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## Management Review

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### The Power of *Reconnection* — How Dormant Ties Can Surprise You

# The Power of *Reconnection*— How Dormant Ties Can Surprise You

The Web has made it easier than ever to reconnect with long-lost professional colleagues. Does it pay to do so? New research says yes — and suggests that every smart manager will try.

BY DANIEL Z. LEVIN, JORGE WALTER AND J. KEITH MURNIGHAN

THE WORLD OF NETWORKING continues to expand. For years, people have been encouraged to build a strong, wide personal network to get information and keep connected. Facebook, LinkedIn, Google and other Internet sites have made everything about this task easier than ever. In particular, they have made access to long-lost friends, colleagues and acquaintances as easy as a few keystrokes. Now with relative ease, people can reactivate what may have seemed like dead connections.

Are those reconnections valuable — particularly in terms of the world of work? Not too long ago, both researchers and many members of the general public assumed that neglected relationships would lose their value and, ultimately, wither and die. And even though networks of contacts are obviously important for many things — finding a job, getting your work done, learning new things and providing social and emotional support — there is only so much time in a day. As a result, there is a limit to how many relationships a person can actively maintain, which is one reason why so many relationships become dormant in the first place.

Now, though, what used to happen only rarely — at reunions or chance encounters — can happen after a memory, a whim and minimal effort. Moreover, not only are reconnections so much easier to make; it turns out that the old presumption that dormant ties have no value was wrong. Reconnecting dormant ties provides a whole host of benefits,



## THE LEADING QUESTION

It's easier than ever to reconnect your dormant relationships. Is it worth it?

## FINDINGS

- ▶ Dormant ties are as valuable — and often even more valuable — than current ties.
- ▶ Insights from dormant ties tend to be more novel, and more efficient to get, than those from current ties.
- ▶ The pool of helpful dormant ties is surprisingly deep.



many of them unexpected.

Our research shows that reconnecting dormant relationships is more than just fun — it can be extremely useful. We prompted hundreds of executives to consult people whom they had not been in contact with for three years or more. We asked them to make the reconnection, in person or via telephone, and use their interactions to get information or advice that might help them on an important work project. Our results indicate that the advice that our executives received was as useful, and often even more useful, than the advice they received from their current relationships, and reconnections were, in many ways, more efficient than their everyday connections. In other words, reconnecting was a real bonanza.

In this article, we discuss why most managers, even today, tend to neglect the tremendous potential of their dormant relationships. We then describe why reconnecting dormant relationships is so valuable. Finally, we answer the most frequently asked questions about the dynamics of those reconnections.

### Why the Potential in Dormant Ties Goes Ignored

Research has shown that adults accumulate thousands of relationships over their lifetimes, but, prior to the Internet, they actively maintained no more than 100 or 200 at any given time.<sup>1</sup> Thus, most relationships in a person's network were necessarily dormant, but could potentially be reconnected. Obviously, not all reconnections will be useful, especially relationships that were consciously severed due to interpersonal conflict. For most people, though, these are relatively rare; most dormant ties simply fade away, the result of people changing locations, switching jobs and leading hectic, busy lives. Some dormant contacts may lack relevant expertise or the motivation to help. But even then, most managers have hundreds, if not thousands, of potential sources of support and advice that they can tap. (See "Two Kinds of Relationships, Two Kinds of Value," p. 50.)

In the past, the main obstacle to reconnecting was search costs. Before the Internet, it was difficult to stay informed about old contacts. How would you track down your old high school friends if they did not join its alumni association? Thus, even active pursuit of a dormant tie often was not easy. This obstacle to reconnections has mostly vanished, however. Searching for dormant contacts today — using Google and social networking websites like LinkedIn and Facebook — is much easier than it once was. The propensity to reconnect with previously lost contacts is soaring.<sup>2</sup> Yet these reconnections are mostly personal; they are rarely work related. A big question, then, is why work-related reconnections remain so rare.

Nowadays, the biggest obstacle, especially for busy executives, is finding the time to reconnect. But even beyond that, the executive MBAs in our study (see "About the Research") reported considerable trepidation when we asked them to reconnect:

*When I saw this assignment in the case packet, I groaned. If there are dormant contacts, they are dormant for a reason, right? Why would I want to contact them?*

Some admitted to simple inertia, others reported embarrassment about not staying in contact, and yet others voiced their fear of coming across as being opportunistic. Another, unspoken reason that we suspect

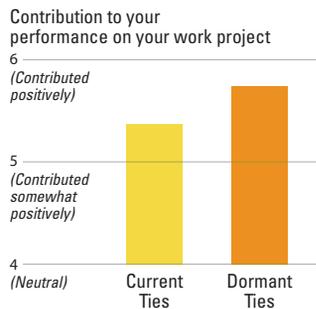
### ABOUT THE RESEARCH

To investigate the value in reconnecting dormant relationships, we asked 224 executives in four executive MBA classes — three in the United States, one in Canada — to reconnect with two people whom they had not communicated with for at least three years, but who might have advice that would help them on a major, ongoing work project with significance for their career.<sup>1</sup> The first person they were to contact was someone with whom they had once had a close relationship; the second person was someone with whom they had once had a weak or distant relationship. After their reconnections, we asked our executives a series of questions about their two reconnections. We compared their assessments, including the value they said they received from each one, with two randomly selected, current relationships (one close, one distant) that they had already consulted in the course of their work project. We measured *value* as the extent to which five types of actionable knowledge<sup>ii</sup> — that is, solutions, referrals, problem-solving assistance, validating the executive's ideas and providing legitimacy — contributed to the executive's project performance, as well as the relationship's overall contribution. We also measured novelty, trust and shared perspective. To rule out alternative explanations, we controlled statistically — including in the bar charts shown — for a variety of factors related to the work project (its duration, how revolutionary it was), to the executives themselves (their age, experience), to their organizations (size), to the characteristics of the relationship (the demographic similarity of the two parties), the context (people in common), the knowledge source (perceived competence) and their interaction (in person or not).

To examine the value of the depth of a pool of dormant ties, we asked a different group of 116 executives, drawn from the same sources, to think of an important project at work and rank-order their top 10 reconnection choices. We then asked executives to reconnect with and ask for project-related advice from their first choice plus another contact that we randomly selected from their ranked list. We measured value in the same way as in our first study.

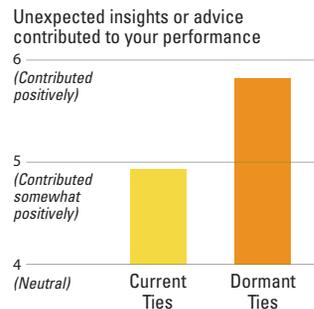
## RECONNECTED TIES BEAT CURRENT ONES

Asked to rate and compare the value of advice received from dormant versus current contacts, executives reported that dormant ties delivered more.



## DORMANT TIES PROVIDE MORE NOVELTY

One reason dormant ties are valuable: Research reveals that dormant ties, compared to current ones, are greater sources of unexpectedly novel insights.



was underneath almost everyone's reservations was the simple reason that most people, at least at one point in their lives, don't want to impose, personally, on other people. They have the idea that a "cold call" is rude, and should be reserved for annoying telemarketers.

### The Reconnection Payoffs: Novelty, Efficiency, Residual Trust and Shared Perspective

In spite of their initial hesitation, almost all of the executives in our studies report that they have received tremendous value from reconnecting their dormant relationships. In fact, the advice our executives received from their dormant contacts was as useful, and often even more useful, than the advice they receive from their current relationships. The same executive who "groaned" about the assignment to reconnect, for instance, indicated:

*[T]his experience has been eye-opening for me. For one, it has shown me how much potential I have in my Rolodex.*

Another executive admitted how surprised he was at the value he received from reconnecting:

*Before contacting them I thought that they would not have too much to provide beyond what I had already thought, but I was proved wrong. I was very surprised by the fresh ideas and the similarities with the problems they had dealt with in their own organizations, and by the confidence I got after hearing a highly experienced executive having thoughts that were similar to mine.*

Our research helped us identify three reasons why reconnecting is so valuable. First, dormant ties are great sources of unexpectedly *novel* insights. After all, just because people lose touch does not mean that they go into hibernation. Instead, they continue to encounter new and different experiences, observations and information, which makes them particularly valuable resources for information and advice. Reconnecting can tap into a wealth of knowledge that other people have discovered.

Second, reconnecting is tremendously *efficient*, as it imposes few constraints and requires only a minimal investment of time. That was a result we did not expect: Reconnection conversations are shorter but just as helpful as everyday conversations; that is, they offer more "bang for the buck." In addition, after reconnecting, these relationships demand only minimal maintenance for the same reason they required no maintenance at all during dormancy: These are not people you see every day. So even if these relationships do not slip completely back into dormancy after a reconnection, they only rarely become a high-frequency contact.

Third, reconnecting a dormant relationship is not like starting a relationship from scratch. When people reconnect, they still have *feelings of trust and a shared perspective* — which are critical for receiving valuable knowledge from someone — and our research shows that these feelings do not fade much, if at all. Thus, unlike most scholars' and managers' expectations, our research shows that the old feelings and sense of connection typically come rushing back quickly. As one executive remarked:

*I also feel comfortable talking to [him]... I didn't need to guess what his intentions were ... there was mutual trust that we built years ago that made our conversation today [go] smoother.*

The fact that feelings of trust and shared perspective decay only minimally was especially true for relationships that had once been close. As expected, dormant relationships that had never been more than distant did not share these benefits; however, they did provide more novel insights more efficiently, so they also offered tremendous benefit, albeit in different ways. Overall, dormant ties were substantively and emotionally valuable, whether they used to be close or distant.

As a result, despite executives' worries that their dormant relationships might want to remain dormant, their old contacts tended to be willing, able and even eager to help them with the problems they were facing at work.

Most managers have at least a thousand dormant relationships. While they can't all be useful, our research suggests that the dormant ties that come to mind easily all tend to be worthwhile. When we asked executives to list and then rank-order the 10 dormant relationships they would most like to reconnect with for work-related advice, each of the 10 turned out to be equally useful. We originally thought that usefulness would drop off as people went down their list, from number one to number 10, but the data did not show that. Instead, the value of reconnecting

continued to be high throughout the entire list. That suggests that people can benefit from reconnecting with a fairly large number of their dormant ties: The benefits don't all reside in the very top.

The bottom line is clear: Reconnect! People do not use their dormant ties as much as they should or as much as they could. There are hidden benefits walking around in your past, and reconnecting is easier than ever, even for busy managers and executives.

### Reconnecting Dormant Relationships – the FAQs

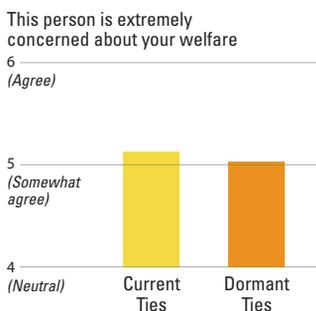
Given the initial social anxiety that study participants expressed (and that readers might experience as well) about calling on lapsed acquaintances, friends or former colleagues, we now address a series of frequently asked questions about what to expect.

#### Do older, more experienced managers benefit more from reconnecting dormant ties?

Our findings indicate that reconnecting dormant relationships is more valuable for older executives. We surmise that older executives naturally have a larger pool of dormant ties, as they have had more time to accumulate and then lose contacts — and the larger the pool, the more chances there are for obtaining particularly relevant and useful information. For instance, when we conducted our dormant ties study with undergraduate and MBA students, we found that they got much less benefit from the process than our (older) executive MBAs: Positive results for

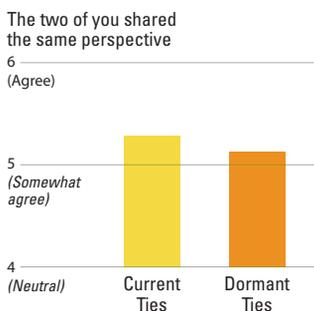
#### RECONNECTED TIES: TRUST FADES LITTLE (IF AT ALL)

When people reconnect, they still carry old feelings of trust. As this graph shows, trust levels reported by reconnecting managers are nearly as high for old relationships as for current ones.



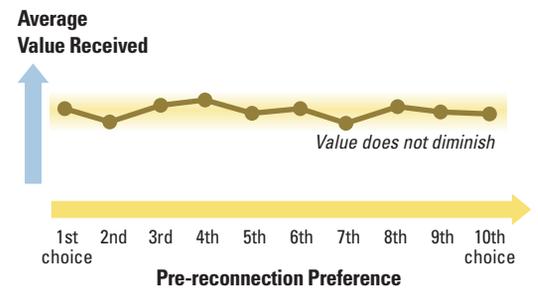
#### RECONNECTED TIES: SHARED PERSPECTIVE FADES LITTLE (IF AT ALL)

The research revealed that shared perspective, like trust, also had diminished very little when a once-strong but long-dormant tie was renewed.



#### THE POOL OF USEFUL DORMANT TIES IS SURPRISINGLY DEEP

When executives were asked to rank-order their top 10 dormant contacts and renew ties with them all, it turned out that the 10th most valued contact offered as many rewards as the 1st.



MBA students were often hit-or-miss, and positive results for undergraduate students were relatively rare. In addition, within each population, the older the person, the more useful they found reconnecting to be. By their late 20s or early 30s, though, most people seem to have created a reservoir of dormant ties sufficiently large to be useful.

**Aren't dormant relationships just like very distant relationships?** Dormant relationships do resemble distant relationships, in that they both require minimal maintenance — which makes them particularly efficient — and they both have access to novel information. They differ, however, in two important ways: First, dormant relationships offer a better chance of receiving novel information than distant ties do, because dormant ties have had more time to encounter different experiences and accumulate new knowledge during the years of dormancy as compared with distant but current contacts. Second, unlike distant relationships, dormant relationships that used to be close tend to

retain most if not all of the previously developed trust and shared understanding, which is particularly helpful for any kind of knowledge exchange.

**Isn't this what happens on Facebook, at high school reunions, etc.?** Lately, many people reconnect their dormant ties for social reasons. That is obviously valuable in a personal sense. Our research, however, is pointed toward value in a work-related sense, involving project-related information or advice. Thus, our finding is that dormant ties are great sources of new and useful work-related information, unlike the mostly social interactions on Facebook.

**What happens to these relationships after reconnections? Do they stay connected? Is there any pressure to keep them maintained?** In a follow-up study, we have found that, although our executives had high hopes for staying connected, communication during the year after a reconnection was typically infrequent. However, that was true for their current relationships, too. As one executive put it:



## TWO KINDS OF RELATIONSHIPS, TWO KINDS OF VALUE

Social capital refers to people's ability to benefit from their relationships and the resources that are embedded in those relationships. Research on social capital has generally distinguished two different types of relationships and their distinct benefits.<sup>iii</sup> The "bonding view" emphasizes strong, emotionally close relationships, which tend to nurture trust and a shared perspective. People in these close relationships are motivated to assist and cooperate with one another; they also tend to have similar goals and values, and their common language and understanding enable them immediately to understand one another and the knowledge that they exchange. People in close relationships are thus more willing and able to engage in a productive knowledge transfer.

That does not mean, however, that only relationships that are emotionally close are beneficial. The "bridging view" focuses on weaker connections between more casual acquaintances in more distant circles. These arm's-length relationships require less time and energy to maintain. Also, unlike close ties, where people tend to think alike and have access to similar sources of information, casual acquaintances tend to experience a different social milieu, which gives them access to novel information, fresh ways of thinking and unexpected insights that they can share quickly and efficiently (with minimal relationship maintenance costs).

*I believe that renewing dormant relationships is a worthwhile effort. Unfortunately, between 50 hour workweeks, [the executive MBA] program and two kids, there is very limited time I am able to give toward any additional relationships.*

The fact that reconnected relationships do not always become fully renewed and maintained is not necessarily a bad thing. If reconnected dormant relationships were maintained on a regular basis, they would become just like current relationships, and their unique benefits would probably dissipate over time.

Nevertheless, the executives in our research never reported any ill will that arose in the year after reconnecting with old business contacts. Instead, they were unanimous in seeing the experience as positive. In addition, even after reconnecting, dormant relationships do not demand much maintenance; that is, they remain incredibly efficient in terms of time and effort.

### What if you keep coming back again and again?

Reconnecting the same dormant tie repeatedly may run the risk of undermining trust, especially if renewed maintenance expectations are not met or if reconnection only occurs for blatantly self-serving purposes.

### Rather than investing in relationships, should we make shallow connections and then let them slip into dormancy?

Wayne Baker, a well-known network researcher at the University of Michigan, has some particularly pertinent advice for people who consider this kind of opportunistic networking behavior: "If we create networks with the sole intention of *getting something*, we won't succeed. We can't *pursue* the benefits of networks; the benefits ensue from investments in meaningful activities and relationships."<sup>3</sup> Thus, engaging in the normal act of reciprocity, and providing useful information to your dormant ties, too, makes for a particularly useful, mutually beneficial interaction. In other words, no one wants to help a selfish jerk.

**Instead of forging new relationships, should we focus on reconnecting old ones?** Salespeople know that "cold calling" has a notoriously low success rate. Also, forging new relationships may require considerable upfront investment. Al-

though reconnecting dormant ties clearly benefits from retained feelings of trust and shared perspective — advantages that new relationships would not have — limiting yourself only to old relationships would be silly. Instead, we expect that most people would benefit most from pursuing a balanced portfolio of current, new and (reconnected) dormant relationships.

## Conclusion

The overall takeaway from our study is simple but profound: The next time you have a problem or issue at work, dust off your Rolodex and get on the phone, Facebook or LinkedIn. In a word: Reconnect. Besides finding the experience personally enriching, odds are good that you will also gain efficient access to novel knowledge from a trusted source.

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