Nowadays, when people think about Social Networks (SN), they often refer to Web applications like Facebook, Hi5 or LinkedIn even though family, friends, classmates, or network of work colleagues remain the most common SN. SN refer to relationships that exist between network of people. The original concept of *social circles* was introduced by Georg Simmel, at the beginning of the 20th century. Since this first theory the discipline has matured to be used for instance by modern computer technologies to empower social science to do massive surveys on all kinds of social networks. The main idea is to map social relations and to look for parameters which will eventually lead to a better understanding of how relations work, information flows and organizations collaborate. Currently, such tool could be used to map and understand how the H1N1 influenza is spreading over a network of people. Many types of relationships (ties) can be revealed by Social Network Analyzes (SNA) in organizational settings; Knowledge transfer, trust relationships, who act as information or knowledge brokers? Where are the information bottlenecks? (just to name a few ideas).

“The Hidden Powers of Social Networks” by Robb Cross and Andrew Parker is about using this latest social networking theories to improve the networks of organizations. Both authors worked with IBM on the Knowledge and Organization Forum. Dr. Cross is well recognized within the Social Networking Community, publishing lots of publications about the topic in several well known journals. To put their approach in one sentence: Try to find out the underlying, informal structure in organizations! They then put the scientific theories about how to improve the information flows, relationship building etc. into practice. It appears very clearly that most of the work is not done through the formal organizational structure but through informal social networks as illustrated in the figures below.
In each chapter, Cross and Parker introduce the reader to at least one case study on which they exemplified a problem they have solved using Social Network Analysis. They start with a very simple case on which they introduce the basic terms and methods, going onto explaining how to view and interpret the visualization of a network. With each chapter the authors incrementally broaden the topic. They also address the limits of SNA. The second part of the book deals with best practices for solving problems found through network analysis. Also we call it "best practices" Cross outlines, that every organization has their own patterns and it therefore should be consulted uniquely. There is not one plan that will work for every institution. Just knowing the organizations problems will not of course solve them. Cross and Parker explain how different managers try to change patterns and how the analysis was useful to them, in addition they provide a helpful chapter on approaches that every institution should consider for a sustainable change in their network structure.

After reading through the two parts, you will be happy to find a huge appendix. The flaw with the book is, that due to the structure, there is barely space for a "How To". The appendix contains a six steps framework that will guide you through the creation of a survey. You will find everything, starting with useful question for your first on-survey brainstorming, an example survey to how to visually and quantitatively analyze your results.

The results itself will not help you much if you don't know how to change your organization behaviours. Therefore in the second appendix several methods are presented to improve connectivity, gain knowledge about colleagues, and start, improve or just maintain relationships with them.

And to sum it up: "The Hidden Power of Social Networks" is a very eye opening and instructive book. It will help you to make the first steps into social network analysis, using a managerial approach, without going too deep into the underlying network and statistical theories. Even if you do not want to perform a Social Network Analysis, the book will be helpful to students, consultants and managers to get a different point of view on how things might get done in your study group, at your clients or in your organization. Rob Cross recently published a new book on SNA named "Driving Results through social networks – How top organizations leverage networks for performance and growth". In his latest book he emphasized on how to fully take advantage of SN to improve performance and innovation, two top priorities in time of economical crisis!