



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Connecting online: Small investment, big return

By SUSAN PINKER
From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

Dear Susan,

Almost every week I get invitations to join networks on LinkedIn and Facebook from people I went to school with some 30 years ago, or from co-workers at a company where I started out (now a competitor). Sometimes I barely know the person or met him through e-mail. I have enough to do without having to keep in touch with these people, and I'm a private person. Sometimes there are work groups posted, but when old classmates or business contacts invite me, must I join?

- *Old School*

Dear Old,

It doesn't take that much time or effort to click "I accept." And you're not obliged to provide much information when you do. It's just one notch up from a handshake. You'd extend your hand in response to someone offering you their's, right? It's basic politesse. Being "friended" is the online version. There's not much initial investment but the potential is there for further contact, if you want it.

Even if it seems shallow, being connected to other people's online networks is harmless in the short term and might prove to be useful in the long term. The classic benefit is finding the job you always coveted via the net version of word of mouth - or the reverse: passing recruitment leads to friends, or friends of friends who might fit the bill.

This fluid, yet targeted manpower network is what powered the roaring Silicon Valley engine in its early days, according to Mark Granovetter, a Stanford University sociologist who has written extensively about how individual social networks alter business or cultural horizons on a grand scale.

The really important sparks are most likely to ignite with people you're only loosely connected to, rather than people you know well, a principle proven many times since Professor Granovetter proposed his "the strength of weak ties" idea in the early 1970s. The reason we're most likely to find our dream job (or Ms. or Mr. Right) through a colleague's spouse's friend, or a spouse's friend's friend, is that we already share a lot of what we know with people in our inner circle. Our networks and interests overlap; our sources of information and gossip are pretty much the same as those of our buddies and family members. But weak ties offer what Prof. Granovetter calls "better bridges" to new contacts and novel information, which could be a new project, a job opportunity or, as in my daughter's case recently, an invitation to a holiday dinner via a friend's friend's friend - in a European city she recently moved to and where she knows no one.

Such connections can be trivial or they can be life-changing. But as James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis write in their upcoming book, *Connected*, if you depend on the people you know well for new opportunities, you'll make perhaps 20 connections. But if you open yourself up to forming loose ties (within three degrees of separation) you're connected to 8,000 people. That network is huge but it's not exactly random. Each link has something or someone in common.

That's why, as long as he knows the person even slightly, Prof. Granovetter doesn't find it beneath him to accept "friending" invitations. "The reality is that we can spend as much or as little time as we like on Facebook, or LinkedIn," he wrote in an e-mail. "And all things considered, I really do believe in the strength of weak ties (of course) so I think it is a good thing to keep your network as expansive as possible."

Still, with more than 300 million active users and six billion minutes spent on Facebook each day, the prospect can seem overwhelming, if not a faddish waste of time. And 8,000 connections?

When I asked whether the human brain could even fathom the exponential possibilities, Prof. Granovetter demurred: "I'm skeptical of 'natural' limits. Of course there are only 168 hours in a week and we need some sleep, and there are no doubt some upper limit cognitive limitations on how many people we can keep track of. But I think hardly any of us gets anywhere near those limits."

Those who do might be labelled "a Friendster whore" - a common online epithet - although that's hardly a risk in your case. Recent research by Stephanie Tom Tong, a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University, shows that when it comes to other people's perceptions, there's an optimal number of online contacts. Too few "friends" creates the impression that you might be antisocial, whereas too many (more than 300) suggests that you might be insecure -and compensating for a lacklustre social life by grooming your list beyond "normal" proportions.

Of course, what's normal for college students, who are often the subjects in such studies, is not normal for their parents, and won't be for their children. And there are individual differences, too, when it comes to how much social contact we can stand.

If it all seems like too much, and even a little silly, consider that when underemployment is the leitmotif, none of us is invincible. Your tacit knowledge can give someone a leg up and it costs you very little. As investments go, it's a drop in the bucket, and though the returns are unpredictable, they're probably better right now than you can find anywhere else.

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