FRIEND OF A FRIEND...

UNDERSTANDING THE HIDDEN NETWORKS THAT CAN TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

DAVID BURKUS

FRIEND OF A FRIEND . . .

ALSO BY DAVID BURKUS

Under New Management:
How Leading Organizations Are
Upending Business as Usual

The Myths of Creativity:
The Truth About How Innovative Companies
and People Generate Great Ideas

FRIEND — OF A — FRIEND

. . .

Understanding the Hidden Networks
That Can Transform Your Life

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To my parents

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Introduction

Or
How I Learned to Stop Networking
and Love Network Science

In 1999, a young computer engineer and aspiring entrepreneur named Adam Rifkin was looking for advice on his next move. In gathering advice, Rifkin sent an unsolicited email to a man he had never met in person named Graham Spencer. At the time, Spencer was one of the hottest names in the Silicon Valley tech community, having just completed the sale of his last start-up, Excite.com.[1]

Although Excite.com is still active, it's easy to forgive anyone who doesn't immediately recognize the name. In the age before Google and Facebook, however, Excite was one of the biggest brands on the Internet. Started in 1993 by Spencer and five of his friends, Excite had grown to become the front page of the Internet for a significant percentage of web-surfers. (This was back when people still used that term seriously.) Spencer and the Excite team had grown the website from a humble start-up to a vast collection of websites. They had some financial struggles, but the success of the website in drawing users eventually led them to a major payout. In early 1999, Excite was sold to the telecommunications company @Home for $6.7 billion. Needless to say, once the deal was finalized, Spencer was getting a lot of attention.

That Rifkin sent a cold email hoping for some advice from a Silicon Valley success story isn't unusual; who wouldn't at least try? What is unusual is that Spencer agreed to the request. Not only did Spencer volunteer to meet with Rifkin in person and answer any questions Rifkin had, but he went above and beyond that. Once Rifkin had explained his idea, Spencer connected Rifkin to a venture capitalist who became one of the first funders of the new start-up.

The overriding question is why, at the height of his popularity, and at the peak of the demand for his time, did Spencer agree to sit down with someone he had never met in person?

Because five years earlier, Rifkin and Spencer had built a webpage about punk rock bands.

More specifically, in 1994, as Rifkin was beginning his studies in computer science, he built a fan website dedicated to the emerging punk rock band Green Day. Despite it being the early days of the Internet, the website took off quickly. In fact, the website was getting so much attention that members of Green Day asked if they could take it over from Rifkin and make it their official website. Rifkin said yes. But Rifkin also received another request, from a young Graham Spencer, who felt that labeling Green Day as "punk rock" was taking attention away from "real" punk bands. So Rifkin and Spencer worked together and built a page on the Green Day website that listed other, lesser known bands. "A completely random set of events that happened in 1994 led to re-engaging with him over e-mails in 1999," Rifkin said. "Which led to my company getting founded in 2000."[2] Rifkin had helped Spencer, even though he could have ignored the request. Five years later, Spencer in turn helped Rifkin even though he too could have ignored the request.

While this story might seem exceptional, it's actually not that uncommon an occurrence for Rifkin. His career has been full of incidents of helping individuals who either were or would go on to be well-known figures in technology and business. Like the time Rifkin gave some contract work over to a young Ev Williams so he could keep afloat with a start-up called Blogger—which he later sold to Google for an undisclosed sum (though rumors estimate tens of millions). Williams would go on to start the company that would become Twitter. Or like the time Rifkin was starting another company and needed office space, and Reid Hoffman offered to let his team crash at LinkedIn until they got on their feet.[3]

Rifkin's story is filled with amazing anecdotes. He may not be a well-known name to everyone, but to the right people in his industry, he's more than well known. He's the best networker in the world. Literally. In 2011, *Fortune* magazine named Rifkin "the world's best networker"—since it turned out that he was more connected than anyone else to the most influential people on *Fortune*'s lists (Fortune 500, 40 Under 40, 50 Most Power Women, etc.).[4]

What is surprising about Rifkin earning this title isn't just that he is not the household name we would expect, but also that he doesn't fit the image of the world's best networker. He is not a tall, extroverted, dapper, energetic, eloquent, highly educated professional. "I am not an extrovert," he has said frequently. "Meeting people is not my favorite thing."[5] He describes himself as a little shy and awkward. He prefers a T-shirt and hoodie to a suit and tie. His look is often compared to a panda bear (a comparison he wears fairly proudly). He'd rather reconnect with old friends than work a room full of new people.

What Rifkin does have is *an understanding of how networks work*. Much of his initial strategy for building relationships and making connections wasn't gleaned from an advice book about being a power networker. It came from his graduate school work in computer science. "I feel fortunate to have learned networking from many excellent teachers," Rifkin once said. "And the greatest of these teachers was actually the Internet itself."[6] To Rifkin, human networks follow similar principles to computer networks. And studying those networks taught him several lessons about how to build and utilize better human networks. While we might think of our network as a collection of contact cards in a rolodex (or more modernly, a collection of names in a contacts app), when Rifkin thought about networks, he saw them not as a collection of contacts but as the map of the connections between contacts. "A network is basically a set of people and the connections between those people," he explained.[7]

One lesson in particular was that computer networks grow in value as the number of nodes and the number of connections grow. (A similar lesson from network science, often referred to as Metcalfe's Law, is a mathematical expression of this idea.) "If you go about it the right way, then it's good for everyone," Rifkin explained. "If you go about it the wrong way, then it cuts off opportunities, not just for yourself but for others too."[8] So Rifkin committed himself to making introductions every single day. Eventually, he learned to scale his network building by building a whole community, 106 Miles, dedicated to keeping the tech community well connected. Today 106 Miles has almost 10,000 members who interact regularly. It's a network unto itself. Although Rifkin isn't at the center of it anymore, it owes its existence to his perspective on networks and networking.

Rifkin's own extensive network, and the career success it has brought him, is more than an amazing story. It's a stern rejection of many of the misconceptions about what networking is and how it's supposed to work. One reason these misconceptions are widespread is that the majority of books, workshops, courses, speeches, and more on the subject are based on old and misguided advice. Specifically:

- *They say you should write and refine your "elevator pitch."*
- *They say you should never eat a meal alone.*
- *They say that you should repeat someone's name three times in the first few seconds of conversation (sometimes as advice for remembering the name, other times as a trick to get people to like you more).*
- *They will offer guidelines on how to work a room or how to meet new connections online.*

But all advice is autobiographical.[9] Advice, even advice about networks, represents little more than one person's single story projected onto others. Advice, at its core, says, "I did this and it worked, so you should do it too," or the slightly more convincing, "I wasn't doing this, but then I did and it changed my life." As well meaning, inspirational, and accurate as another person's autobiography might be, it's still one person, with one specific set of skills, one personality, in one specific location, at one specific time. So what if you're not that person with that personality at that point in life? What if you're not the tall, extroverted, dapper, energetic, eloquent, highly educated professional who's giving you the advice? Would it still work for you? Would you even want to try it?

Many people report feeling sketchy or even dirty when they engage in or think about networking. We think about the creepy salesman at the last networking mixer we attended, the one who sped around the room handing out business cards like candy and always scanning for people more "important" than us to talk to. Or we think about that old classmate who just hit the job market unexpectedly and has started frantically emailing everyone in her address book, blanketing LinkedIn with connection requests, and asking just about everyone out for coffee and a "quick chat." Networking seems to many of us to be an insincere way to manipulate relationships for personal gain. This is the repulsive stereotype most people have of networkers, and it's no surprise that it is not a pleasant picture.

In one study, the researchers Tiziana Casciaro, Francesca Gino, and Maryam Kouchaki found that even just thinking about networking leaves most people feeling dirty . . . literally dirty.[10] In one round of the study, the researchers asked 306 adults to remember a time when they reached out to form a new relationship. One group was asked to imagine a time when they sought out professional contacts who could help their career (what the researchers called "instrumental networking"). Another group was asked to imagine a time when they reached out to someone in their industry to form a personal connection, without consideration of professional gain (what the researchers called "personal networking" but we could also label "being a decent human being").

Afterwards, participants in both groups were asked to do a word completion task and given word fragments (such as "S _ _ P" or "W _ _ H") that could be filled in to spell seemingly random words ("STEP" or "WISH") or words related to cleanliness ("SOAP" or "WASH"). It has been well demonstrated in previous research that feeling morally tainted increases our desire for cleanliness and that desire manifests in subtle shifts in cognition —including how we do a word completion task. Unsurprisingly, Casciaro and her colleagues found that those in the instrumental networking group—those who had to imagine a time when they played the role of the stereotypical networker—completed the task with words related to cleanliness. The implication is that the act of networking made them feel morally tainted and literally dirty.

In a follow-up round, the researchers took the experiment online. They asked students to think of a time when they had reached out to get to know someone better. One group of students was asked about social connections and the other about professional relationships. The researchers then asked the social group to reach out to the person they were thinking of via Facebook (a social media website mainly used to build and maintain friendships), and the professional group was asked to reach out to the person they had remembered via LinkedIn (a social media website mainly used to build and maintain professional relationships). Afterwards, all students were surveyed about how they were feeling. Again, the professional relationships group reported feeling physically dirtier than those in the social relationships group.

Despite these results, Casciaro and her colleagues also found that networking was hugely important. In a different study, they surveyed hundreds of lawyers throughout North America and asked them how frequently they engaged in networking. They found that those who engaged in making new connections and strengthening old ones were better performers (in terms of billable hours and hence compensation) than those who didn't. Their findings align with a significant body of research that demonstrates that networking—making and strengthening connections to others—is vitally important for professional success. Likewise, understanding how the networks inside an organization truly operate dramatically improves its overall importance.

But what do you get when you combine an understanding that networks and relationships are important with the commonly shared belief that networking activities are awkward and dirty? You get perhaps the most commonly expressed maxim about networking: "It's not what you know; it's who you know."

This phrase is a curious one. People have written it down or spoken it aloud for at least seven decades (and probably more than that),[11] but usually just to express exasperation. "I didn't get the job [the sale/the promotion] because I didn't have the right connections." You may have even said it yourself at some point—in a moment of similar frustration. If success is mostly a matter of who you know, then we start to believe that we only have two choices: settle for less, or adopt the stereotypical networking prowler.

But what if there is another choice?

In fact, there is.

Researchers Rob Cross and Robert Thomas have found time and again that "who you know" is important, but just knowing lots of people won't get you there. "In fact, we've found that individuals who simply know a lot of people are less likely to achieve standout performance," they write. "Political animals with lots of connections to corporate and industry leaders don't win the day, either."[12] Collecting contacts isn't the surefire route to success.

In light of this research showing that it's not necessarily about who you know, perhaps another commonly used phrase is more accurate: it's about knowing who is a "friend of a friend." It's about getting a full picture of the network you already have access to, and learning how to improve it.

Like Adam Rifkin, understanding how networks work, how to navigate them, and how to tend to the community they represent is what determines a lot of your career success and a lot of organizations' ability to perform. Knowing who your friends are and who *their* friends are, so you can gain a better understanding of the community, will lead to better odds that your network will enhance your success.

Fortunately, this insight is backed up by decades of research from the worlds of sociology and network science. This research supports that being connected to a strong network provides major advantages—access to diverse skills and perspectives, the ability to learn private information, and the type of expertise and influence that makes it easier to attain power—which sociologists refer to as *social capital*. An intriguing term that appears to have been invented by six different people at six different times, social capital takes its definition opposite *physical capital*—financial resources, inventory, property, and the like.[13] Just as those things have value, sociologists argue, so do the connections and networks of our social capital—especially when we know how to leverage that capital. In one study, led by the renowned sociologist Ronald Burt (more on him soon), it was found that educating executives about network structures and principles led to dramatic improvements in performance.[14] Those who took the training were 36 to 42 percent more likely to improve their performance than similarity qualified but untrained peers, and 42 to 74 percent more likely to be promoted.

And that is what this book is about.

This isn't just a book about networking. It's not like any networking book you have read (or ignored) before. This is a book about how networks actually work. This isn't another collection of rote advice and specific instructions on how to meet new people or how to work a room. It's not a manual for managing your social media and online presence. There are plenty of those guides already and adding one more wouldn't help—especially because just collecting contacts doesn't work. Instead, this is a book that takes a deep dive into the proven science of networks and shares the implications for anyone looking to upgrade their connections and relationships.

I won't be sharing anecdotal advice from stereotypical networkers; instead, we will examine real case studies of people and companies who found success because they found (knowingly or not) a strategy in line with the research.

Knowing how networks come together is the secret weapon behind a powerful networking strategy. It works better than the entire collection of tools.

And that is where we are headed.

The next chapter explains the types of network connections that are most likely to provide you with new information and opportunities (and a quick hint: it's probably not who you tend to interact with the most). After that, chapter 2 examines an old party game and reveals the clues it holds to just how large and useful your total network really is. Chapter 3 deals with your networking strategy: is it better to try to connect with everyone in one industry or profession, or is it better to be the connector between these groups? Chapter 4 answers the common call to break down silos with a reminder that sometimes staying in your silo can have tremendous benefits—it just depends on how often you're there. Chapter 5 examines how your network affects the teams you rely on, and explains why part of cultivating a high-performing network is being willing to decrease or cut off how frequently you interact with some connections. Chapter 6 describes just how large your network can become, and how above-average networkers really do have above-average networks. Chapter 7 looks at the implications of above-average networks for your own plan: will it always be an uphill battle and a constant process to make key connections, or can you grow your network passively?

Then we turn to some of the more surprising findings from network science that will have you reevaluating your entire network. Chapter 8 describes an intriguing quirk of social networks: it is possible to appear more popular and connected than you really are—but is it worthwhile? Chapter 9 issues a dire warning for anyone building their network: more isn't better if it means more of the same. Chapter 10 reveals the solution to this dilemma, showing that *where* and *how* you make new connections affect how valuable they will become. Chapter 11, the final chapter, moves away from the entire network to look at individual connections, revealing that part of "who you know" includes how (and how well) you know them.

In addition to the implications for individuals, the findings from network science carry implications for how leaders shape their organizations and how companies try to market their brands through customer networks. When relevant, these will be explored as well.

To help you move from ideas to action, or from scientific research to practice, each chapter ends with an activity you can do quickly that will help you either better understand your current network or take the first steps to strengthening it. In addition, we examine the role of online tools and social media services in building and maintaining your network and show you when those tools might actually become counterproductive—which happens more often than you might think, since online tools only seem to work well when they reinforce off-line principles of human connection. (Perhaps that is why studies are showing that the more time individuals spend with online-only connections the more lonely they report feeling. Also, as people increase their use of online tools, their sense of social isolation seems to increase as well.[15])

Your connections matter. But so does how you know them, why you know them, where you met them, and who else they know. All of these elements are explained by the network around you—all your friends of friends.

By the end of this book, I hope you have become more effective at making and strengthening the key connections that will change your work and career. But I hope you do that not by just taking advice. Rather, I hope you become more effective because you've learned how the network around you works—and how to work it.

— 1 —

FIND STRENGTH IN WEAK TIES

Or
Why Your Old Friends Are Better Than Your New Friends

We tend to act as if our closest friends are our biggest assets. While that may be true for social support or for trusted information, it's not so true when it comes to opportunity. Research shows that our biggest opportunities and best sources of new information actually come from our "weak ties" or "dormant ties" — our connections with people we don't see often or haven't spoken to in a long time. This means that if we want to learn something new or make a job change, reaching out to our old friends is a better move than keeping it "just between friends" by connecting only with the people we're closest to now.

Lorenzo Fertitta never planned on disrupting the prizefighting industry or on saving the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA) from regulatory extinction.

The son of casino magnate Frank Fertitta Jr., Lorenzo was no stranger to the world of combat sports, but his future was almost certainly going to be in the casino industry. However, because of an old and distant high school friend, he has spent the better part of the last two decades turning the once-crippled Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) franchise into a worldwide brand valued at more than $4 billion. But Lorenzo Fertitta isn't even the lead actor in the story. That title goes to Dana White, for re-activating a weak tie in his network that dramatically enhanced both his and Lorenzo Fertitta's net worth.

From the outside looking in, White and Fertitta resemble and act like lifelong friends on a journey to continuously grow the UFC and the sport of MMA. But their deep friendship is actually relatively new. They attended the same high school, Bishop Gorman, a Roman Catholic preparatory school in Las Vegas, Nevada, and tended to associate with the same circles of friends, but they themselves rarely interacted. "We had a lot more in common after school than in school," said White. "I got kicked out of Gorman twice. Lorenzo was the role model: A-student, football player, going on to college and college after college."[1]

White was correct. Lorenzo Fertitta went on to the University of San Diego and then earned an MBA from New York University. After school, Fertitta partnered with his brother, Frank III, first by starting a business renting pay phones and slot machines, then buying real estate on the outskirts of Las Vegas, and finally merging their company with their father's chain of casinos and taking the new entity public.

As for White, after he got kicked out of Bishop Gorman not once but twice, his parents sent him to Maine to live with his grandmother. White finished high school there and actually spent some time at college, but did not graduate. He floated through a variety of different jobs, everything from a bellhop to a boxing trainer. Eventually, he moved back to Las Vegas and started a gym. Then he started two more. Eventually, White found himself managing the careers of two fighters, Tito Ortiz and Chuck

Liddell, as they competed in the UFC. It would be nearly a decade after White left Bishop Gorman before he talked to either of the Fertitta brothers again.[2]

When they did, it was back in Las Vegas, and it was the result of a chance encounter at the wedding of a mutual friend from high school. Dana and Lorenzo quickly bonded over their mutual love of combat sports. White's passion for MMA quickly turned both of the Fertitta brothers into new fans. Lorenzo Fertitta was already serving on the Nevada State Athletic Commission, which regulated all combat sports in that state. Perhaps most notably, he was a commissioner when Mike Tyson bit off Evander Holyfield's ear. "I was one of the guys who had to tell Mike to pack up and go," Lorenzo Fertitta said.[3] It was a time when all combat sports, especially MMA, were being highlighted for their brutality.

As for the UFC, it was fighting hard just to stay alive and in business. Senator John McCain was leading the charge to ban MMA and even referred to it as "human cockfighting." One by one, each state and state athletic commission began to outlaw the sport, forcing the UFC to become creative in how it staged its events. Eventually, it lost its pay-per-view distribution, which meant ticket sales at live shows had to serve as the main source of revenue.

Through his work managing fighters, White learned that the UFC's original owners were tired of putting up a fight and were looking to sell their franchise. So White reached out to his long-lost friend Lorenzo Fertitta. Within a month, the Fertitta brothers had purchased the UFC for $2 million, using private funds. "It was probably the worst brand in the United States because of all the negativity around it," Lorenzo Fertitta said. The brothers did not even have the blessing of their father. "Dad was a fairly conservative guy," said Frank Fertitta. "He asked us not to do it. I think that's the only time that Lorenzo and I actually went against what he wanted us to do. Thank God we did."[4]

Little by little, White and the Fertittas grew the struggling league from backwater shows to sold-out arenas and millions of television viewers. The Fertitta brothers knew that the sport would not survive without regulatory approval. Fortunately, Lorenzo's connections with the athletic commissions helped him understand and work toward the changes they would need to make to get that approval. They added a new rule structure, established weight classes, and by some accounts made it a safer sport for participants than boxing. White's experience with the fighters they inherited no doubt made those changes an easier sell to the athletes themselves.

All this being said, their first big event was, by most accounts, a disaster. It was disorganized and ran over time, so the pay-per-view broadcast was cut short before the main event.[5] However, the Fertittas continued to put more effort and money (over $40 million) into the venture. In 2004, they gambled even bigger. One of the Fertittas' casinos, Green Valley Ranch, had played host to a reality show on the Discovery Channel, and the brothers thought a similar venture might help raise awareness of their fight league.[6] They pitched a show where aspiring young fighters were shown living and training together, all the while competing for a contract with the UFC. The show was turned down by every network, except Spike TV, which agreed to air it if the Fertittas paid the $10 million production cost themselves.

The show was a hit almost from the beginning and rapidly increased the fan base for mixed martial arts. It also made Dana White into a television star, showcasing his brash style, his understanding of what it means to be a fighter, and his knowledge of what it takes to be a champion. The show has now run for over twenty seasons and continues to recruit new fans to the sport. By 2005, the Fertittas had recouped their original investments in the UFC.[7] Senator McCain has even changed his tune, if only slightly. "They haven't made me a fan, but they have made progress," he said in a 2007 interview on National Public Radio.[8]

As part of the purchase, the Fertittas maintained an equal ownership of the enterprise, something their lawyers were not happy about.[9] Legal counsel wanted a way to resolve disputes in case of a stalemate. They solved that in two ways. First, White was given a 10 percent stake in the organization and tasked with running the day-to-day operations. Second, they added a clause in their ownership contract that all disputes between the brothers would be settled with a jiujitsu match, with White playing the role of referee. "It hasn't happened yet," Lorenzo Fertitta joked.[10] The two brothers and White have a great relationship. They work out together regularly and communicate frequently. "We both bring something very different to the table, but at the end of the day, we've got a great dynamic," Lorenzo Fertitta said.[11]

In 2011, the UFC signed a seven-year broadcasting deal with the FOX Sports Media Group valued at $700 million.[12] The company produces more than forty live events every year and is broadcast in more than 1 billion households around the world. In 2013, Dana White was named the "sports innovator of the year" for his role in the turnaround.[13] And in 2016, the Fertittas and White successfully sold the UFC for $4 billion to a group of private investors, including the William Morris Endeavor Agency, Silver Lake Partners, KKR, and MSD Capital (the investment firm of the technology billionaire Michael Dell). "It's the largest deal ever in the history of sports," Lorenzo Fertitta said at the time.[14] He is not far off. In terms of sports, it is twice what Steve Ballmer paid in 2014 to purchase the Los Angeles Clippers. In terms of all entertainment, $4 billion rivals what the Walt Disney

Company paid George Lucas for the entire Star Wars franchise in 2012, which was hailed as the "deal of the century" when it happened.[15] For his part, White's personal payout was reported to be more than $350 million.[16] Pretty good payday for a former bellhop and boxing trainer.

Whatever measure is used, the story of the UFC is one about a remarkable transition from the brink of collapse to a multibillion-dollar valuation. And none of it would have happened without a chance meeting of two former classmates.

The Forgotten Network

White and Fertitta's chance interaction at that wedding may seem like a fluke, but it is actually a textbook case of how the forgotten parts of our network yield bigger opportunities than most of us realize. Their relationship at the time resembled what sociologists refer to as *weak ties*—people we maintain a connection with but rarely interact with. By contrast, *strong ties* are the connections we regularly return to—those friends and coworkers we feel comfortable around because we know, like, and trust them.

Our tendency when things get tough is to seek out trusted, familiar counsel. When we need a new job, for example, we default to those close to our network. We tell our friends and family, then skip over our weak ties, ironically, and go right to coldly responding to job postings online. Or when we need advice about a major problem, we tend to share our dilemma only with those close to us—those we feel comfortable around. But that comfort comes at a cost. Most of the strong ties in our network are connected to each other. They are often so tightly clustered that information known by one person is already known by everyone in that cluster. In contrast, our weak ties often build a bridge from one cluster to another and thus give us access to new information. Even though the strong ties in our life are more likely to be motivated to help us, it turns out that our weak ties' access to new sources of information may be more valuable than our strong ties' motivation.

Consider how Dana White's strong ties were already in the UFC world, while Lorenzo Fertitta's network gave him access to casinos to put on events and the connections to the athletic commission needed to change attitudes toward the sport. White found himself inside a community of individuals who knew their sport was dying but couldn't find a way to revive it; Fertitta was in a different community of Las Vegas entertainers who mostly focused on boxing. White had the knowledge of MMA; Lorenzo Fertitta had the knowledge of how to get the sport regulated and marketed like boxing. Their chance meeting at a friend's wedding connected these two seemingly distant clusters and unlocked an extremely valuable solution.

This counterintuitive finding first came from a now-classic study by the sociologist Mark Granovetter. In 1970, as a PhD student at Harvard University, Granovetter decided to conduct a study of job transitions. When surveying respondents, he would often ask whether a friend had told them about their current job. Respondents would often answer with something like: "Not a friend, but an acquaintance," which suggested to Granovetter that he ought to look further.[17] In the end, he surveyed hundreds of professional, technical, and managerial job-changers living in the suburbs of Boston, asking them about the contacts who had told them about the job opportunity they ended up applying for and accepting.

Specifically, he asked how often they were seeing those contacts around the time they received the job information. Granovetter used three categories: often (at least twice a week), occasionally (more than once a year but less than twice a week), and rarely (once a year or less). When Granovetter looked at the collected results, he found that fewer than 17 percent of job-changers saw their contacts often. Over 55 percent said they saw their contact occasionally, and over 27 percent said they rarely saw this person.

While between once a year and less than twice a week is admittedly a large margin, it's very representative of the variance in contact most of us maintain with our weaker relationships. Weak ties are those colleagues we don't plan to see, but when we do it's easy to catch up quickly. "The skew is clearly to the weak end of the continuum," Granovetter wrote in his 1973 paper presenting this data.[18] That paper, "The Strength of Weak Ties," would go on to become one of the most cited papers in sociology.

Granovetter's surprising findings run opposite to what most of us do when faced with a problem to solve, a choice to make, or the sudden need to find a job. It makes sense to share your situation with friends, family members, and trusted colleagues. They know you best and are most interested in helping you. But, as Granovetter found, the odds that they have any useful information or leads that you don't already have are slim. Moreover, the odds that everyone in your close circle will offer the same information or advice are great—our closest contacts tend to share the same contacts as us. Our weak ties are irregular contacts precisely because they tend to operate in different social circles. They interact with people different from our inner circle and learn different information. As a result, *weak ties become our best source for the new information that we need to resolve our dilemmas*.

Weak ties are stronger sources of information not just about job opportunities. Granovetter's work inspired researchers to study the other ways in which weak ties bring us new and valuable information and opportunities. Martin Ruef, a professor at Duke University, studied how entrepreneurs rely on strong and weak ties and the effects on their ability to be innovative.[19] Ruef surveyed more than 700 entrepreneurial teams who were launching new businesses and gathered data on the sources of their ideas, the structure of their team, the advisers or partners they sought, their patent applications, and the novelty of their business ideas. In particular, he was looking at the strength of the connections between the source of the teams' business ideas and the innovativeness of those ideas. To judge the strength of connections, he asked participants to classify the source of their business idea as: (1) coming from discussions with family and friends (strong ties); (2) coming from discussions with business associates, customers, or suppliers (weak ties); or (3) coming from observing discussions in the media, in the industry, or among existing competitors (what he called *directed ties,* since the information flow was only in one direction). To assess innovation, Ruef used two measures: patent and trademark applications as an objective measurement, and a subjective comparison of the teams' ideas against long-standing research on the categories of innovation.

When Ruef tabulated the results, he found that those teams whose business ideas came from discussions with weak ties were more innovative as judged by both measures. The fact that they sought more patent and trademark applications meant their ideas were likely more original and hence called for intellectual property protection. And their business idea was stronger across the categories of innovation, meaning the business model itself was more innovative than those businesses started by teams relying on strong ties. "Weak ties allow for more experimentation in combining ideas from disparate sources and impose fewer demands for social conformity than do strong ties," Ruef said.[20]

Taken together, Ruef's findings are consistent with the strength of weak ties phenomenon first discovered by Granovetter. Just as the weak ties of job-hunters are more likely to provide novel information about job opportunities, the weak ties of entrepreneurs are more likely to provide a novel perspective or discovery that can yield an idea for a new business. Similarly, while job-hunters relying on strong ties have to endure the steep challenge, while unemployed, of convincing potential employers to make an offer, entrepreneurs relying on strong ties have to endure the difficult path of differentiating their business from the crowd. "Our results suggest that entrepreneurs can avoid the pitfalls of conformity by diversifying their networks," Ruef wrote of his findings.[21]

The research clearly supports the idea that in order to develop the most diverse information and create the most opportunity, we need to move beyond our strong ties and gain the fresh perspectives of our weaker connections. But not all weak ties are created equally. Strong ties may be more motivated to help us by bonds of familiarity and trust, but there is one form of weak ties with almost as much goodwill toward us while still offering new information: weak ties that used to be stronger. Even in Granovetter's original study, he noticed the role that former colleagues and long-lost friends played in helping individuals. "Chance meetings or mutual friends operated to reactivate such ties," Granovetter noted. "It is remarkable that people receive crucial information from individuals whose very existence they have forgotten."[22] Over time, other researchers would come up with a shorter name for such a weak tie that used to be stronger. They would label it a *dormant tie,* and their research would prove just how valuable these weak connections are.

The researchers Daniel Levin, Jorge Walter, and Keith Murnighan have been studying the power of dormant ties for almost a decade. Specifically, they have been surveying business executives, encouraging them to deliberately reactivate old connections and then observing the results. And the results have been quite powerful. In one experiment, the trio asked a group of 224 executives from four executive MBA classes to reconnect with two people to whom they had not spoken for at least three years, but who they thought would have advice that would help them on a major work project.[23] Specifically, the executives were to contact one person with whom they had shared a strong relationship before they fell out of touch, and also one individual with whom they had a weak tie relationship. In addition, the executives selected two current contacts (one strong, one weak) from whom they had already sought advice during the course of their project. The researchers then asked executives to assess all four contacts' advice in terms of value (actionable knowledge), novelty, trust, and the extent to which they had a shared perspective.

As you can imagine, many of these executives were not excited about the idea of cold-calling old colleagues and asking for advice. However, as the researchers and the executives themselves discovered, these old colleagues ended up becoming a tremendous resource. In short, the advice from the dormant ties was more likely to be valuable than the advice from current connections. Likewise, the dormant ties were more likely to provide unexpected insights and more novel advice than current ties. "In spite of their initial hesitation," Levin, Walter, and Murnighan wrote, "almost all of the executives in our studies report that they have received tremendous value from reconnecting their dormant relationships."[24]

The researchers weren't satisfied yet, however. It was still possible that one of the reasons dormant ties provided so much value was simply that they were top of mind when the executives were asked to think of old colleagues whose information would be useful. Most of us have more dormant ties than current ones, after all, so the probability is pretty high that the most useful counsel on a project would come from the larger pool of old colleagues. So the researchers tested a separate group of over 100 executives drawn from the same programs and gave them a different task. Instead of just selecting two dormant ties, these executives were asked to make a list of ten possible people to reconnect with and then rank them based on perceived usefulness. The executives were then told to reconnect with their top choice and with another person on the list chosen at random. After both conversations, the researchers measured the value of the advice in the same way as in the first study. “We originally thought that usefulness would drop off as people went down their list,” the researchers wrote. “But the data did not show that.”[25] Instead, the value of the advice tended to be consistent no matter what the executives’ preconceived notions were. This suggests that the benefits of dormant ties have more to do with the dormancy of the ties themselves than with the perceived expertise.

The research on dormant ties reveals three main reasons for their strength. First, like weak ties, dormant ties can hold a wealth of new, different, and unexpected insights. Just because we have lost touch with someone doesn’t mean that person has become extinct. Instead, our dormant ties are still around and interacting with other social circles and having new experiences. Second, reaching out to dormant ties specifically for advice is efficient; the contact with them is often much quicker than conversations with current colleagues who might be collaborating on multiple projects. And third, because many dormant ties, unlike weak ties, were once stronger relationships, their trust and motivation to help are much stronger than is true for current weak ties.

While dormant ties have been proven to be a great source of new insights and also to be a stronger form of weak ties, the truth is that not all dormant ties are equal. We all have someone we have lost touch with for a very specific reason. Levin, Walter, and Murnighan found that predicting which dormant ties would have the most valuable insights was so difficult that it inspired them to look even further into which dormant ties tend to be the most valuable.

In a follow-up study, the researchers repeated their method of surveying over 100 executives and asking them to reconnect with old contacts.[26] As in the previous experiment, they asked the executives to recall ten old contacts and to rank them by preference. Also as before, the executives were then asked to reach out to their most preferred contact and one other contact randomly chosen from their list of ten. However, unlike the previous study, this one included a survey of the executives before contact was made. The researchers asked the executives how briefly they had known their old contacts, how frequently or infrequently they had communicated with them before the relationship went dormant, and also how each old contact's status or organizational rank compared to the executive's own. All of the executives were also asked for their expectations about the trustworthiness and willingness to help of each of their contacts.

Then, after the executives reconnected either in person or via phone, the researchers followed up and asked a series of questions about the value of the advice received, as well as the novelty of the ideas and the levels of trust and shared perspective experienced. Surprisingly, when examining the results, the researchers found that executives consistently rated the advice from their more infrequent connections as more novel and useful . . . but also that the executives generally preferred to reconnect with people they saw as being more familiar. In other words, when reactivating dormant ties, the weaker dormant ties gave much better advice when reactivated, but those were also the exact type of dormant ties that most executives preferred to avoid. "Our executives displayed a strong bias to choose potential reconnections that turned out not to be the most valuable," the researchers wrote.[27] Despite this bias, preference didn't show much of an effect on the assessment of the conversation itself—almost all of the executives said they enjoyed and benefited from all conversations regardless of prior preference.

These findings suggest that, even among dormant ties, weaker connections are a more novel, valuable, and useful resource, which means Granovetter's strength of weak ties phenomenon applies even among old colleagues. Taken altogether, the strength of weaker ties runs counter to a lot of our preferences and even some conventional networking beliefs.

Like the executives in the study, most of us prefer to keep our conversations and advice-seeking inside a small, trusted circle of colleagues, despite solid evidence that the novelty of the information that this tight cluster can provide is severely limited. Even when forced to reconnect with dormant ties, we may tend to stay safe and to reconnect with those individuals with whom we are more familiar and who are less likely to provide the benefit of new intel.

At the other end of the networking spectrum, much of the conventional networking advice is focused on reaching out and meeting brand-new people. While that is a noble goal in and of itself, and new connections are likely to provide novel and valuable information and opportunities, the research from Levin, Walter, and Murnighan encourages us to consider old, dormant ties in our network before spending so much energy investing in new relationships. After all, dormant ties are almost as likely to give us great counsel, and they will do so much more efficiently, since reactivating an old connection is much faster than building a brand-new relationship from scratch.

New Ideas from Old Connections

It was this exact situation—the challenge of building new relationships and the ease of reactivating old ones—that Scott Harrison faced when he decided to start a new nonprofit organization. And it was the novelty that his dormant ties provided that led Harrison to revolutionize the way in which the nonprofit world operates. Before Harrison was the founder and face of charity: water, he was a young teenager rebelling against his upbringing and building a life as a nightclub promoter in New York City. After growing up in New Jersey in a household with a strong Christian ethos, Harrison fled to the big city to study at New York University. By his own admission, he wasn't exactly the ideal student, but he did learn how to throw a great party.

After graduation, Harrison found work as a promoter in New York's nightclub scene. He would organize parties for clubs, fashion magazines, and alcohol brands. And he was good at it. Eventually, corporate brands began sponsoring not just his parties but Harrison himself. He was paid to go out in public and drink certain brands of alcohol and wear certain brands of clothing. And he had also mastered the art of nonchalantly facing a logo or label toward any nearby cameras. His success and fame brought him a great deal of contacts. At one point he had 15,000 names in his address book. This wealth of connections and his ability to throw great parties earned Harrison a lot of money, but it also left him pretty miserable. "I had a Rolex, a grand piano, an apartment, a Labrador retriever," Harrison reflected, "and I came face to face with what a scumbag I was."[28]

Desperate to make a deep and personal change, Harrison decided to pursue a life of service. He blindly reached out to a variety of humanitarian organizations but was turned down by every group except one—presumably, his party animal back story was too hard to hide.

So with no other options, Harrison joined the crew of a Mercy Ships expedition to Liberia. The ship was a floating hospital where medical professionals volunteered their time to bring free medicine and surgical procedures to the world's poorest communities. "The chief medical officer was a surgeon who left Los Angeles to volunteer for two weeks—23 years ago," Harrison recalled.[29]

For his part, Harrison had convinced the staff of the organization that he was a photojournalist, and so his job became to use a camera lens to document the extreme poverty and dramatic transformations he witnessed. For the first time, Harrison saw just how severe the problem was. He met families who lived on less money per year than what he used to sell bottles of vodka for. "I was utterly astonished at the poverty that came into focus through my camera lens. Often through tears, I documented life and human suffering I'd thought unimaginable," Harrison said.[30] Initially, he had signed on for an eight-month expedition. He stayed with Mercy Ships for two years. "There was really no going back after my third day."[31]

During those two years, Harrison also saw the primary cause of a lot of suffering and left motivated to find a solution. "Of all of the issues I had seen facing the poor, water seemed to be the root cause," Harrison said.[32] "It was responsible for 80 percent of all disease. Water and lack of sanitation were responsible for 80 percent of all sickness on the planet, and there are a billion people without it." He was resolved to find a way to solve this problem—to bring clean water to every person who needed it. A big enough goal by itself, it was made almost insurmountable by his lack of connections to anyone involved in combating the water crisis. Harrison had learned from being seriously rebuffed when he tried to blindly reach out to humanitarian organizations in the past. Now, instead of forcing his way in and working to make new connections, he decided to reactivate his dormant ties. “It dawned on me what an opportunity it would be if my previous contacts could be corralled to make a difference,” Harrison said.[33]

He went back to his old nightclub and fashion colleagues, most of whom he hadn’t spoken to since sailing for Liberia two years prior. He started small at first, but then gathered momentum. Given where his dormant ties were, his first project was actually a party, his own thirty-first birthday party. He leveraged his old colleagues to book a nightclub so trendy that it hadn’t yet opened to the public and invited almost his entire contact list. “As people walked into the nightclub, they walked past images of people drinking dirty water. Then those images turned to images of drillers, and then they turned to people drinking clean water,” Harrison explained. “I asked everybody to pay on the way in and 100 percent of the money would go to our first projects in Uganda.”[34] Seven hundred people attended the party.

After the party, things started to move quickly, but not in the direction of traditional philanthropy. Harrison followed up with his contacts, whom he knew would be concerned about how the donated money was spent. “I was with people who weren’t giving to charities. So I was forced to try to create a business model that would resonate with them,” he explained.[35] To do this, Harrison had pictures taken of the wells that were dug and emailed them out to everyone who attended the party. The response was incredible. “Half of them couldn’t even remember being at the party but they were blown away by the pictures and the difference they had made,” he said.[36] In effect, Harrison had found a new community of people interested in and willing to contribute to charity, but to whom the traditional models didn’t appeal.

From that party onward, charity: water committed to a new model, one where 100 percent of all individual donations would be directly used to provide access to clean water. In addition, everyone who donated would be kept informed on the group's progress and the end results of their donations. To do this, Harrison and his growing team established two bank accounts from the beginning: one for donations from a small group of trusted donors who had committed to paying the overhead, and the other for the majority of donations from individuals who, like his dormant ties from the fashion and nightclub world, wanted to know their money was going right to the project. While a few foundations and trusts work this way, almost all were established through a gift from one or two major donors—billionaires who decided to give away some of their wealth by starting a foundation. The idea of someone who was not a billionaire starting from scratch and building a nonprofit organization that functioned similar to a charitable trust was unheard of. The rest of the philanthropic world just didn't work that way. "Nobody had ever done our model before," Harrison recalled.[37] And perhaps he wouldn't have done it either had he tried to network and make new contacts in that world. Instead, it was his weak ties that led him to a very different idea about how to run a charity.

His old contacts also helped him think differently about raising awareness. From the beginning, charity: water put a special emphasis on storytelling and great design, the same elements it takes to run a profitable fashion brand or to put together a remarkable event. "I think the second thing we did was take over New York City parks," Harrison said.[38] And by "take over" he really does mean take over—his team made it almost impossible for any passing New Yorkers to avoid the issue of the water crisis. They took a series of striking photos that captured the needs and efforts of impoverished communities that needed access to clean water and plastered these images onto large tanks of dirty pond water, forcing passersby to imagine what it would be like if they faced the same daily challenge of finding clean drinking water. The exhibit worked, drawing out tens of thousands of people and raising tens of thousands of dollars for the cause.

It also led a lot of people to look up charity: water online and encouraged them to join what would become their most important fund-raiser. Inspired by Harrison's initial birthday fund-raiser, charity: water began encouraging others to give up presents on their birthdays and ask for contributions to help drill wells instead.[39] Participants set up a webpage announcing the venture and sent out invites to family, friends, and colleagues and also (you guessed it) to weak and dormant ties. The birthday donations have raised a lot of money for clean water but, perhaps more importantly, have also raised even more awareness. As friends told friends who told other friends, word spread quickly. It wasn't long before well-known businesspeople and celebrities were setting up pages of their own and spreading the word to their vast followings. Skateboard legend Tony Hawk raised over $20,000 for his forty-fourth birthday. Twitter founder Jack Dorsey has given up his birthday three times and raised almost $200,000.[40]

The birthday pledges also morphed as word of charity: water spread. As fund-raisers reached out to their weak ties, these people learned about charity: water and developed their own unique ideas. One person climbed a mountain to raise money; another swam the English Channel.[41] Donors saw every detail of these ventures—the total amount raised and later the project that was funded, along with photos and GPS coordinates. The innovation and transparency that charity: water had brought to the philanthropic world was immense, and it likely wouldn't have happened if Scott Harrison hadn't been forced to reach back to his former life and his dormant ties. While few folks from the nightclub world are still actively involved in charity: water (Harrison believes the tech industry is now their biggest influence and champion), the path Harrison traveled down would have looked a lot different if it weren't for those original weak ties.

The chances of unlocking value from only your immediate and close connections are minimal, since your close contacts don't have access to a lot of information you don't already have yourself. But the lessons of weak ties research, as evidenced by the experiences of White and the Fertittas, as well as Scott Harrison and charity: water, suggest that you may be missing out on a major asset: those weak ties you may have forgotten about or haven't reconnected with in a while. It's those weak ties that give you the best chance of finding new information and learning about unexpected opportunities. Moreover, weak and dormant ties are likely to be much more plentiful in your network than your strong connections. If you want to maximize the value of your network, then you need to make sure you're using *all* of your connections and not limiting yourself to just your current strong ties. The bottom line is that when it comes to new information and opportunities, your weak and dormant ties are much stronger.

FROM SCIENCE TO PRACTICE

The biggest implication of the strength of weak and dormant ties is that we ought to fight our impulses. When we have a career setback, for example, we tend to tell only a close circle of friends who may or may not be able to help (most likely not), and then we take to blindly responding to job postings online or calling headhunters. Instead, we ought to go to our weak and dormant ties, tell them our story, and see what opportunities they can steer us toward.

Even better is to start a regular practice of reengaging with your weak and dormant ties. So here's a weekly routine to get you started:

1. Like the executives studied, list six to ten work colleagues with whom you used to have a strong relationship but who have since fallen by the wayside — include, at a minimum, those colleagues with whom you haven't had an in-depth conversation in two years.
2. Randomly select one person from the list. Roll dice or flip a coin if you have to, then email or call with an invitation to chat in person or via phone call.
3. Don't set an agenda. Don't say you are looking for something specific. Just say you would like to reconnect. During a free-flowing conversation, however, you are likely to talk about work matters, problems, opportunities, etc. Make a note of these and follow up anywhere you could help or might need help.

Practicing Online

Whether you consider yourself a technology Luddite and don't have a social media profile on websites like Facebook or LinkedIn or you've grown up alongside a digital presence, you are in luck. Most of these services have an option to import your email or smartphone's address book and send invitations to connect to anyone who is a match. If you have old contacts in there, then the service will automatically do step 1 and step 2 for you. It's still on you, however, to be brave and send the invitation to chat; the technology for that isn't quite here yet.

For a downloadable template to use when completing this exercise, go to http://davidburkus.com/resources/ and look for networking resources.

About the Author

David Burkus is a best-selling author, a sought-after speaker, and a business school professor.

David is the author of two previous books, *Under New Management* and *The Myths of Creativity*. He is a regular contributor to *Harvard Business Review,* and his work has been featured in *Fast Company,* the *Financial Times, Inc.* magazine, *Bloomberg BusinessWeek,* and the *Wall Street Journal* and on *CBS This Morning*. In 2015, he was named one of the emerging thought leaders most likely to shape the future of business by Thinkers50, the world's premier ranking of management thinkers.

David's innovative views on leadership have earned him invitations to speak to leaders from a variety of organizations. He has delivered keynote speeches and workshops for Fortune 500 companies such as Microsoft, Google, and Stryker and for governmental and military leaders at the US Naval Academy and the Naval Postgraduate School. His TED talk has been viewed over 1.7 million times.

When he's not speaking or writing, David is in the classroom. He is associate professor of leadership and innovation at Oral Roberts University, where he was recently named one of the "Top 40 Under 40 Professors Who Inspire." He serves on the advisory board of Fuse Corps, a nonprofit dedicated to making transformative and replicable change in local government.

David lives outside of Tulsa with his wife and their two boys.