

Why I Connect With Strangers on LinkedIn



By [Henrik Bresman](#), INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

In online and real-world networking, the same principle applies: You never know when you might make a crucial connection.

Social networks are like any other social environment: No two have exactly the same standards of acceptable behaviour. For good reasons, most of us would think twice before granting a Facebook friend request from a stranger. And since the workplace tends to have more rigid social standards than other areas of life, people commonly assume that their cache of connections on LinkedIn – the leading internet venue for professional networking – should be similarly exclusive, if not more so.

But among my LinkedIn connections are many people I've never met offline. It's not that I'm a fan of unsolicited sales pitches or the many other annoyances that can crop up on social media. As an organisational behaviour professor, I'm acting from a solid basis in research, which I am glad to share

with you.

Weak Ties Win the Day

In 1973, sociologist Mark Granovetter published a classic paper called “The Strength of Weak Ties,” which found that social capital, i.e. “who you know”, was nearly three times more effective in finding people jobs than “formal means” such as Help Wanted ads and recruiters. And most of the time, jobs were found not through close friends and relatives but through casual acquaintances, neighbours, and other “weak ties”.

Leveraging weak ties, Granovetter concluded, allows us to tap into knowledge not available in our inner circle, which tends to be composed of people like ourselves. Because weak ties lack trust, we cannot lean on them too heavily. But if we respect the nature of the relationship, these ties can extend our reach far beyond the contexts and communities we know best.

Weak ties, unlike strong ones, are by definition low maintenance, and thanks to LinkedIn, the upkeep of sizable professional weak-tie networks has become next to effortless. Most of us are accustomed to forming LinkedIn connections with people we’ve just met at a networking event or business function. So why automatically balk when someone forgoes the face-to-face introduction and approaches you directly through LinkedIn? A digital invitation may not spell the start of a beautiful friendship, but it’s sufficient to forge the weak tie that one day may bring you the job, investor, or client of your dreams.

Finding Your “Godfather”

There is no hard-and-fast way to know which of your weak ties will be the conduit for your next golden opportunity. That’s why it helps to make your network as diverse as possible. As a case in point, take this story from a former MBA student. The names in this tale have been changed, of course.

Mark was a fast-rising executive and self-styled turnaround artist who landed a great job heading up an underperforming internal auditing unit at a top aerospace company. Mark’s group of audit supervisors was responsible for collecting data, which were then processed by a team of assistants and their supervisor, Rachel. After months of trying his previously successful turnaround techniques, Mark was making no headway in fixing the unit’s problems. He needed help, but from whom?

Fully aware of his newbie status in the company, he ultimately yielded to the experience of his colleagues and asked them who they turned to for help and advice. They unanimously pointed to an unlikely oracle: not even Rachel but one of her direct reports, Tanya. “Tanya has been here forever and knows the system back to front,” Mark heard over and over. By taking Tanya at face value – as a low-ranking employee with little decision-making power – Mark had overlooked a key potential ally.

Naturally, he was eager to ask Tanya what she would do in his place, but despite her expertise and intimate knowledge of the organisation she had no concrete suggestions for him. Tanya was a particular kind of person found in most organisations, not versed in conventional leadership but an expert string-puller behind the scenes. Let’s call her a “Godfather” within the network. Getting on good terms with the Godfather produced swift results for Mark: Within six months, his unit was the most efficient in the entire department.

This example points up two basic rules of professional networks: 1) Power accrues to those in the organisation who are central to the network. 2) Power accrues to those who know the network.

Getting back to the question of how to manage your own network of professional contacts: Unless you have a good reason to believe otherwise, it may be the wisest course to treat everyone you encounter as a potential Godfather.

Play the Long Game

When I’m asked to admit a stranger to my LinkedIn network, one of the things I consider is whether there is any future scenario where having a weak tie to this person may come in handy. Perhaps he or she is deeply embedded in an industry or a country that isn’t vital to my career now, but could be important to its long-term growth. It would be a shame if rejecting a LinkedIn request caused you to lose out on a useful future resource. After all, if the new connection becomes a nuisance, getting rid of him or her is only a click away.

Language like this often strikes people as cold. Indeed, when I speak to groups about networking, the issue of instrumentality – treating people as tools to get what you want – always comes up. This is one of the major qualms some people have about online networking in particular. Is it wrong

to leverage a relationship with someone you haven't even met in person? Again, I would counsel readers to think long-term: Online or off-, true manipulators always eventually make enemies and social capital gravitates to the genuine and the generous. With that in mind, you may want to consider giving unfamiliar LinkedIn suitors the benefit of the doubt.

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