

A Little Help From Friends of Friends

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Mar-18-2003



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Introduction

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They spend untold hours in local job seekers' clubs, and when they are not leaning on old friends or former colleagues for leads, they are trolling the Web and responding to job boards. Most often though, their efforts result in not so much as a call back from overwhelmed recruiters who routinely receive hundreds of responses to each posting.

One group of unemployed software specialists has decided to try a different tack. Instead of going to people they know well, this particular group searches for work by going to people most of them do not know well at all, using the Internet and a 30-year-old social theory called "the strength of weak ties" to create electronic Rolodexes listing the names of thousands of acquaintances who are potential employers.

Think of it as "the friend of my friend might know my next boss."

The organization, called the Software Product Marketing eGroup, focuses on software marketers, but the theory they espouse applies to any job seeker.

The concept of strength in weak ties was introduced in 1973 by Mark Granovetter, a professor of sociology at Stanford and the author of "Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers."

"If you think about the people who are your very close friends, they might have more motivation to give you information about available jobs, but if they are in your own circle, they are getting the same information you are," he said.

While acquaintances culled from a wide circle may not be as motivated as close friends are to lend a hand, they will do so because "often it is not very costly for them to share information" about jobs, Professor Granovetter said. And because the friends of friends can be distant, their sources of information are different, producing new and sometimes unexpected leads.

Weak ties are like never-seen distant cousins who treat you with consideration because you are family.

The theory behind the strength of weak ties is simple, though not immediately obvious. While "six degrees of separation" refers to the idea that a link between any two people can be found through no more than six other people, the "strength of weak ties" says that big networks of the "friends of friends" can link job seekers to positions beyond their immediate circle of friends.

"It's counterintuitive," said Rich Sodon, 48, of West Milford, N.J., a product marketing manager who has been job hunting for 10 months. When he was out of work before, he went to close friends, former colleagues, job boards and recruiters. But in this extremely tough job market, traditional routes turned into dead ends.

Then he heard about Software Product Marketing. He became one of about 100 volunteers who agreed to put the names of business acquaintances into a common pool of potential employers.

The supervisors, personnel managers and senior vice presidents on that list then were invited to post jobs on the site, assured that only current members would respond. There are now 3,000 members; other prospective members may sign up at www.softwareproductmarketing.com.

A posting committee screens all the jobs to ensure that they correspond to the group's expertise. If so, the job is listed, and members who think they meet the requirements make the contact directly.

"I read the theory and understood the concept, but at first I was skeptical," said Joel Passen, a partner at Gravity People, a San Francisco-based recruiter.

Instead of having to sift through the 350 résumés he gets from listing on an open Internet jobs board, Mr. Passen said, the S.P.M. group produces about 20 résumés that closely match his requirements. "Actually it works pretty well," he said.

But it is not always fast.

Mr. Sodon still has not found a job, but he figures that is because weak ties, while more effective than strong relationships, work more slowly. "There's a lot of value in weak ties," he said. "It just takes a little longer to get value from them."

Cynthia Typaldos, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who began S.P.M. in November 2001, said the weak-ties theory could not be put to the full test until the Web made it possible to collect and list thousands of names. "The Internet doesn't really allow you to have more close friends," she said, "but it does allow you to have 10,000 acquaintances."

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Mar-18-2003 9:22 AM (GMT -5.0)