Why Networking Matters More Than Ever

There's more at stake than your career.

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Credit: Ibáñez Luis Ibáñez

Chicago Booth's Ronald S. Burt was in London one morning in 2016 reading the Times when he was struck by an image in the newspaper. It was a map that showed where the recent Brexit vote, for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, had been strongest. People in poorer regions had tended to vote "Leave," while those in richer London, Manchester, and Edinburgh wanted to stay.

The image reminded him of another map, from a paper he often used in teaching, in which technology entrepreneur Nathan Eagle, Cornell's Michael Macy, and British Telecom's Rob Claxton had visualized the UK's telephone networks, showing that people who called a greater range of phone numbers (see the course of a month in 2005) tended to live in more prosperous areas. The volume of phone calls made no difference—it was the diversity of people being called that tracked economic indicators, and that those people were not in contact themselves; in other words, that Andrew had Betty and Calvin in his call list, but Betty and Calvin never phoned each other.

As a sociologist, Burt has demonstrated over decades that diverse networks of contacts help individuals thrive on a range of fronts—from salary levels and promotions to the chances of leading a successful start-up to the ability to think strategically. Your LinkedIn account is your file.

The paper he shared with his classes was his own work scaled: quantitative evidence from a team of social and computer scientists suggesting that this relationship might persist at a community level. What Burt realized that morning is that the two maps—in the Times and from the research paper—suggested a less noted but potentially interesting relationship: between a person's network diversity and their feelings about national borders. Your LinkedIn account is your country's fate.

The research by Eagle, Macy, and Claxton did not probe causality, but Burt says today that he can see the correspondence between open networks (ecosystems in which people can gather diverse contacts and ideas) and relative economic prowess—and associated views on cross-border or cross-cultural cooperation—as running in two directions. Individuals in struggling industries or regions may be where they are because they failed to network. But just as likely, if you can't imagine that your life will be validated in new and unfamiliar settings, it will inhibit your temptation to network. "Around the world, there is a huge residue of people left behind," Burt argues—"left behind economically and socially. And this feeds into tribalism. 'If there is no hope, you find solace in people like yourself.'"

This jump between the Rotodeo and politics may feel too big, but Burt is not the only person making it. Studies over the past several decades have focused on benefits to individuals and the economy of putting your head above the parapet: cross-fertilization promotes innovation and growth. Now a growing body of evidence from sociology, psychology, economics, and management goes further, suggesting that stepping out of our social bubbles is fundamental to social cohesion, and that networking—that networking, cringe-worthy schmoozing so many of us were happy to drop in the name of COVID-19 social distancing—is a good way, maybe even the best way, of taking that step.

Not your father's networking

Isabelle Ferrá, a 31-year-old second-year consultant in San Francisco, started her previous career eight years ago at one of China's biggest financial news producers, where she was tasked with bringing domestic business stories to global audiences and international stories home. Building bridges was a way of operating in the world that felt natural to her—professionally and personally, as well as in that grey zone between the two. "I used to love to say to an acquaintance, 'I know this person who does what you do; maybe I can connect you,'" she says.

This impulse was part of what drove Fang to earn her MBA in the United States, but it has been sapped by the COVID-19 pandemic. She landed her current position in summer 2020, and spent the first year and a half working from home. As a result, she doesn't feel she has a firm grasp of the company's culture, and wonders if her class of new hires will ever catch up or change the paradigm. Most of all, she can't get excited about nurturing the network of home contacts that once gave her such pleasure and purpose. "I know I have to relearn that," Fang says (she one-night over Zoom). "I need to do it for my career. I need to do it for my life here, locally, too."

Specialists in the science of networking agree. Network theory since the 1950s has demonstrated that the number and nature of our relationships with others can affect our behavior and success in the world. The importance of weak social links emerged in the research relatively soon after. In an influential 1973 paper that analyzed, among other situations, longtime Italian American residents in Boston's West End struggling to hold gentrification at bay, Stanford sociologist Mark S. Granovetter argued that ideas are adapted more quickly when conveyed by people with many weak ties, as opposed to members of tightly knit groups, who tend to spend information into oblivion. On this basis, Granovetter wrote, mobility in one's career is better supported by weak than strong ties, and activism is least effective in communities partitioned by cliques.

In the 1970s, Burt completed this argument by looking not just at the ties between people, but the absence thereof—structural holes in the network, in his words. Burt described a network structure in which "brokers" use insider information from one in group to solve problems or enhance life outside that setting. These connections are not like the glad-handing networkers of the contemporary imagination in several senses. The benefits they get from this work are indirect—higher wages or better job opportunities thanks to their reputation for delivering fresh insights, rather than promotions arranged during rounds of golf with the boss.

Open and closed networks

Networks are the patterns of people's relationships with others, and how those others interact (or don't) with one another. The world is full of clusters of networks, connected by one person here, another there. Here is an illustration of how they connect.

Burt, 2019

More importantly, brokers are distinct from stereotypical, superficial networkers amassing weak ties every which way. Rather, brokers transfer knowledge from one setting to another that is built on long periods of in-group interactions, wherein experiences become so deeply shared among members that their lessons are often unspoken. The knowledge they're moving is akin to what MIT's Eric von Hippel has called "sticky" information, stickiness being the incremental expenditure required to transfer information in a way it can be used by a specific recipient. Sticky information can be tacit and difficult to explain to others—but brokers do just that. Or if they do not explain it, they at least derive new lessons from it that are meaningful outside the insider group.

And they do so precisely by being part of the insider group. A 2016 analysis of investment bankers' career paths and pay by Burt and Yuliana's Jennifer L. Mehrotra finds that individuals with broad networks of contacts earned no more than those in closed teams. The bankers with a significant pay advantage were those who oscillated between brokerage and "closure," or in-group interactions. They worked intensely as an insider on one project for a period, and then spent time reconnecting with a wide range of colleagues before diving deep again.

"This is social capital," says Burt, and he doubts the pandemic, or much else, will thwart those who have it. Those without are more vulnerable to hitting road blocks in their careers.

The network makes the networker

Chicago Booth's Nicholas Epley forgot about the first interview scheduled for this article—for a good reason: he was taking his two youngest sons to the doctor. "People are motivated to connect with others," he says. "But that motivation can be diminished, and the balance between close and more distant relationships can get disrupted."

Some of Epley's work explores just this relationship—between a person's feeling of social connectedness with a close set (their children, say) and their interactions with others outside that circle (a writer they've never met).

In 2012, Northwestern's Adam Waytz and Epley published a series of experiments in which they encouraged participants to think either about friends and family or about acquaintances and strangers, and then assessed them on measures such as the ability to recognize another person's intentions. Waytz and Epley find that the people who felt socially connected were more likely to dehumanize strangers than were subjects uninvoiced from their close social relationships. "People who are full . . . are less likely to look for food. Similarly, people who feel socially connected are less motivated to affiliate with others," they write. "Considering others' interests, attitudes, feelings, and preferences are critical to connecting with them. Diminishing the motivation to connect with others may diminish the motivation to recognize, think about, or consider others' mental states as well."

The challenge to social cohesion lies in giving people reason to connect outside their cliques.

This chimes with research suggesting that events that reduce the number or intensity of a person's close relationships have a positive impact on prosocial behavior. A 2010 study by Oxford's John Ermisch and Diego Gambetta established that events that force people out of their tight family circles, such as divorce, make those people more likely to trust strangers. A 2020 study of Vietnamese villagers who moved away from their hometowns and surveyed, by Kochi University of Technology's Yoshinori Nakagawa and then-Kochi PhD student Huyen Thi Le, demonstrates that these returned immigrants were more likely than the average villager to put energy into the community at large, and more likely to try to improve life there for future generations.

Burt and his fellow researchers have also tried to work out how people's networks affect their behavior. Burt and Jer-Dar Luo at Tunghua University noted in 2019 that people with closed professional networks were more likely than those with open networks to blame work problems on a colleague's character, as opposed to skills, or outside circumstances.

And in August 2021, Burt, alongside Sonja Opper at Bocconi University and Hubert J. Hotter at Lund University, published a study probing the degree to which having a closed network predicts a person's willingness and ability to cooperate with people outside of the network. They interviewed 320 CEOs of Chinese companies, conducting an analysis of their professional networks and asking them to take part in prisoner's dilemma games in which the executives had to balance the risks and rewards of cooperating with versus defecting against a stranger in a financial or business transaction. CEOs with closed networks turned out to be much less predisposed to cooperation.

Strikingly, this effect and its inverse, in which CEOs with open networks were more likely to cooperate, increased if the given CEO's company was more successful than average, as measured by the previous year's profits. Successful people find justifications for their success, and their networks, whether open or closed, with be "baked into that rationalization," write the researchers. This makes successful executives more likely then less successful executives to be influenced by their networks in their future behavior.

The success effect also underscores the likelihood that the impulse to cooperate is learned and not merely an underlying personality trait. CEOs who are trusting by nature could be expected to cooperate no matter what their network structure, and the researchers assume that the distribution of naturally trusting CEOs is consistent whether or not they are successful. But finding that successful CEOs cooperated more than unsuccessful CEOs suggests they learned something from their success—namely, that cooperation worked for them.

A rut or a grave?

How long does your network need to be in place before it starts affecting your actions in the world? In the CEO study, the researchers looked at their subjects' networks going back in time. When they labeled an executive's network as "open" or "closed" on the basis of the person's most recent contacts, the network did not predict whether the CEO cooperated in the prisoner's dilemma game, whereas longer-established networks did. Burt infers from the data that "a respondent's pattern of network behavior for two or three years is a good indicator of the respondent's behavioral predisposition in a game played today."

This suggests the structures we settled into under COVID-19 are unlikely to change us in the long run. Epley also believes we will bounce quickly back to our old ways of connecting, should most workplaces return to on-site work as the norm.

Isabelle Ferrá, struggling to absorb tacit insider information at her new job, is not so sure this will be overcome easily once in the office. "In some ways, there are good things about COVID-19 and work," she says. "You can feel that everyone has become more empathetic and less aggressive. You tend to care about people more and understand that there are many critical elements and priorities in life other than work. If I were in a video meeting with someone and I saw their kid walk into the room asking for help, even if there was something I wanted to say, I'd think, 'Never mind, you've got more important things in life to take care of right now. I'm not going to keep you.'"

If COVID-19 and its aftermath deepen a relationship between having less status—due to age, gender, or race—and having little social capital, it is not just individuals who will suffer.

Some surveys suggest that, beyond the pandemic, a two-tier system could develop in the workplace, with more experienced and higher status workers continuing to work flexibly even if younger workers return to the office. A February survey from Eden Workplace—an office management software company, indicates that, in the US, baby boomers tend to be less eager to return to in-person work than millennials, and white workers tend to be less willing to go back than nonwhite workers.

Under this scenario, individuals with social capital will retain it: a more-closed network for a year or two mid-career shouldn't affect anyone's ability to oscillate between closed and open networks. But those less experienced workers who haven't done this oscillation before may struggle to find that rhythm. And their access to other closed networks—those of more powerful coworkers or at better jobs—might be limited.

This could exacerbate inequality, according to New York University's Delia Baldassarri and Maria Abascal. They argue in a 2020 review article in Science that the office is an ideal setting in which different groups interact harmoniously, another that the key to social cohesion in diverse communities is twofold: economic interdependence between subgroups (hiring a person, selling them a service, renting them a home), and social differentiation in which people recognize multiple identities in themselves and others rather than categorizing only by race, class, religion, or nationality. But, they add, social differentiation must also come with policies that pull apart the coded ropes of identity and opportunity, such that being Black does not increase your likelihood of landing in prison, for example, and being working class is not associated with limited access to higher education. To this extent, if COVID-19 and its aftermath deepen a relationship between having less status—due to age, gender, or race—and having little social capital, it is not just individuals who will suffer.

Only connect

MBA students are among the most eager of networkers in the traditional sense; they are also, in Burt's experience, interested in learning to navigate better by becoming "brokers." Might they thereby become soldiers for social cohesion?

In fall of last year, 26-year-old Shaurya Jha moved from his native India to the US to start a business degree and, recognizing that his class's experience would be fundamentally different from others', founded the LinkedIn group "US MBA Admits 2020 (Opportunity in Adversity)." It soon had nearly 400 members, but Jha noticed that the online community wasn't exactly serving as a classic networking tool—a wide web of weak contacts. Its posts about COVID-19 and higher education or COVID-19 and recruiting got little interaction from the nearly 400 members, and few conversations lasted more than a comment or two. Instead, the group became a place where people could go to find their smaller cliques, whether that meant self-selecting by university, visa issue, or target internship. "People were interacting internally in these groups, discussing their own specific situations," says Jha.

The members, in other words, were networking in the same pattern used by the most successful investment bankers: by building bridges through casual contacts, then going deep by forming strong relationships. The next round of bridge building may happen in person, and the postpandemic reunions, even if its pace is halting, should with any luck support the creation of these types of bonds for people with an impulse and motivation to connect.

However, the coronavirus exposed tears in the social fabric that may be hard to repair. People are divided over mask-wearing, reopening schools, and trusting in vaccines. The challenge to social cohesion lies in giving people reason to connect outside their cliques. Those for whom Burt's form of networking has worked in the past should at least understand the benefits to them as individuals. Be aware that they feel they have benefitted enough and don't

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need to do any more of the sometimes-uncomfortable work of interacting with people unlike themselves.

Those with little in the way of wealth or education, meanwhile, might be shy of encounters outside their bubbles. If they don't have much status across social groups, this can make networking a demoralizing experience.

"To the extent that money is the criterion for dignity, they're in a hopeless position," Burt worries. As is society, balkanized between the haves and have-nots. "But to the extent there is respect and visibility for being interesting, being a little varied, there is hope for everybody," he says.

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