

Gwen Rhys discovers there's a magic number in networking.

When running seminars and workshops on networking I'm often asked how many people someone should have in their network. I used to say that, from my own experience, 200 was about the maximum number - a core network of up to 10 people (your personal board of directors) and an inner-circle making up the balance. Beyond that, the outer-circle, is better described as a database rather than a network of relationships.

In other words, I prefer to have quality relationships rather than be able to boast about my quantity of connections.

Interestingly an article by Robin Dunbar, Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology at Oxford University in the Spring 2010 issue of the RSA Journal suggests that the magic number is in fact 150.

"If social networks become too large, communities fail to function effectively," he says and cites that the number 150 starts to emerge from all kinds of unexpected places. It was the average village size recorded in the Domesday Book and is the average size of the smallest standalone unit (the company) in all modern armies. It's also the point at which businesses start to need formal management structures and is the typical size of communities amongst the Amish and Hutterites as well as virtual world communities such as Second Life.

Moreover, 150 people do not form a homogenous group - social networks consist of a series of layers, says Prof Dunbar, which increase by a multiple of 3 - an inner layer of 5 intimates, 15 good friends, 50 friends and 150 acquaintances.

I'll admit to being ambivalent about social media networks. For me, there's nothing quite like making a physical connection with someone. Prof Dunbar agrees saying that "you need to get to grips with people in real life ... a touch in the real world is worth a thousand words in the virtual world." If I've not met someone in person or at least spoken to them on the phone, I don't accept their invitations to join an online network.

On the plus side, he suggests that social networks are good at slowing down the rate at which relationships decay, but goes on to reveal that they do not prevent decay altogether and are not especially good for creating new relationships.

If you don't have 500 people in your Facebook or Linked In - don't worry, you're just being normal.

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