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**AUTHOR CONTACT INFO**

**Emanuela Rondi, Associate Professor**

Department of Management

Università degli Studi di Bergamo

Via dei Caniana 2, 24127

Bergamo (Italy)

+39 0352052699

Homepage: <https://didattica-rubrica.unibg.it/ugov/person/2746>

emanuela.rondi@unibg.it

**Daniel Z. Levin, Professor**

Management and Global Business Dept.

Rutgers Business School – Newark and New Brunswick

Rutgers University

1 Washington Park

Newark, NJ 07102

(973) 353-5983

homepage: <http://www.levin.rutgers.edu>

levin@business.rutgers.edu

**Alfredo De Massis, Professor**

Department of Economics and Management

Free University of Bozen-Bolzano

Piazza Università 1, 39100

Bolzano (Italy)

(and IMD Business School (Lausanne, Switzerland) and Lancaster University Management School (Lancaster, UK))

Homepage: <https://www.unibz.it/it/faculties/economics-management/academic-staff/person/37012-alfredo-de-massis>

Twitter account: @AlfredoDeMassis

Facebook account: <https://www.facebook.com/FamilyBusinessProfessor>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/alfredodemassis>

alfredo.demassis@unibz.it

**Required Online Elements**

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<Title> **Reconnecting When Network Ties Go Dormant**

<Deck> Reviving a professional relationship isn’t as simple as it looks. New research uncovers three key elements for refreshing an inactive tie successfully — not disastrously.

<Byline> By Emanuela Rondi, Daniel Z. Levin, and Alfredo De Massis

[bios] Emanuela Rondi is an associate professor of management at Università degli Studi di Bergamo in Italy. Daniel Z. Levin is a professor of management and global business at Rutgers Business School – Newark and New Brunswick at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Alfredo De Massis is a professor of entrepreneurship and family business at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano in Italy, the Wild Group Chair in Family Business at IMD Business School in Switzerland, and a professor at Lancaster University Management School in the United Kingdom.

<Micro 100 characters> New research uncovers three elements for refreshing an inactive tie successfully — not disastrously.

<Short up to 500 characters> We used to assume that reawakening a dormant tie was a simple process — just reach out and start talking. But reviving a professional relationship takes more care. New research uncovers three key elements for refreshing an inactive tie successfully: how well both parties remember each other; how they go about catching up; and whether they perceive the relationship similarly. Done right, refreshing dormant ties can be as important to enhancing your network as adding new people or strengthening existing ties.

<Tags> Business Relationships, Networks and Networking, Partnerships, Relationship Management, Trust

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<Pull Quotes> “Simple mistakes can derail the reconnection process, sometimes so dramatically as to cause the end of the relationship.”

“Refreshing dormant ties can be as important to enhancing your network as adding new people or strengthening existing ties.”

“Savvy executives reconnect, but they do it thoughtfully.”

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The Research or The Analysis (features) – not a separate element

Endnotes (features) – probably would not be included if used for print; included here for factcheck

[body]

We’ve known for a while that after relationships fall into a state of inactivity — becoming dormant ties — [they can be resurrected](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20868904).[[1]](#endnote-1) As more of us venture back into professional social settings after pandemic-induced disconnection, more people than ever are looking to revive their inactive ties. These connections have the potential to be incredibly valuable:[[2]](#endnote-2) During the period of dormancy, former contacts have been learning new things and developing new networks. Their knowledge and associations can be extremely beneficial, with the potential for offering advice, referrals, emotional support, and even tangible resources.[[3]](#endnote-3)

We [used to assume that reawakening a dormant tie was a simple process](https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-power-of-reconnection-how-dormant-ties-can-surprise-you/) — just, you know, reach out and start talking[[4]](#endnote-4). According to this view, people could simply reengage as if no time had elapsed.

However, new research shows that the process of reviving a dormant tie is more complex. Simple mistakes can derail the reconnection process, sometimes so dramatically as to cause the end of the relationship. For instance, one of us was with an innovation manager at a convention immediately after a former colleague had poorly attempted a reconnection. “Unbelievable, did you hear what he asked me?” this manager said. “I will never talk to that guy again!”Less dramatically, dormant contacts will sometimes seem friendly when responding to an overture (“Well, it was great to see you”) but later admit they were holding back, reluctant to fully engage, collaborate with, or share what they know with the other person.

Why are some reconnection attempts so suboptimal or even downright harmful? And what makes reconnections more successful? We investigated this question by observing and interviewing managers to understand how to refresh a level of trust in ways that benefit both parties.

## The Three Key Elements of Reconnection

Over the course of several years, our research has included observing dozens of real-time reconnections at industry conventions and conducting 71 interviews of executives across the North Italian textile industry. We identified three elements associated consistently with successful reconnections: how well both parties remember each other; how they go about catching up; and whether they perceive the relationship similarly. We developed a model of reconnections that result in activity where one or both parties obtain resources through the tie, such as a productive collaboration or receiving useful advice.

We then tested this model in an experiment with 331 U.S. workers to assess the impact of each of the three elements on another person’s willingness to help. We provided a vignette describing a reconnection attempt by a former coworker. We asked, how willing would you be to help this person? We measured if people’s willingness changed based on whether a reconnection element was present or absent. We found that with none of the elements present, people’s willingness was neutral at best (3.86 on a 1-7 scale). When all three elements were present, it went from neutral to essentially “yes, I’d agree to help” (5.72). This validated our findings. We also confirmed that the three reconnection elements are useful specifically because they increase people’s trust that the other person cares about and will look out for them.[[5]](#endnote-5) Our research was [published earlier this year](https://pubsonline.informs.org/doi/abs/10.1287/orsc.2023.1685?journalCode=orsc) in *Organization Science*.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Here’s how to work with each of the three key elements that enhance the success of a dormant-tie reconnection:

**1. Remembering.** Recognizing each other is critical, and a failure to do so can feel both embarrassing and even insulting. Trying to reconnect with someone who does not recognize you is painful and might even make you seem less trustworthy. This often ends the relationship permanently.

Overtures that give the other person time to look you up on social media such as LinkedIn can provide a way for the person being approached to see your face, read your bio, and be reminded how they know you. Cold calling can be risky: An R&D manager told us about calling a CEO and having to explain multiple times who he was and how and where they had met. Eventually the CEO did remember him as “the young guy with very big hope.” The R&D manager felt humiliated and decided not to ask for the advice he was looking for and never called him again. Approaching someone in person at a professional event can also be tricky. Keep in mind, for instance, that everyone’s appearance changes over time, including yours, so providing clues such as a prominent name tag can help.

After recognizing each other, reminiscing over shared experiences helps to re-establish the relationship by reminding each other of when the tie was active. You want to talk about times spent together and even shared hardships. For example, we observed a successful reconnection where one participant said, “Do you remember our director? He was such a jerk.” The other recalled that person the same way: “Haha, how could I forget? The most unapproachable guy, super moody.” As memories came flooding back, the former colleagues created a bridge between past and present.

**2. Catching up.** Updating the other person on professional and even personal matters since you last saw each other brings the relationship into the present and allows you to fill in the picture of what has happened while the relationship was dormant. This is more than just small talk; it lets people see what you’re all about now. One executive said that hearing about the other person’s career path “not only helps but is probably also critical to understanding who you are dealing with.” Note that catching up does not mean providing a detailed chronological account of all that has happened since you last were in touch. By focusing on just the relevant highlights, it can be used strategically to orient the conversation.

Including details on personal matters can make the reconnection less transactional. “If you season it all with some mention of your personal life, it can help bring the talk back to a little bit more human level,” said one executive. “If you go straight to the point, people might feel you want to exploit them.” It’s important not to get too personal, though. One manager, in describing catching up with a dormant contact after eight years, explicitly cautioned, “I didn’t want to cross the line and be too intrusive, so I tried to limit this to pleasantries, showing that I care without being indiscreet.”Unfortunately, not everyone follows this advice. Indeed, we witnessed several reconnection disasters brought on by insensitive questions, both in the professional realm (“Did they at least pay you well when you were let go as CEO?”) and in the personal realm, with an inquiry into how a person was coping with the death of a spouse. Both reconnection attempts were cut short by the other person.

Reacquainting yourselves also helps both sides assess if they like and trust each other. It may initially seem like a gratuitous ritual, but it allows people to check if their mental image of you, including your trustworthiness, is still accurate. How you present yourself — your views, your recent experiences — is your chance to refresh not just how the other person sees you but the relationship itself. You will likewise have the same opportunity to reassess your old contact. This is when both parties evaluate, often subconsciously, if the other person represents a viable tie for the future.

**3. Perceiving the tie similarly.** Both sides need to be on the same page about the relationship, such as how close you two feel, if your roles or companies are in competition or not, and whether you are of similar or different status. For example, it is fine to reconnect with people you used to know either really well or barely at all, as long as you treat the other person accordingly. However, treating someone as a close confidant when you had a distant relationship with them (or vice versa) undermines the reconnection.

Dormant contacts who are now competitors can still reconnect successfully and sometimes even work together — such as on efforts to promote the industry — but the two sides need to be in sync about the nature of the relationship. As one executive put it, “If I think that asking that person something would cause them a conflict of interest, I do not ask.”

One R&D manager told us of a reconnection he tried to make that went poorly. It was with a former employee who had since become CEO of a small but fast-growing company. The CEO “kept the conversation very brief before hanging up.” Afterwards, the R&D manager told us sheepishly that he may have been too bossy, coming off as if his former colleague owed him something. “Maybe he felt like I was treating him as my employee instead of the CEO of an important company,” he said. The two were not seeing the tie similarly, and the reconnection failed.

Being on the same page sets the boundaries for what is or is not appropriate when making requests in the reconnection process. The other person needs to trust that you will not pressure them into sharing resources they are not comfortable sharing for the type of relationship you have.

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These latest findings are on *how* to reconnect your dormant ties. Don’t forget, though, that it also matters *who* the other person is. Past research has found that [the most useful reconnections](https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-reconnect-for-maximum-impact/) are to dormant contacts who are likely to provide novelty — such as higher-status contacts and people you never spent a lot of time with in the past — and who are also likely to be fully engaged — such as people you expect will care about you and be willing to help.[[7]](#endnote-9)

Refreshing dormant ties can be as important to enhancing your network as adding new people or strengthening existing ties. Savvy executives reconnect, but they do it thoughtfully. The payoff is that requests to collaborate or seek advice will be greeted less warily, with a willingness by the other person to go above and beyond in helping without feeling like they’re being taken advantage of. Those who take the time to pay attention to these three steps are better able to restore past relationships to their full potential — refreshed, trusted, and ready to help.

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**References** – FYI editors: Footnotes are for copyediting/factchecking. I’ve added hyperlinks in a number of spots.

**Exhibit –** FYI KEEPING THIS HERE ONLY FOR FACTCHECKER TO REVIEW



*Note.* Based on an experiment (Study 2) in Rondi et al. (in press). Willingness to help is the average of three similar questions following a vignette describing a reconnection attempt by a former coworker named Alex (e.g., “I would answer completely and openly any question Alex asks”). The baseline corresponds to the regression results when none of the three reconnection elements are present.

1. D.Z. Levin, J. Walter, and J.K. Murnighan, “Dormant Ties: The Value of Reconnecting,” *Organization Science* 22, no. 4 (July-August 2011): 923-939. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20868904> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. D.Z. Levin, J. Walter, and J.K. Murnighan, “The Power of Reconnection — How Dormant Ties Can Surprise You,” *MIT Sloan Management Review* 52, no. 3 (spring 2011): 45-50. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-power-of-reconnection-how-dormant-ties-can-surprise-you/> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. E. Rondi, D.Z. Levin, and A. De Massis, “The Reconnection Process: Mobilizing the Social Capital of Dormant Ties,” *Organization Science*, in press. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2023.1685> (online May 23 2023) <https://pubsonline.informs.org/doi/abs/10.1287/orsc.2023.1685?journalCode=orsc> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. J. Walter, D.Z. Levin, and J.K. Murnighan, “How to Reconnect for Maximum Impact,” *MIT Sloan Management Review* 57, no. 3 (spring 2016): 18-20. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-reconnect-for-maximum-impact/> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)