

Six degrees of separation: it really is a small world!

■ Remember the last time you bumped into someone from back home whilst you were on holiday? The odds are that you suddenly realised you shared a common acquaintance, at which point one of you exclaimed, "What a small world!" The fact is that this sort of coincidence occurs relatively frequently. Is it all purely a matter of chance or is the hidden hand of providence at work?

In fact, chance encounters are not as fortuitous as they seem. We do actually live in a small world. The first person to study this in detail was Stanley Milgram, back in 1967. His 'small world experiment' engendered a theory known as the 'six degrees of separation', which states that everyone is just six steps (= people) away from each other. Other studies performed between 1967 and the present day have confirmed the truth of this theory.

We can also look at the issue from a more mathematical angle. Let's assume that the average person has 250 contacts, both business and personal. Each of these 250 contacts has 250 contacts of their own. Based on a very conservative estimate that you know half of these people yourself, each of your contacts knows 125 people whom you don't know. In other words, there are a further 31,250 (i.e. 250×125) people in the second degree with whom you could potentially come into contact. Although you could argue as to whether 250 is a small or large number, few people would claim that 31,250 is a small number. In other words, the great strength of networking lies not in the first, but in the second degree.

Apart from the sheer numbers involved, there's also the advantage of a bond stemming from the presence of a common acquaintance.

What exactly does this mean? Well, it means that people should look through different eyes at people they meet during receptions, online networking and other social occasions. Guests at receptions often feel uncomfortable because they think they need to 'sell' themselves to other people or because they feel obliged to ask other people to do them a service. And because they don't like other people behaving like this, they don't wish to project this impression in public. Once you realise, however, that the value of a network lies not in the first, but in the second degree, you can approach people in a completely different way.

So, next time you talk to someone at a networking event, try and work out what the other person can do for your own network and what your own network can do for them. Not only will you discover far more opportunities, you'll also find that your conversations are totally different – and also much more fun! Obviously, should you discover that you and the other person can also do each other a service, this is something you should study in greater detail. You don't need to concentrate exclusively on the benefits for your network. However, by taking your network as your point of departure, you will find that you get involved in completely different conversations – often with amazing results!

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