

The Power of Personal Networking in a Digital Age



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The French have a saying, “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” It means: the more things change, the more they remain the same. In the midst of communication channels that have changed, morphed, and expanded exponentially over the past decade, this adage reminds us of something that has not changed—the value of our personal relationships and networks.

As deans, we are bombarded with electronic and digital messages that threaten to consume us. Yet, we need to remind ourselves that the success of our enterprise may well depend upon how well we manage the electronic media while focusing on personal networks and relationships. These relationships still serve as the basis for success with our stakeholders including faculty and university colleagues, peers and professional organizations, students, alumni, chairs, and business leaders.

Faculty: Recruiting and retaining outstanding faculty is at the heart of our endeavor. We may use digital media to identify and initiate communication with potential faculty, but the final decision by universities and candidates regarding an offer of employment probably reflects the intangible gestalt generated in a face-to-face experience. And, once hired, faculty still deserve and value your personal attention.

Students and Alumni: Recent graduates and alumni routinely use online sources to find jobs or change careers. That’s why LinkedIn reports it has 65 million members. But ultimately, people are hired and careers started when an online connection results in a personal experience, a face-to-face meeting.

An alumni's recent experience underscores this point. Our finance graduate called to speak to me about new career opportunities. He had posted his (in my opinion, very strong) résumé online. However, his most promising options came as a result of personal networking with another alumni of our school and with a former work associate. His personal network created interview opportunities that led to two offers and his ultimate acceptance of a position with a well-respected U.S. firm.

Donors: We all know that support for our programs comes from relationships based on time and trust. Would your major potential donors support your programs without talking and meeting with you? It's doubtful. For us, a decade-long relationship resulted in the largest gift in our university's history. In addition, our school's benefactor consistently attributes his own success as an entrepreneur to the strength of his personal relationships.

Peers and Professional Organizations: A recent example occurred in February during a reception for an AACSB International Peer Review Team. Because of our strong personal relationships with our alumni, business community, and advisory council, the team cited these relationships as one of our "best practices" in its report recommending initial accreditation.

The power of personal networks should not be underestimated or minimized in light of electronic or digital communication. As deans, we need to remember that electronic or digital channels may help us maintain and even enhance personal networks, but they will never replace them. As the French say, "**The more things change, the more they remain the same.**"