I'll Introduce You

Your employees' little black books may be your greatest asset.

BY CHANA R. SCHOENBERGER

WHEN CONSULTING GIANT EDS WAS trying to sign up a big bank this spring, salesmen typed the names of the bank's top execs into software from a company called Spoke. Instantly the system identified an EDS worker who happened to be a neighbor and barbecue buddy of a target banker. He made an introductory call. It's too soon to tell if the pitch worked, but "it did help us make a connection," says EDS executive Robert Segert.

Social networking Web sites like Friendster, Orkut and LinkedIn hit the hype stratosphere last year, pitching their ability to find one a mate or a job. But a more sensible business idea is to sell the Web idea as software to companies to figure out who knows whom, and how well, to close more deals. Why cold-call when someone you know can introduce you? New firms like Spoke Software in Palo Alto, Calif. and Visible Path in New York City let you search address books, in-boxes and call logs of employees, investors, lawyers or anyone you consider part of your company's ecosystem.

How it works: Enter a name and the software tells you whether someone—without giving any names—knows him by virtue of the e-mail and phone traffic between them. It judges the relationship based on how quickly he replied to an e-mail and whether it was a personal note and not some mass mailing. You then send an e-mail asking the anonymous connection for an introduction. That go-between decides whether to forward the note to the target. You can keep any of your contacts private, and there can be several links between people in any chain. Spoke has 18 million people in its public database.

Both companies' software works with sales-automation systems in wide use, such as Siebel and Salesforce.com. Venture firms behind Spoke and Visible Path are already using it. Investor Kleiner Perkins used Visible Path to check out a job candidate, torpedoing him, says partner Ray Lane. On one deal, IntraLinks, a New York software firm, used Visible Path to cut the usual time between initial call and sale from six months to one. **F**