurses often know more about what's actually happening with patients than the doctors who officially make decisions—because nurses talk to everyone: patients, families, orderlies, specialists, pharmacists. They're positioned at the intersection of information flows that doctors, siloed in their specialty rounds, never see.

In schools, it's often not the principal who shapes culture but the veteran teacher who's taught alongside everyone, who knows which new initiatives will fly and which will quietly die. That teacher may have no official authority, but their position in the network makes them the person whose opinion actually matters.

In social movements, the person who becomes the public leader isn't always the one who did the most work. It's often someone who happened to be connected to multiple groups—who bridged the activists, the donors, the media contacts, and the community leaders into a single coordinated force.

Position matters. But we consistently fail to see it, because we're trained to look at hierarchy, not networks.

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### **3.3. The Insight**

Imagine two people at the same party.

The first is extraordinarily popular. She knows half the room—former classmates, current colleagues, neighbors from her building. People wave at her constantly. But notice something: almost everyone she knows also knows each other. She's embedded in a tight cluster. If she left, those people would still be connected.

The second person knows fewer people—maybe a dozen. But look at *who* she knows: the host, someone from the catering company, two guests from completely different social circles, the DJ, and a few others. Her connections span groups that otherwise wouldn't interact. If she left, those groups would become islands.

Who has more power at this party?

If you want to spread a message to the most people quickly, the first woman looks like the obvious choice—she knows so many people! But if

you want to spread a message *across* the party, to reach groups that don't normally talk to each other, the second woman is invaluable.

This is the insight at the heart of network centrality: there are different ways to be "important" in a network, and they depend on what kind of importance you care about.

Some people have many connections—they're popular, well-known, frequently contacted. This is *degree centrality*: simply counting how many links someone has.

Some people sit between groups—they're the bridges, the brokers, the ones everyone has to go through to reach someone in a different cluster. This is *betweenness centrality*: measuring how often someone lies on the shortest path between others.

And some people are connected to other important people—they might not have the most connections, but the connections they have are to the most influential nodes. This is *eigenvector centrality*, or in its most famous form, Google's *PageRank*: importance determined not just by your connections, but by the importance of your connections.

Jeff Dasovich didn't run Enron. He wasn't on the executive committee. But he sat at the intersection of more information flows than almost anyone else in the company. He had sky-high degree centrality—connected to more people than even the CEO. Louise Kitchen, meanwhile, was the bridge between trading desks and the rest of the organization, with the highest betweenness centrality in the entire network.

Their positions were powerful. But the org chart, which measures only hierarchy, is blind to that power.

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### 3.4. The Science, Simply Told

In 1977, a sociologist named Linton Freeman published a paper that would become one of the most cited in network science. Its title was technical—"A Set of Measures of Centrality Based on Betweenness"—but its insight was profound. Freeman argued that when we ask "who is central in a network?", we're actually asking several different questions, and they don't have the same answer.

### 3. Where You Stand

He formalized three distinct ways of thinking about centrality, each capturing something different.

**Degree centrality** is the simplest: count someone's connections. The person with the most ties is the most central. This works well when you want to know who can reach the most people directly—who has the widest immediate access.

Think of it like counting how many roads connect to a city. New York has many highways, rail lines, and airports converging on it. It has high degree centrality. But that's not the only thing that matters.

**Betweenness centrality** asks a different question: how often does someone lie on the shortest path between other people? If I want to get a message from A to B, and it has to pass through you, you have power. You're a gatekeeper, a broker, a bridge.

Think of a small town that sits at the only crossroads between three larger cities. The town might be tiny, but every trip between those cities passes through it. It has disproportionate influence over what travels.

Freeman's paper showed that these two measures could disagree dramatically. Someone could have few direct connections but massive betweenness—a bottleneck that everyone depends on. Or someone could be hugely popular but completely redundant—surrounded by connections that also connect to each other.

Two decades later, a different kind of centrality became world-famous.

In 1998, Larry Page and Sergey Brin were graduate students at Stanford, trying to build a better search engine. Their insight was that not all links are equal. A webpage linked by *The New York Times* should count for more than a webpage linked by a random blog. But how do you know *The New York Times* is important? Because important pages link to it.

This is circular reasoning, but it's the useful kind. Page and Brin figured out how to compute it: start by assuming everyone is equally important, then update importance based on who links to whom, then repeat until the numbers stabilize. The result, which they called *PageRank*, was a form of eigenvector centrality—a measure that says your importance depends not just on how many connections you have, but on how important your connections are.

Google was built on this idea. When you search the web, you're not just looking for pages that contain your keywords. You're looking for

pages that *important* pages consider authoritative. The algorithm privileges position—not just connections, but the right connections.

The same logic applies to social networks. Knowing one hundred random people is less powerful than knowing ten people who themselves know thousands. Access to hubs beats raw numbers.

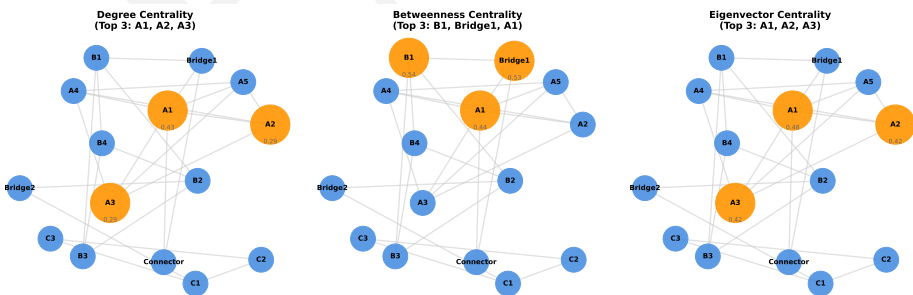
Here’s the unsettling implication: centrality is not evenly distributed, and it’s not always visible. Dasovich’s and Kitchen’s centrality was invisible to Enron’s formal recognition systems—it took a federal investigation and a released email archive for researchers to see it. A researcher might publish brilliant work but remain obscure because no central figure in their field has cited them. A community organizer might do the actual work of holding coalitions together, while a charismatic newcomer with better-connected friends gets the credit.

Position is power. And most systems are blind to the positions that matter.

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### 3.5. See It in Action

Let’s visualize how different centrality measures tell different stories about the same network. We’ll create a small network and highlight which nodes are most “central” by each measure.



**Figure 3.1.:** Different centrality measures identify different ‘important’ nodes. Left: Degree centrality (who has the most connections). Center: Betweenness centrality (who lies between others). Right: Eigenvector centrality (who is connected to important people). Notice how the highlighted nodes differ across measures.

Notice how different measures tell different stories:

- **Degree centrality** favors nodes in the tight clusters—they have the most direct connections.
- **Betweenness centrality** highlights the bridges—they're the bottlenecks that everything flows through.
- **Eigenvector centrality** identifies nodes connected to other important nodes—quality over quantity.

At Enron, Dasovich ranked highest on degree centrality while Kitchen dominated betweenness—different measures identifying different kinds of structural power. The right measure depends on what kind of influence matters.

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## 3.6. Back to Life

Understanding centrality isn't just academic. It shapes history, health, criminal justice, and careers.

### The Midnight Ride

On the night of April 18, 1775, two riders set out from Boston to warn the American colonists that British troops were coming. Paul Revere rode north and west. William Dawes rode south and west. Both carried the same message.

Revere's ride became legend. Dawes is a footnote.

Why? Historian David Hackett Fischer, in his book *Paul Revere's Ride*, documents that Revere wasn't just a messenger—he was extraordinarily well-connected across multiple social circles. He was a member of the Sons of Liberty, the Masonic lodge, the North Caucus political club, and several trade organizations. He knew doctors, merchants, artisans, and political leaders. When he arrived in a town, he knew exactly who to wake up—and those people knew and trusted him.

Dawes was a tradesman with a more limited network. He rode an equally dangerous route. But when he arrived in towns, he was a stranger. People didn't pass the word as quickly. The warning spread more slowly.

Same message. Same night. Radically different outcomes—because of network position.

### 3. *Where You Stand*

Malcolm Gladwell popularized this story in *The Tipping Point*, arguing that Revere's centrality made him what Gladwell called a "Connector." It's not that Dawes was less brave or less dedicated. But Revere's position in the network amplified his message in ways that Dawes's position could not.

#### **Village Health Workers in Thailand**

In rural Thailand, the public health system relies on village health volunteers—ordinary community members trained to share health information, distribute medication, and connect sick people with clinics. There are over a million of them across the country.

But researchers studying the program discovered that not all volunteers were equally effective. Some would share information that spread through entire villages. Others would share the same information and it would go nowhere.

The difference wasn't training or dedication. It was position.

Effective volunteers were bridges—connected to multiple social groups within the village. They knew the elders *and* the young parents *and* the shopkeepers *and* the farmers. When they shared information, it reached across the community. Less effective volunteers, often deeply embedded in just one group, could spread information intensely within that cluster but not beyond it.

The insight changed how Thailand trains and deploys volunteers. Centrality, not just enthusiasm, predicts impact.

#### **Dismantling Criminal Networks**

When Italian prosecutors began systematically targeting the Sicilian Mafia in the 1980s and 1990s, they initially focused on the obvious targets: the bosses, the public faces, the most violent enforcers. The arrests made headlines but didn't break the organization.

Then investigators, working with early network scientists, began mapping the actual structure of the networks. They discovered that some relatively obscure figures—mid-level brokers who connected different *cosche* (clans)—were far more structurally important than many bosses.

Remove a boss, and the organization adapts; someone else steps up. But remove a broker—someone with high betweenness centrality connecting otherwise separate groups—and the network fragments. Communication breaks down. Trust collapses. Coordination becomes impossible.

This approach, focused on structural position rather than apparent rank, proved far more effective than traditional law enforcement strategies. It's now a standard technique in organized crime investigation worldwide.

#### **The Citation Game**

In academic science, success breeds visibility. But initial visibility often depends on position, not just quality.

Studies of citation networks show that early citations from well-connected researchers dramatically increase a paper's chances of becoming highly cited later. Two papers of identical quality can have wildly different trajectories depending on who notices them first.

This creates a kind of "rich get richer" dynamic that we'll explore more in Chapter 11. But the foundation is positional: whose attention you can capture depends on who is connected to you, and that depends on where you stand in the network when you begin.

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### **3.7. The Limits**

Centrality measures are tools, not truths.

Every measure makes assumptions. Degree centrality assumes all connections are equal—but they're not. Betweenness centrality assumes information travels by shortest paths—but it often doesn't. Eigenvector centrality can behave strangely in disconnected networks or when there are odd structural features.

More fundamentally, measuring centrality requires knowing the network. And networks are often invisible. We can map citation networks because citations are recorded. We can map email networks because emails leave traces. But the network of who actually trusts whom, who calls whom for advice, who would vouch for whom—that network exists only in human minds, and it's far harder to measure.

The Enron email network was measurable only because the emails were seized and made public. In most organizations, the real communication network is never mapped. Centrality is a lens, not a complete picture—and it often requires data we don't have.

There's also a dark side to pursuing centrality deliberately. If everyone optimizes for becoming a bridge, genuine community collapses. If everyone seeks connection to important people, the important people become gatekeepers who can't do their actual work. There's value in being embedded, in deep relationships, in not being the person everyone has to go through.

Position matters. But not every position needs to be central, and not every kind of centrality is worth having.

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### 3.8. What To Do

**The Principle:** Your position shapes your possibilities—and most people have no idea where they stand.

Influence doesn't come only from popularity or rank. It often comes from being a bridge—from connecting people and groups that wouldn't otherwise be connected. Understanding where you sit in your networks reveals powers and vulnerabilities you didn't know you had.

#### Try This: Map Your Position

Take 20 minutes with a large sheet of paper:

1. **Draw yourself at the center.** Use a circle or your name.
2. **Add the 10-15 people you interact with most frequently.** Work, personal, community—any context. Arrange them around you, connected to you by lines.
3. **Now the crucial step: draw lines between THEM where they know each other independently of you.** Your colleague who also knows your neighbor. Your college friend who became friends with your spouse. Every connection that exists without you.
4. **Look for patterns:**
  - **Where are you a bridge?** Connections between people who only know each other through you—you're the only link.

- **Where are you redundant?** People who would stay connected even if you disappeared.

5. **Identify your most bridging relationship.** Where do you connect two worlds that otherwise don't touch?

**What you'll discover:** You probably have more structural influence than you realized—in the places where you're the only connection between groups. Those are your positions of invisible power. You may also discover vulnerabilities: relationships that depend entirely on you maintaining them.

**Remember:** At Enron, the CEO and CFO believed they sat at the center of the company. The data showed otherwise. Dasovich and Kitchen held structural power that no org chart captured. If they had understood their own centrality, they could have leveraged it. If their managers had understood it, the company might have made very different decisions about who mattered and why.

Position is power. But first you have to see it.

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*Understanding position is just the beginning. In the next chapter, we'll discover a counterintuitive truth: sometimes it's not the close connections that matter most. The people you barely know—your acquaintances, your almost-strangers—often hold the key to opportunities you can't access any other way.*