A BRIDGE TOO FAR:
SPANNING DIFFERENT BOUNDARIES AND THE EFFECTS ON
EXPLORATION PERFORMANCE*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine how different boundary spanning relations affect exploration performance. We consider both internal relationships between members of the same organization and relationships that reach outside the firm. Further, we distinguish between relationships within the same knowledge domain and those that cross into different knowledge domains. Consistent with extant research, we argue that internal relations spanning knowledge domains provide access to different information and resources and hence are sources of new areas of exploration. Yet, we argue that having just a few such relationships may be detrimental to exploration performance and only when actors reach a certain number of such relations do the benefits transpire. Surprisingly we find that spanning the firm boundary within the same knowledge domain has no advantages for exploration. However, once actors cross into different knowledge domains outside the firm there are benefits in terms of exploration performance. We also find that external ties spanning knowledge domains have a positive effect on exploration when actors already have a minimum threshold of internal ties that span knowledge domains. Detailed data on 1449 informal relationships of 79 senior partners in a large management consultancy lend support to these arguments.