

Want a strong career? Start nurturing those weak ties

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by *Flavian DeLima*

During the last federal election, I recall a candidate from one of the political parties making rounds door to door talking with residents on a Sunday afternoon. Of course, he was seeking support, but he also wanted to connect with people on a personal level. After he was elected, I remember thinking that developing those personal relationships must have had something to do with his success.

Do engineers and technical professionals need to think about networking skills for professional success? An article published in Harvard Business Review titled How Bell Labs creates star performers by Robert Kelley and Janet Caplan describes the advantage of networking skills as being one of the essential ingredients for workplace success.

According to research conducted by executives at AT&T's Bell Labs in the early 1990s, "10 to 15 per cent of our scientists and engineers are stars, while the vast majority are simply good, solid middle performers."

In his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (published by Bantam Books), Daniel Goleman explains that "one of the more important results turned out to be rapport with a network of key people. Things go more smoothly for the standouts because they put time into cultivating good relationships with people whose services might be needed in a crunch as part of an instant ad hoc team to solve a problem or handle a crisis."

It seems clear that networking skills do matter. But where does one start? With the rise of the Internet, perhaps combining old ideas with new ones is the solution.

As far back as 1974, Mark Granovetter, in his book *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers* (published by the University of Chicago Press), examined the role of developing "weak ties" as a tool to build highly effective networks. He found that 60 per cent of professional and technical workers got jobs through personal connections which involved knowing people from the community, previous jobs or school. Eighty-four per cent reported they occasionally or rarely saw the contacts (weak ties) that helped them find a job.

Much of the research I've come across suggests that the "strength of weak ties" comes from having a broad circle of many friendly acquaintances that can be warm and intense and last many decades. However, these acquaintances usually do not turn into close friendships. We all know people who seem to "know everyone" and rarely worry about their next paycheque. They are "connectors" who get energized by connecting people.

Sally Helgesen, author of *Thriving in 24 by 7* (published by Free Press), suggests some tips that connectors can use to strengthen and build their "weak ties." They include allocating daily "maintenance time" towards managing your circles of influence. This means creating a detailed well organized updated database and using it regularly to connect with a cross section of your contacts. The goal is connect and create new relationships such that others begin to associate you as someone likeable and trustworthy. Another tip characteristic of our fast-paced society is to be able to connect with people at a deeper level quickly. Rather than exchanging titles and trivial chitchat, it's more effective to move to important questions about each other's needs and fears in a sensitive manner. The objective is to use intuition to connect at a deeper level by having a meaningful conversation that is remembered.

As our successful politician realized, developing weak ties with people who barely know you is often more fruitful than connecting with those you've known all your life.