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Disruption Makes Strong Ties More Valuable

A Guest Article By David Nour, MHCA Keynote Speaker and Author of Curve Benders

The conventional wisdom on networking says that you need more: It's better to have many shallow contacts than a few deep ones because they are more likely to connect you to the opportunities you need. But I learned first-hand the hard way, through the disruption of the global pandemic this past year, that we need to amend that wisdom.

To understand why, let's get into the rationale for shallow contacts. Because of specialization, the thinking goes, we need to cast a wide net to find a good match for our talents. A large pool of contacts will do that, while a small pool of strong ties will likely give us people with similar networks. After all, we're more likely to connect deeply with people who already share our interests and experiences.

Favoring shallow contacts makes sense in stable times when people can help each other with minimal effort. If all I need from you is some contact information or background knowledge, then

weak ties are fine. But with businesses buffeted by all sorts of unexpected pressures, from continued supply chain threats to global talent shortages, you're likely to need more assistance than shallow contacts can give. That's where those strong relationships pay off.

Hit by Covid

Last October, I was in Istanbul to teach an executive education course and rendezvous with my elderly parents from Iran. Unfortunately, despite vaccinations, we ended up contracting Covid, and my mother ended up in the ICU sedated and intubated. I didn't know any Turks, so I posted a blog mentioning our predicament. I got responses from several CEOs who knew me and headed up global companies. I was relieved and thought at least one of them would have Turkish operations and could connect me to medical help. No such luck.

Meanwhile, I heard from Tug, a summer intern with me back in 2013. He now works for Google and lives in Singapore, but is Turkish and was visiting Istanbul around the same time. He had impressed me that summer, and I had kept up with him with career advice and discussions. Now he returned the favor many times over, as he set up an online delivery service of food and supplies to our quarantine hotel and translated discussions with my mom's Turkish doctors.

Although my mom died from pneumonia in Istanbul last Thanksgiving, Tug was an invaluable friend. And he was willing to do that only because he wasn't a shallow, superficial contact of convenience. Instead, I had invested something in him during the spring of his career, and he was motivated to go to great lengths to help.

How to Invest in Strong Ties

Of course, we can't invest in all our relationships equally. Many, if not most of the people we know, must remain shallow contacts – there just isn't time in the day. That's fine, and you can still build mutually valuable relationships with many of them. But to thrive in a time of disruption, we need deeper and more meaningful contacts. Only they will commit to helping us through the sudden, unexpected challenges that could derail our careers, and cause massive disruption in how we live, work, or serve others.

Conventional wisdom has one thing right: We need to connect with people beyond our comfort zone. So back in 2013, I could have passed on hiring a Turkish intern or, when Tug arrived, treated him with only minimal attention. But instead, I expanded my hiring horizon and invested love and support in his personal growth.

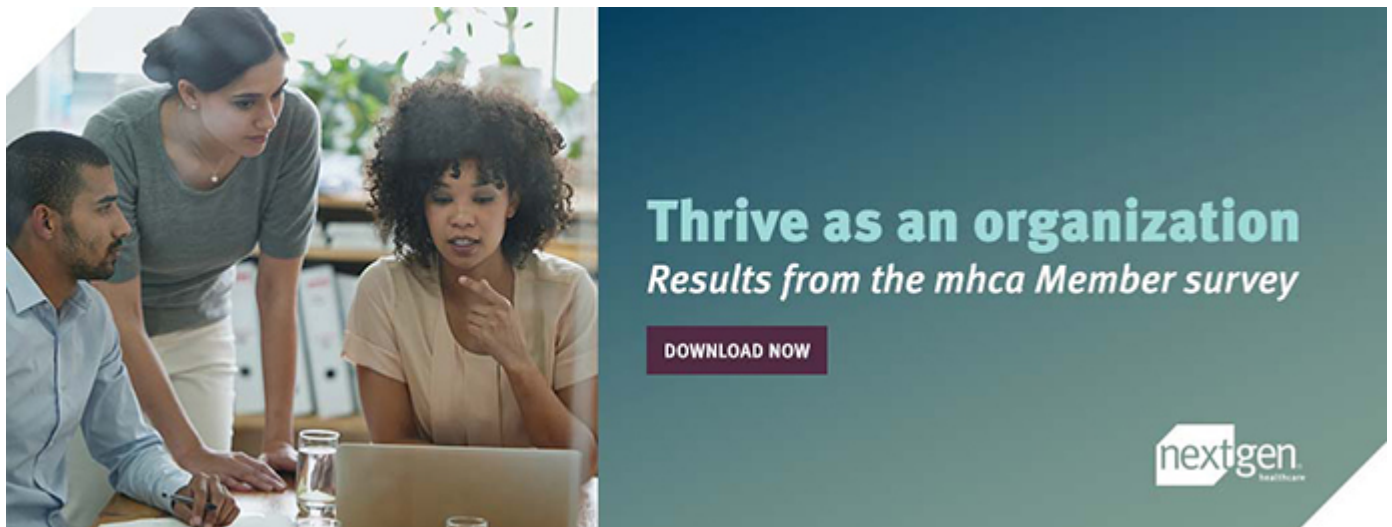
The second lesson is to focus your relationship investments on those who demonstrate high

performance. He was with us for a few months, but checked many boxes. He was competitive, connected, candid, resourceful, engaged, focused, clear-sighted, and intelligent while readily giving credit to others. So I kept investing in him, even though he had little to offer me after that summer. Partly, I was just passing on the help that other people had given me early in my career. And I certainly didn't imagine anything like the assistance he gave us in Istanbul.

Building Resilience Against Curve Balls

This is an extreme story, but we are likelier to get hit with everyday curve balls. Not only are global disruptions increasingly possible, but fast-emerging technology and shifting industry structures are leaving everyone vulnerable.

When you get hit, will you rely on your shallow contacts to help bail you out? Or will you have people motivated to step in with sustained assistance?



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