

With One Click, Old Contacts Offer Best Advice

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Rekindling old acquaintances can yield creative, useful advice, executives and researchers have been finding. **Maxim Stulov**

Rustam Barnokhodzhayev, head of Russian operations for headhunting firm Preng & Associates, makes the acquaintance of about three to four people a day — or more than a thousand new contacts a year.

The headhunter, whose firm recruits executives and board directors for energy companies, can't keep up with all of those contacts on a regular basis. Earlier in his career, however, he learned a maxim about the headhunting business: In his field, winning and keeping a positive reputation depends especially on building good relations with job candidates.

Because of that lesson, he uses every meeting as a springboard for continuing relationships with his candidates, interacting with each potential hire in a thoroughly courteous manner. As a result, Barnokhodzhayev said, any telephone number in his address book can be used

for pulling up additional information or recommendations.

The executive recruiter's practices echo the findings of a much-read research paper published by U.S. business school professors this year: that old connections waiting for your approval on Facebook or for a glance in your Rolodex can be the most valuable ones there. You just don't know it yet.

As the professors point out in an introduction to their study in the MIT Sloan Management Review, the question posed by their research — is striking up old acquaintances worth it? — is extremely pertinent in the age of social networking web sites. From Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki in Russian, to LinkedIn and Facebook in multiple languages, the sites have sped up the process of searching for, locating and reaching out to old friends.

Social networking and other web sites "have made access to long-lost friends, colleagues and acquaintances as easy as a few keystrokes," the professors wrote in the introduction. "Now with relative ease, people can reactivate what may have seemed like dead connections."

"Both researchers and many members of the general public assumed that neglected relationships would lose their value and, ultimately, wither and die," the academics noted, but their research suggests that isn't the case.

3-Year Pause

In fact, the professors — Daniel Z. Levin at Rutgers University in New Jersey, Jorge Walter at The George Washington University in Washington, and J. Keith Murnighan at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management outside Chicago — found the opposite to be true.

They said advice from people with whom you have lost touch is frequently more useful than advice from your close acquaintances and friends.

The authors arrived at that conclusion after detailed research into the behavior of 224 managers who were studying in executive master of business administration, or executive MBA, programs in a Canadian business school and three U.S. business schools.

The researchers asked the executives to try to re-establish ties with at least two people whom they hadn't contacted for three years or more. One of the long-lost contacts needed to be a person whom they had been close to, while the other needed to be a person with whom they had formerly had only a superficial connection.

Notably, the connection had to be made in person or by telephone.

Each of the study participants was required to use the conversation to get advice or information that could help him or her with a significant work project.

When the professors questioned their study participants about the results of those conversations, it turned out that restoring forgotten connections was an extremely helpful exercise, as advice given by the old connections was more useful than advice from current close acquaintances. The professors' research became a paper titled "The Power of Reconnection — How Dormant Ties Can Surprise You."

Sleeping Contacts

As Levin, Walter and Murnighan pointed out, the majority of experienced business managers have a minimum of 1,000 such dormant contacts. At any given time, however, a person is capable of maintaining only 100 to 200 active relationships.

Dormant relationships — those that had been close at one time and then lapsed — are more useful than those that never had been close, but even distant connections have some impact, the professors said.

Another possible outcome of reaching out to dormant contacts lies in the fact that after they are re-established, they become dormant again.

The students in the professors' study noted that they had the best of intentions and planned to keep up their reinvigorated contacts. As demonstrated, however, in additional research by the three professors among the same sample of executive MBA students, the re-established relationships rarely turned into active ones.

Despite the fleeting nature of the re-connections, they are extremely valuable. The professors named three reasons for that finding.

For one, dormant contacts "are great sources of unexpectedly novel insights." While the executives were out of touch with the old contacts, those people were continuing to accumulate useful advice and information from their own lives and careers.

Getting back in touch makes it possible to access and make use of those outside viewpoints, in other words.

Also, associating with former acquaintances is an efficient way to get new knowledge, as it can be done with a minimal investment of time on the part of the seeker and the old contact. That is a major advantage for busy business executives.

What's more, the mutual understanding and trust that had been established in the past tend to stay intact.

"Reconnecting is not like starting a relationship from scratch," according to the study's summary. "People still have feelings of trust and a shared perspective, which are critical for receiving valuable knowledge from someone."

That means that executives can count on significant openness in the renewed relationship. By contrast, between the executive and a superficial acquaintance, the connection is basically a blank slate.

As statistics have shown, old connections are less helpful to young students in college or MBA programs than to people who are already managers and who have an executive MBA.

Anecdotal examples from Russian businesspeople lend support to the study's findings, though they also point to the complexities of renewing an acquaintance after many years.

Barnokhodzhayev, the energy executive recruiter, has met with various degrees of success as

he has tried to re-establish his past acquaintances. When the pause in his friendships was in the range of three years to 10 years, about half of his attempts to restore connections turned out well.

When Barnokhodzhayev attempted to revive connections with former classmates two years ago, however, nothing panned out. Their personal circumstances had drifted too far apart, he said.

In those situations where professional or personal circumstances were more similar, recovering the friendship was easier.

That was especially the case when the friendship had been deep enough in the past that restarting it could give significant results, Barnokhodzhayev said.

Heidrick & Struggles, a multinational executive recruitment and leadership consulting firm, also offers an example. Crafting relationships outside of professional settings is one of 17 major qualifications that Heidrick & Struggles uses to assess leadership skills in job candidates, said Dmitry Prokhorenko, a partner in the firm's Moscow office.

In Person

Prokhorenko said he himself spends a lot of time forming relationships beyond the scope of his day-to-day work. "That is part of my professional job responsibilities," he said.

In the space of a year, Prokhorenko gets to know about 200 people. Of those, about 60 turn out to be helpful to him, while his connections with the others are lost over time.

During the last two years, he has revived associations with people whom he worked with about a decade ago in the Russian office of French cosmetics giant L'Oreal. Social networking sites, particularly LinkedIn, have helped him to do so, Prokhorenko said.

Furthermore, he doesn't limit himself to reaching out over social networking sites.

Prokhorenko tries to meet up with his past acquaintances in person — the same live-conversation approach used by executives in the U.S. study.

He isn't necessarily seeking practical results, however. Prokhorenko, who has been pleased to get in touch with former co-workers at L'Oreal, said the reunions tend to be nostalgic in tone.

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