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YOUR KINDLE NOTES FOR:

Friend of a Friend . . . : Understanding the Hidden Networks That Can Transform Your Life and Your Career

by David Burkus

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UNDERSTANDING THE HIDDEN NETWORKS THAT
CAN TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE AND YOUR CAREER
DAVID BURKUS

34 Highlights

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 142

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 200

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 279

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 327

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 334

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 350

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.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 364

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 381

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 487

So here’s a weekly routine to get you started: 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. 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. 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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 669

The entire collection of humans, 7 billion strong and counting, is basically one interconnected network. Everyone is a friend of a friend (even if we haven't met that friend yet). Every new person we meet opens up our ability to navigate that network, and any given person can open us up to an entirely new world.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 743

We often think that the way to success is to just stay in our lane, climb up the corporate ladder or become an expert in our field, and focus on meeting ever more powerful people inside our industry or sector. Research into networks reveals that, surprisingly, the most connected people inside a tight group within a single industry are less valuable than the people who span the gaps between groups and broker information back and forth. This finding has implications for how we manage our careers and how we manage our organizations.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 859

In one study, Ronald Burt demonstrated that brokers between groups are often paid more, are promoted more often, and have the best chance of coming up with innovative new ideas.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 897

We are told, and often tell others, to work hard, keep your head down, and just focus on climbing the ladder. But taken together, the research on structural holes suggests that jumping from ladder to ladder is a more effective strategy, and that lateral or even downward moves across an organization are more promising in the longer run because that is how new and diverse contacts are developed. In contrast, the traditional advice might actually bring diminishing returns as more and more new contacts turn out to be redundant.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 956

Perhaps McChrystal's most controversial action, at least at first, was the embedding program. It worked like an exchange program for military operators. McChrystal would take someone from one team like the Navy SEALs and place him with a unit of Army Special Forces. This idea was met with a lot of resistance at first. Most objectors cited how different the units' training and operational norms were—so different that these exchanges could create real liabilities. And initially, that may have been true. But over time the exchanged soldiers learned the cultural norms and behaviors of the units they were embedded in. They built positive relationships and gained the perspective on the overall mission that could only be seen from inside that unit. When they returned to their home unit, their positive experience and new perspective would spread to the other members of the team. Likewise, the unit in which those soldiers were embedded would see them as representative of the entire unit from which they came. Over time the relationship ties between units strengthened dramatically, allowing them to operate alongside each other even more impressively. "Bonds of trust began to form," McChrystal explained. "People from different tribes began to see increasingly familiar faces. Even strangers were now, by extension, part of a familiar and trusted unit."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 974

The research on structural holes sends a clear signal: there is real value to be captured by bringing two unconnected groups together. You might not always be able to see that value right away, but as you become the broker who fills the structural holes, you will have a greater chance of finding the right opportunity.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1001

While much of modern business writing warns about the dangers of silos, the truth is more complicated. Research suggests that, indeed, becoming too siloed can be damaging to businesses and careers, but at the same time, not being siloed enough can be just as damaging to growth. The most successful individuals know that they need clusters of similar people who can help them develop and grow, but also that they can't spend all of their time inside of clusters. They oscillate between being part of a silo and reaching out into the broader network.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1041

Given these examples, and what we know about the importance of structural holes, it's tempting to look back at the Venetian government's forced relocation and assume that the siloed glassmakers would suffer on Murano. But that's not what happened. Instead, the art of glassmaking flourished in its new home. While the glassmakers were technically competitors, their unique trade (and the tendency among their families to intermarry) led them to share information and ideas. Techniques were refined, and creativity flourished. Innovations in the craft became commonplace, and the creativity of their artwork exploded. It was on Murano that glassmakers found a way to make optically clear glass, as well as glass with threads of gold running through it. It was on Murano that glassmakers discovered how to make chandeliers, as well as fake gemstones made from glass. Murano, and by extension Venice, quickly developed a monopoly on glassmaking as Murano glass became a status symbol throughout Europe. The glassmakers themselves were elevated to a place of high prestige and became (or saw their daughters marry) the most prominent citizens of the city. The island of Murano even became known as the Isle of Glass. And Murano isn't unique. For every example of the damaging and isolating effects of silos there's an example of how clusters in a social network help unleash creative new ideas or make individuals and teams more efficient and productive.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1089

In other words, humans seem to want to be clustered, even when it's not good for them. But does that mean it's always bad? Despite how we may currently feel about silos and clusters, recent research suggests that we need some level of clustering and silos to help spread information and opportunity. Damon Centola, a University of Pennsylvania professor and director of the university's Network Dynamics Group, discovered that, quite counterintuitively, breaking down all group boundaries may actually slow the spread of knowledge across a population, not speed it up.¹⁰ Some level of clustering actually makes it easier for best practices, complex ideas, and new opportunities to move across a network.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1142

Taken altogether, this research tells a much different tale about silos and clusters. There's a reason for our tendency toward transitivity—our desire to gravitate toward silos. Clusters are good for us, and good for our growth. The trick is to make sure we're not so clustered that we ignore opportunities to be structural holes. At the same time, we need to make certain that pursuing our goals as brokers between clusters doesn't leave us clusterless. Pulling that trick off can be difficult. In many industries, the balance of close-knit groups and arm's-length ties has already been decided. If that's the case in your industry, you might just have to create your own solution.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1223

Rather than being trapped, they all found that being in a small cluster—part of a small group of similar people—can be vital for growth and development. Likewise, the research suggests that industry networks and geographic communities benefit as well from faster knowledge-sharing when some level of clustering is in the mix. However, the trick is to not get so comfortable inside a cluster that we become stuck in that silo. Finding a real and meaningful balance between deep community and wide networks is vital for professional success. We need clusters to help develop our skills and knowledge so that we can have an impact that resonates across the network.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1228

Despite the widespread warnings in the modern business literature about silos, research suggests that having a regular cluster with whom you interact, share, learn, grow, and develop is a vital part of a successful career. The most connected, most successful individuals oscillate between working with a variety of teams and acting as bridges from their primary team to elsewhere in the organization or network.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1264

Knowing that clusters and collaboration are important, we can easily assume that the best teams are those that have stuck together for a long time—those that have performed well again and again. But research offers a different lesson, revealing that many of the most successful teams are successful only because they are temporary—they meet for a time and then disband, with some members going to other teams. In the end, having a large network and a tight-knit team isn't as valuable as having a loose network and temporary teams.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1441

So many of us approach building a network by searching for trusted individuals with whom we'll work forever. We tend to assume that the best teams are ones that have held fast together for a long time. But the hard research on the nature of teams and networks suggests that the best and most productive teams are only temporary.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1467

When we look out at our network and the networks of others, it's easy to assume that all our networks are around the same size. Research into human networks, however, reveals that some people have drastically more

connections than whatever would be an average—they are super-connectors. But the evidence also suggests that most of us have the ability to grow our network large enough to become a super-connector. We just need to grow it carefully.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1564

But there is a problem with Dunbar's number when it comes to estimating the size of a particular human's social network—two problems really. The first is that Dunbar's research mostly focused on the tribes and groups of nonhumans (monkeys and apes) and then extrapolated that data to estimate an average for humans. The bigger problem, however, is that 150 just doesn't seem to be the right number. Moreover, the real number may shatter our concept of "average."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1577

They found that the average (mean) network size of those surveyed was 611 people. Taken by itself, this number is dramatically larger than Dunbar's estimate. But another insight hidden in the data is even more dramatic. While the mean network size was 611 contacts, the median was 472 contacts. This difference might not seem like a big deal to you or me, but to a statistician it's a clear signal.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1589

While a lot of people had network sizes around 600 people, a few had dramatically larger networks. Those few people with massive networks skewed the distribution into this power law shape. To be fair to Dunbar, he did hedge his bets when it came to calculating the number. He actually allowed for a few different numbers, which increased with orders of magnitude as the list of contacts became less intimate. In each case, however, he also assumed that there was an upper limit to how many contacts any one person could have in their network. There may well be an upper limit, but it's nowhere near the average.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1613

But as we'll see, being super-connected isn't just a way to extract value from your network. Creating new and valuable connections inside your existing network is a useful way to become a super-connector.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1634

"How come you're never in the office?"²¹ Harbinger had watched as other lawyers in the firm worked all hours of the day and even into the weekend. Yet Dave was never around and looked like he was earning the same money as a partner. Dave decided to return the candor. "I bring in the deals," he said. "I bring in clients. I bring in customers. I've got the book of business."²² Dave explained that he didn't bill for nearly as many hours as the other lawyers, but he made up for it in compensation with his referral bonuses. Dave saw his job less as working long hours in the office and more as working his contacts to generate new clients for the firm. So while others were working away to grow their tally of billable hours, Dave was working as a "rainmaker" to grow his tally of contacts and connections that might someday help the firm.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1662

In fact, if they weren't a good guest, my default strategy was to try and help them."24 Whenever he met new people, he would map through his own network as he talked to them and try to find someone to connect them with who could help them.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1681

If you have never felt comfortable making introductions, here is a helpful format you can utilize in almost any situation, using any medium: Start with a brief line introducing each person by name ("John, meet Jane; Jane, meet John"). Briefly cover the background of each person ("Jane is . . ."), with roughly a paragraph's worth of information per person. Add a short comment about why you think these two people would benefit from connecting ("You both work in the same industry . . ."). End with a brief call to action, specifying what should happen next and who should initiate it ("John, would you be kind enough to jump on a phone call with Jane in the next week?").

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1701

We tend to look at super-connectors, with their large-scale networks, and marvel at how much work it must take to build and maintain such a collection of contacts. But research reveals a surprising fact about connections: they get easier to make over time. The more connections you have, the more likely you are to make new connections. So building a valuable network might seem like a lot of work now, but eventually it will become effortless.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1790

As your network grows, as the number of your connections increases, the process of meeting new people becomes easier. Not because you get more practiced at making introductions, but because introductions are more likely to find you. It's a phenomenon that network scientists call preferential attachment, and it explains why the most connected are most likely to stay that way, but also why building your network will take less and less work over time.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1919

To make sure your event is a success, there are a few things you have to consider: The size: At a minimum, invite six people. A gathering any smaller than that can make new people feel left out as old friends reconnect. At a maximum, make it no more than twelve people. Any more than that and not everyone will get a chance to interact with every other guest. The guests: Ideally, you want a good mix of old friends and new contacts. You can do that by reaching out cold to people you want to invite or asking for an introduction through a friend. If you don't know such a person, then ask your guests to bring a plus-one—not in the romantic sense but a person that the entire group would benefit from knowing. The location: Your home is a great choice, as it's personal and comfortable enough to encourage people to linger. If you are traveling or need to host the event in a restaurant, make sure you coordinate with the manager ahead of time to ensure that you get a large table in a quiet area (and to make sure everyone is clear on how the bill will be settled). The frequency: If it's your first event ever, don't worry so much about this one. However, once you try it and it works, you need to think about

how frequently (weekly, twice a month, monthly, quarterly) you would like to hold events. Just one time is not enough to leverage preferential attachment.

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