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How to Reconnect for Maximum Impact

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[MANAGING YOUR CAREER]

How to Reconnect for Maximum Impact

Research has found that rekindling dormant professional relationships can offer tremendous career benefits to executives. But a new study shows that some reconnections are more beneficial than others — and that executives often don't select the best reconnection choices.

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

Reconnecting with long-lost or dormant contacts can be very valuable — both professionally and personally. But choosing from among hundreds of former contacts can be challenging. We find that executives, when left to their own devices, don't take full advantage of their opportunities to reconnect. And when they do reconnect, they tend to focus on comfort and not on reconnections that might offer the best advice.

As the nature of work and professional life becomes more varied, people accumulate an ever-increasing number of *former* colleagues and contacts. Although the Internet and social media have made it fairly easy for people to maintain their relationships, most managers find it impossible to stay in active communication with everybody. Inevitably, they lose touch with many of their former contacts. When these previously valuable relationships become dormant for several years, they can seem like they no longer exist. But unmaintained relationships are not dead at all: They can be revitalized fairly easily.

Our original study on reconnecting such dormant ties (described in our 2011 *MIT Sloan Management Review* article, “The Power of Reconnection — How Dormant Ties Can Surprise You”) investigated the interactions of hundreds of executives. (See “Related Research.”) We found that reconnecting with people from previous chapters of one's life (such as former colleagues, old friends, and other associates) is as valuable, if not more so, than



connecting with currently active ties. There were three main reasons behind this effect. First, it turns out that dormant ties are great sources of unexpectedly novel insights and ideas. After all, the individuals were not hibernating while you were out of touch; they were out in the world, doing and learning new things, so they can trigger new ideas that are often more valuable than the “same old, same old” from the people in your current network. Second, reconnecting is an efficient investment of time. Rather than requiring lengthy conversations, interactions with dormant ties are often relatively short, delivering good “bang for your buck” — obviously very good news for busy executives. Third, we noted that reconnecting a dormant relationship is qualitatively different from starting a relationship from scratch. Old feelings of trust and a common perspective do not fade away and are rekindled almost immediately.

Because managers typically have hundreds or possibly thousands of dormant ties, we designed our latest study

to explore *how* managers should tap into their vast networks — specifically, how to decide with whom to reconnect. To investigate the value associated with different choices, we asked 156 executives from four Executive MBA classes — two in the United States, two in Canada — to seek advice on an important work project from two of their dormant ties: their first, most preferred choice and a second person randomly selected from their list of 10 preferred choices. We then asked the executives to respond to two surveys — one taken before they reconnected with their contacts and the other after their reconnections. This two-stage research design allowed us to make causal inferences about the executives' advice-seeking preferences, the value of their reconnection choices, and the types of reconnections that were most valuable in this context.

The participants came from a variety of industries and sought advice on a wide range of subjects, including how to design compensation systems, raise equity capital, enter new markets, manage one's career, and handle a difficult boss.

Beyond getting a fresh perspective, some benefits were completely unanticipated. For example, one executive reached out to a dormant contact for advice on a new product design intended for a particular customer. The executive discovered that his former colleague not only knew the customer but also that the proposed design was not going to fit inside

the customer's packaging. Based on this feedback, the executive was able to redesign the product and save tens of thousands of dollars.

Our executives assessed the *value* they received in terms of the contribution to their project performance, specifically the contribution of different types of useful knowledge (solutions, referrals, problem-solving assistance, validating of ideas, legitimacy, and overall). Prior to reconnecting, executives assessed three indicators of novel insights and ideas (in other words, novelty): how briefly they had known their contacts, how infrequently they had communicated with them before their relationship went dormant, and the contacts' organizational rank or status relative to the executives'. We also measured each dormant contact's expected trustworthiness and willingness to help the executives on their

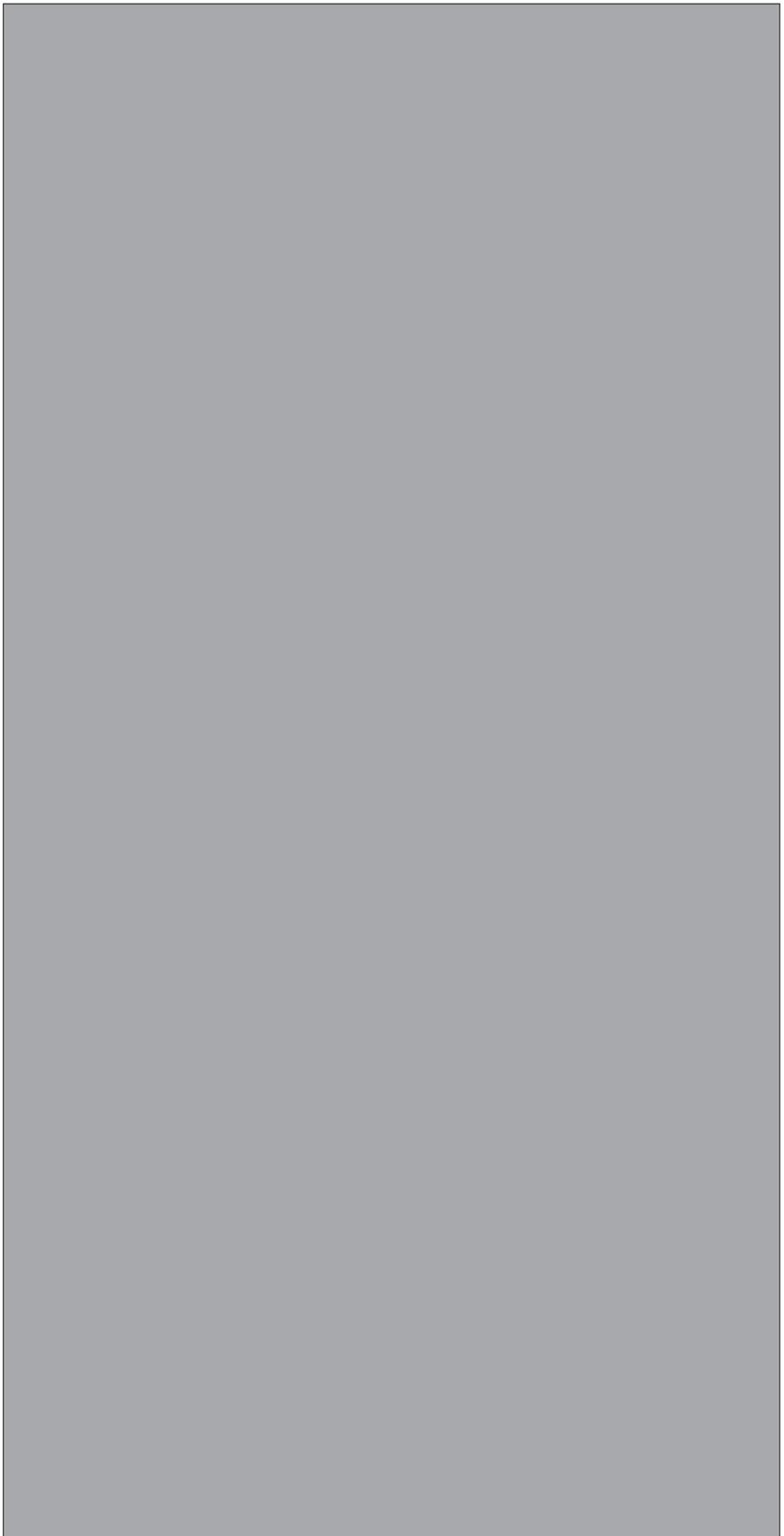
RELATED RESEARCH

▶ J. Walter, D.Z. Levin, and J.K. Murnighan, "Reconnection Choices: Selecting the Most Valuable (vs. Most Preferred) Dormant Ties," *Organization Science* 26, no.5 (September-October 2015): 1447-1465.

▶ D.Z. Levin, J. Walter, and J.K. Murnighan, "The Power of Reconnection — How Dormant Ties Can Surprise You," *MIT Sloan Management Review* 52, no. 3 (spring 2011): 45-50.

work project (in other words, engagement). To eliminate alternative explanations, we controlled statistically for a variety of other factors related to the executives themselves (such as their gender, age, and experience level), their work project (for example, how incremental vs. revolutionary it was), and characteristics of the dormant tie (for instance, shared perspective, physical proximity, and perceived ability). We also conducted a randomized experiment that utilized 344 U.S. participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online labor market, to examine whether anxiety about reconnecting explained people's reconnection preferences.

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Maximizing Your Benefits

Some of our new findings were fairly straightforward. For example, older managers reported receiving more value from renewing dormant ties than younger managers did. The average reconnection by a 30-year-old manager yielded a rating of 5.16 (on a 1 to 7 scale) for value received, but this increased to 5.60 for a 50-year-old manager — probably because older managers had so many more dormant ties to choose from. Executives also rated face-to-face interactions as more valuable (5.63 on the 1 to 7 scale) than phone conversations (5.29).

However, the new research and additional analysis were especially revealing, as our executives displayed a strong bias to choose potential reconnections that turned out *not* to be the most valuable. Specifically, we found the following:

- **The most valuable reconnections were people who provided novelty and engaged fully.** Generally, it was better to reconnect with higher-status contacts and people the executives had *not* spent a lot of time with in the past; this allowed for more novel insights. In addition, participants' expectations of who would care about them and be willing to help turned out to be predictive of the value they received, as this engagement allowed for authentic and productive conversations rather than

just a shallow catching up. Although nearly all reconnections (94%) provided at least some valuable advice, our executives got significantly more value from dormant ties with high levels of expected novelty and engagement. (See “Reconnections Done Right.”)

- **Respondents exhibited systematic biases that resulted in suboptimal reconnection decisions.** Rather than reconnecting with contacts who would provide the best available advice concerning work projects — in other words, focusing on how to achieve engagement and novelty — respondents systematically preferred people whom they saw as less intimidating and more familiar. In other words, they chose the more comfortable rather than the most effective path.
- **Emotions played a bigger role than we expected.** Many of our executives were generally anxious about reconnecting, and this diminished their willingness to consider new options. When pressed, they gravitated toward contacts with whom they had extensive histories of prior interaction, even if that meant missing out on potential value.
- **Ironically, the anxiety that managers felt about reconnecting was usually misplaced.** We asked executives after they reconnected whether — apart from any value received — they enjoyed it and had fun reconnecting. They were resoundingly positive about their reconnection

experiences: 90% enjoyed the experience and had fun, 6% were neutral, and only 4% did not. One respondent concluded:

From a personal standpoint, I believe that I completely underestimated their reactions to assisting me with my project and hence was worried for no reason. . . . Though nervous at first, I am now looking forward to maintaining both these connections, since I believe it will be beneficial for all of us — on a business and personal level.

One year later, this manager was still in touch with — and benefiting from — her reconnections.

Reconnecting with dormant ties in your social network can lead to enduring value, often more than you can obtain from your active ties. It can also be enjoyable. However, to get the most out of reconnecting, you have to seek out former contacts who are likely to engage with you and to provide you with novelty. To achieve more novelty, this may mean going outside your usual comfort zone and reaching out to higher-status people or to people you didn't know very well to begin with. But these are exactly the kinds of reconnections that can best point you in a new direction, tell you something you don't already know, and help you make the most of dormant connections in your network.

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RECONNECTIONS DONE RIGHT

Asked to rate the value of advice received from an average reconnection on a work project, executives were somewhat positive. But they said they got the *most* value from reconnecting with people who offered high levels of both novelty and engagement.

