



Strong ties, weak ties and Dunbar's number

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Strong ties, weak ties and Dunbar's number

If you've ever read Malcolm Gladwell's book 'The Tipping Point' you may well remember Dunbar's number. A British anthropologist, Robin Dunbar studied social groupings in apes and noticed that the size of an effective, stable and cohesive social group seemed to be directly linked to the size of part of the brain, the neocortex. Hard work and a process of extrapolation led Dunbar to suggest a similar phenomenon was true for humans and that the optimal number of individuals in a group was 148 (rounded up usually to 150). There is plenty of evidence to suggest that this number means something in the real world as well as Dunbar found when he looked at observable group sizes for humans. The average size of a Neolithic farming village was 150, the basic unit of a professional army since Roman times has been 150 etc. etc.

The struggle to keep in contact

So does this have any relevance in the 21st century? Perhaps. As a society we look back with fondness to the (ideal of) old social groupings based around communities, families and jobs. These no longer exist in the main and most of us now struggle to keep relationships going with friends and family dispersed around the world who we physically meet only infrequently. In business we spend a lot of our time trying to keep in touch with clients, ex colleagues and others in the face of more work, less time and often geographic and time zone challenges.

New tools – a help of a hindrance?

The number of ways in which we can keep in touch have exploded in recent years. E-mail, SMS and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn provide amazing opportunities to interact. So surely this means communicating has never been easier. Perhaps... but does that make building meaningful relationships any easier? Probably not and in fact we need to go back to Dunbar's number to see why.

The idea that a group of 150 has some relevance is based on the notion that, in such a group, individuals know each other well, develop strong social ties and ultimately trust each other. These kinds of strong ties are perhaps less present in today's society. I know that I personally have significantly fewer than 150 'strong' ties (people I really trust and who I think trust me) but I probably have a much larger number of 'weak' ties, perhaps as many as 1,000.

Strong and weak links

As social media develop at an ever faster pace, it's easy to believe that the contacts we are all making are all equal. But are they? The ease with which we can connect and keep in touch can lead to a 'quantity over quality' result where we come to believe that we are part of a mass group of like-minded people when in fact the connections are very fragile and tenuous indeed.

Leaders in thinking about social media are recognising that there are in fact huge advantages in large networks with loose connections; if you travel to a new country or city you will have local knowledge and

perhaps even a guide available to you. You can associate easily with people who share a sporting interest or used to work for the same company. That all builds weak links and is invaluable to many of us. But Dunbar's thinking still has merit when it comes down to trust. We simply can't process the necessary amount of information to allow us to get to know and keep knowing more than a certain number of people as part of a mutual network of trust. I have no doubt that there is a limit and I would even suggest that with a busy world and a huge number of weak connections the true number of strong connections we should be looking at is probably well below 100.

So what?

Here are a few ways in which we may want to think about strong and weak ties:

1. If 150 (or significantly fewer!) is the number of people that we can maintain good social ties with then it makes sense to focus on that number and make sure we are investing the time and energy to build those relationships properly so that there remains mutual trust. Some of these will be work related relationships, others will be purely personal and for most there will be some overlap between the two. These are the people you should be spending your time with.
2. Recognise that with the best will in the world, most of our relationships are probably loose ties. These may well be very important to nurture because of the social or business benefits but it will not be possible to treat most of these people in the same way as your strong ties. So don't pretend; we all know if we are in one of these relationships and we know how superficial they are. That's fine but be honest; what can grate is when we try to make these relationships something they are not. Over familiarity doesn't work.
3. Think about how you get on to the 100/150 list for people who are important to you. If its family or a friend make that extra effort to meet or to call when you have time to talk. If it's a business contact then make sure you earn their trust not just a place in their contact book!
4. Think about your own personal 'brand'. Whatever your reason for keeping in touch it helps to be memorable and authentic. So try in your communication to put the effort in to help others get to know you. Be honest and open and don't over-promise. Offer to provide advice or help and don't always expect something back.

A Word from the Partners

We hope you've found this piece interesting and useful, and we'd love to hear your thoughts on this subject. If you would like us to explore this subject in more detail, or if you would like to suggest other topics, please don't hesitate to contact us.

We look forward to working with you.

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