When Weak Connections are Valuable at Work

NEW NETWORKING TOOLS ENABLE US TO CULTIVATE WORKPLACE CONNECTIONS WITH PEOPLE WE RARELY (OR NEVER) SEE BUT WHO CAN HELP US IN IMPORTANT WAYS.

BY FRANK GULLO

If you're not sure who the weak ties are in your social network, look at the contacts on your phone. Chances are, there are some people in your contacts list you don't call (much less see) on a regular basis, but you find it useful to keep them listed for those occasions when you do need to contact them. Perhaps your doctor, babysitter, mechanic, or accountant fits this description.

If you use a social network like LinkedIn or Twitter professionally, you will have even more weak links. These weak links are professional acquaintances you may see only a few times a year—or, more likely, people you've never met in person, often from other cities and countries—and with whom you've connected virtually based on affinity, content conversation, or subject matter expertise.

Weak links aren't new to research-ers. Stanford University sociologist Mark Granovetter identified strong ties as your friends and weak ties as your acquaintances in his influential 1973 paper, "Notes on the strength of weak ties." More recently, a 2011 Pew Research Center report indicated that most Americans' networks "contain a range of social ties that consist of friends, family, co-workers, and other acquaintances. This includes a handful of very close social ties and a much larger number of weaker ties."

Much has been written about the value of weak links in our social networks. Granovetter may have said it best when he wrote, "The weak tie between Ego and his acquaintance, therefore, becomes not merely a trivial acquaintance tie but rather a crucial bridge between the two densely knit clumps of close friends."

Thus, weak ties, in addition to representing the first stage in any relationship, bind our networks together (like bridges) and help us understand all our relationships—the close links, the weak and edge links, and the absent connections (or gaps). In addition, today's social networking tools have allowed us to exceed the 150 or so people British anthropologist Robin Dunbar posited as the maximum number of people with whom we can maintain social relationships. We are literally amassing hundreds and even thousands of weak links in our networks—so many, in fact, that we can subcategorize weak links:

The **classic weak link** is an acquaintance, someone you may interact with online or in person a handful of times a year. You may send this person occasional texts or blast e-mails.

The **median weak link** is someone you interact with online or in person at least once a year. On rare occasions,

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you may "like" or share each other's social posts.

The **diffuse weak link** is someone you've interacted with online or in person once but have had no contact with afterwards. However, you keep this contact in your network for future, strategic ends.

Given the prevalence of weak links, it makes sense to try to take full advantage of them. Research suggests that wide-ranging weak ties are beneficial in areas such as job hunting, recruiting, prospecting, marketing, and promoting causes. LinkedIn Coach Victoria Ipri contends that weak links are especially useful in some industries. "If you work in a broad industry—say, marketing—build the largest network you can, because your income depends on lots of exposure to all kinds of people and occupations," she says.

Until recently, most research and networking advice columns focused on weak links outside the workplace. This is partly because commercial networking tools have outpaced workplace technology and made it relatively easier to foster weak links on these external platforms. This situation is changing, however, as modern intranets and enterprise social networks (ESNs) are increasingly being deployed across large and small organizations and becoming embedded in other applications.

IDC, a global intelligence firm, noted in a 2014 report that ESN adoption has continued to accelerate and that the worldwide ESN market will grow through 2018. Jacob Morgan, author of *The Future of Work* and a proponent of cultivating weak ties at work, agrees, noting, "Now we have access to platforms which offer capabilities such as activity feeds, status updates, rich searchable employee profiles, and internal blogs."

Weak Links in the Workplace

As the workplace becomes increasingly digital, success in cultivating weak links will flow partly from becoming proficient in the many collaboration tools available and using them strategically. The more you learn about your options for making weak connections, the easier it will be for you to find the methods that work best for you and your colleagues.

Intranets and ESNs. If your organization has an intranet or ESN, familiarize yourself with the content that's available and the contributors. Many organizations are now establishing social intranets, which are part traditional content-based intranets and part internal social networks. These hybrid sites typically include Web content and file downloads as well as activity feeds, blogs, employee profile pages, communities, and forums.

You can form new weak links by commenting on a blog post, asking a colleague to become a part of your network, posting a congratulatory note about an achievement, adding a forum topic, or joining a shared interest community. Your mileage may vary, but what's important is learning how to form weak links and beginning to do so.

Instant messaging. Over the past decade, instant messaging has grown in adoption and is rapidly becoming a standard and expected method of communication in the workplace, on the same level with e-mail and phone calls. IM is also an ideal platform for establishing and cultivating weak links with colleagues from anywhere in the organization—even in other cities and countries.

Research indicates that many employees value instant messaging because it's quick and in real time, and it is perceived as a great way to form connections with new colleagues because it feels less intrusive than calling or e-mailing them. The one caveat is with group IMs or group chats, which entrepreneur and author Jason Fried likens to "an all-day meeting with random participants and no agenda." So, stick to one-on-one instant messaging for establishing weak links.

Employee profiles. You probably establish many weak links at work organically, in the daily routine of doing your job. For example, you may be assigned to a project team and form connections with different co-workers with whom you don't usually interact, or you might reach out to someone from another department because you need some information from that person for an important proposal. These interactions are the traditional ways that people have established weak links over the years at work.

But the connections you never become aware of will never become weak links. In other words, rather than waiting for connections to form organically, you can be deliberate and proactive by browsing employee directories and profiles for desirable weak links. You can identify subject matter experts, product power users, and thought leaders and cultivate those relationships. (In this same vein, you should ensure that your own employee profile is informative and up to date, because you are someone else's next weak link.)

External social networks. Regardless of whether your organization has an ESN, external social networks are a great way to cultivate weak links with co-workers. This is especially true of social networks that cater to professionals, like LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube. For example, beyond facilitating connections with others, LinkedIn allows connections (and co-workers) to share and like each other's status updates, endorse one another for skills, post about projects they've worked on together, and provide testimonials. Be judicious, however, when exploring weak links on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, where people share personal information and weak links are often not welcome.

Old standbys and outside the box. The digital workplace offers many opportunities to form weak links. But as you avail yourself of new collaboration tools, keep in mind the traditional methods that continue to work, such as e-mail, in-person coffee and lunch meetings, and (actual) water cooler chats. Also, consider getting involved with different programs your organization may have that will put you into contact with people you would not usually meet. These might include "lunch and learns," mentoring and reverse mentoring programs, workplace volunteering

and give-back programs, and after-work business networking and happy hours.

The Value of Weak Links at Work

Establishing weak links is important, but many people stop there and forget about these links unless they want something. To get the most out of your weak links, nurture the connections and cultivate the relationships *before* you have a need. While the effort shouldn't rise to what you put forth for your friends—these are, after all, weak links—you can still do many things that require only modest effort, including engaging your weak links on the intranet or on external social sites, checking in with them occasionally, introducing them to employees or suppliers who might provide value to them in their job, or sending them helpful links or leads.

I mentioned earlier how weak links are beneficial for job hunting, recruiting, prospecting, marketing, and promoting causes. At work, weak links are even more valuable given the many other ways a weak connection can assist you in that setting.

Since many employees today are being asked to do more with less and work effectively with staff in other departments and countries, relationships that can be called upon when needed are key resources. Weak links at work can provide valuable information when needed, lend support to a project, be called upon for testing or review, give impartial feedback about a person or situation, make an introduction, and much more.

When connecting with co-workers in other countries, it is important to keep cultural differences in mind. For example, in India, it's common for employees to connect with one another on Facebook; the Japanese, meanwhile, don't use LinkedIn because, as marketing consultant Gary Inwood notes, "Most Japanese companies do not allow their employees to engage in second jobs, so there is little motivation to build up a network outside of their company."

The Limits of Weak Links

I'm a proponent of weak links. They have been enormously valuable for me professionally, and in my experience, today's networking and collaboration tools make them easier than ever to form and maintain. However, weak links, by their nature, are shallow and less useful than connections with people on a deeper level, and some people feel these connections are more artificial and inauthentic because of this.

I recognize these concerns, but I myself am comfortable with the limits of weak links. In large part, this is because I don't view weak links in a vacuum. Weak links are important, but their importance doesn't mean that strong links aren't just as important. Both are critical and important in any social or professional network.

The presence of strong links on a continuum with weak links gives context to the shallowness of weak links. These links are supposed to be weak because we have stronger, deeper links with others. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually dependent.

Weak links aren't new, and they certainly aren't new in the workplace. What is new are the many tools we have at our disposal in the workplace to cultivate and take advantage of weak links. **SLA**

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