



rethinking linking

new approaches for keeping in touch

BY / ERIC KRELL

How resilient are our most important networks?

The question is yielding unexpected insights and raising new concerns about how we manage our increasingly valuable networks.

Consider the Internet, whose durability hinges on our collective ability to detect and repel malicious viruses. At least, we thought it did. It turns out that the Internet, an increasingly critical enabler of our nation's infrastructure, is also surprisingly vulnerable to good, old-fashioned physical breakdowns. Decrepit thermostats, outdated cooling systems and derelict generators as well as the intentional severing of surprisingly unprotected fiber optic cables pose growing risks to Internet connectivity.

When we shift the focus to our own professional networks, unexpected insights and crucial questions also arise.

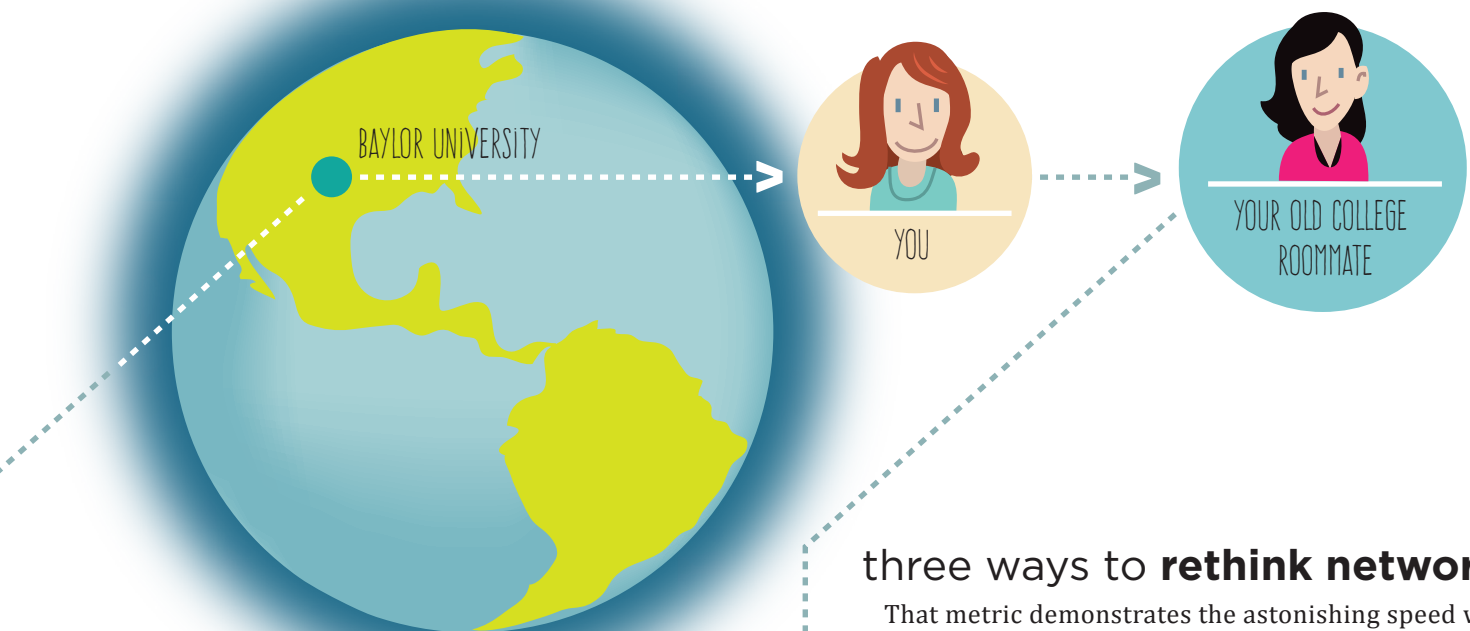
The viability of our professional networks now depends more heavily on Internet, email and social media technology. In 2014, the virtual professional networking platform LinkedIn embarked on a project to use its technology to track the employment activity of more than 3 billion global workers. Writing in *The New Yorker* last year, Nicholas Lehmann characterized LinkedIn's massive business opportunity this way, "The keeper of your career will be not your employer but your personal network—so you'd better put a lot of effort into making it as extensive and as vital as possible." Declining single-company careers, growing entrepreneurialism and the rise of the gig economy suggest that this notion is on the mark.

LinkedIn and other powerful technology tools have made it staggeringly easy to extend our professional networks. Happily, a few well-timed and thoughtful email sentences can connect a business school undergraduate in Waco to a chief executive officer in Silicon Valley. Less happily, scope alone does not determine viability. The health of our personal and professional networks depend on more qualitative factors, strategic thinking and hands-on care.

six degrees starts **the connections craze**

A pivotal development in modern networking took place in an Albright College dorm during a 1994 blizzard. Three students watching movies began pondering how many flicks the actor Kevin Bacon had appeared in—and how many other performers he had worked with. The trio conjured a parlor game in which participants throw out an actor’s name and then connect that actor to Kevin Bacon via other actors who have appeared in the same movies. And so, “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon” was born, opening our eyes to Kevin Bacon’s extremely busy career and the power of mutual connections and networks.

Nearly two decades later, former PayPal-er Reid Hoffman demonstrated the business value of mutual connections and networks by creating LinkedIn with several partners. The site launched in May 2003, and within a month, had attracted 4,500 members. Today, LinkedIn boasts more than 400 million members in more than 200 countries and territories. Two new members join the network each second.



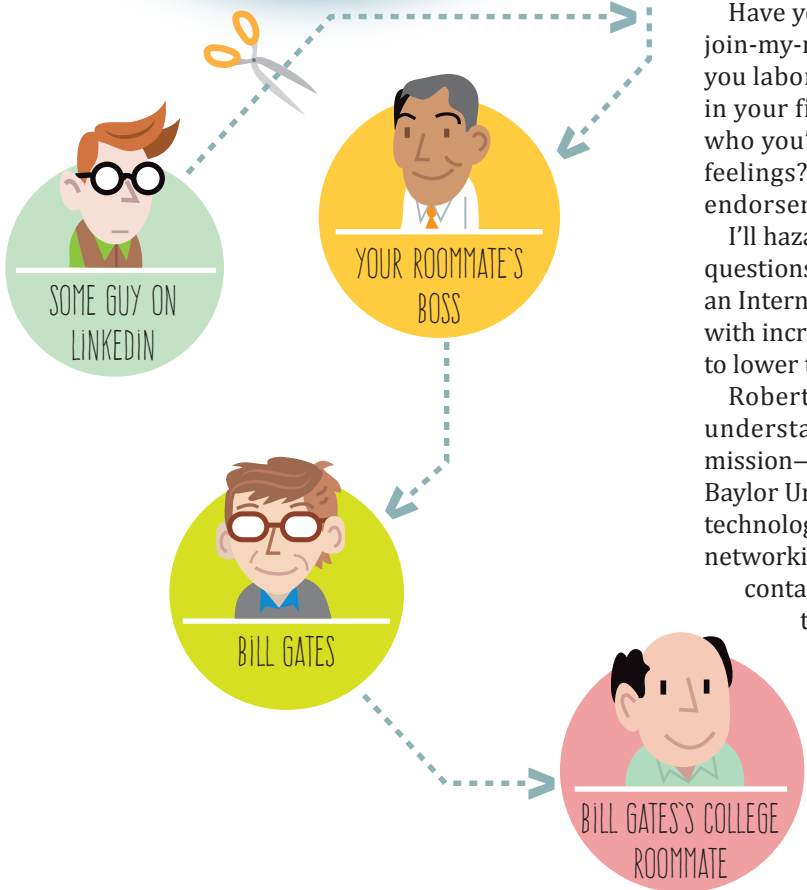
three ways to **rethink networking**

That metric demonstrates the astonishing speed with which professional connections can be made online, but it also hints at some downsides of online networking’s extreme ease and reach.

Have you ever felt a mix of guilt and creepiness when an unsolicited join-my-network email languishes, unopened, in your inbox? Have you labored over whether or not to ask a more experienced person in your field to connect? Ever kept someone in your online network who you’d rather boot because you’re partly concerned about hurt feelings? Have you received unsolicited and not terribly credible endorsements from contacts?

I’ll hazard a guess you answered “yes” to at least two of these questions if you’re a business professional or a business student with an Internet connection. This is not to single out LinkedIn. Powerful tools with incredibly valuable upside should be carefully used and maintained to lower the chances of misfiring.

Robert Ingram, the director of the Baylor Business Network, understands this. He is straightforward in defining his group’s mission—serving as the liaison between Baylor Business alumni and Baylor University—and intentional in how he uses virtual networking technology. He uses LinkedIn to help drive attendance at in-person networking engagements. “My network is based on eye-to-eye contact and handshakes,” Ingram says. “When you add networking technology to one-to-one interaction, you can get the best of both worlds.”



Not all networking needs to be in-person, but **all networking should be intentional** and in the service of a clearly stated mission, regardless of what tools are used to execute the mission. Rethinking the following approaches can help on this count:

when
to build your network

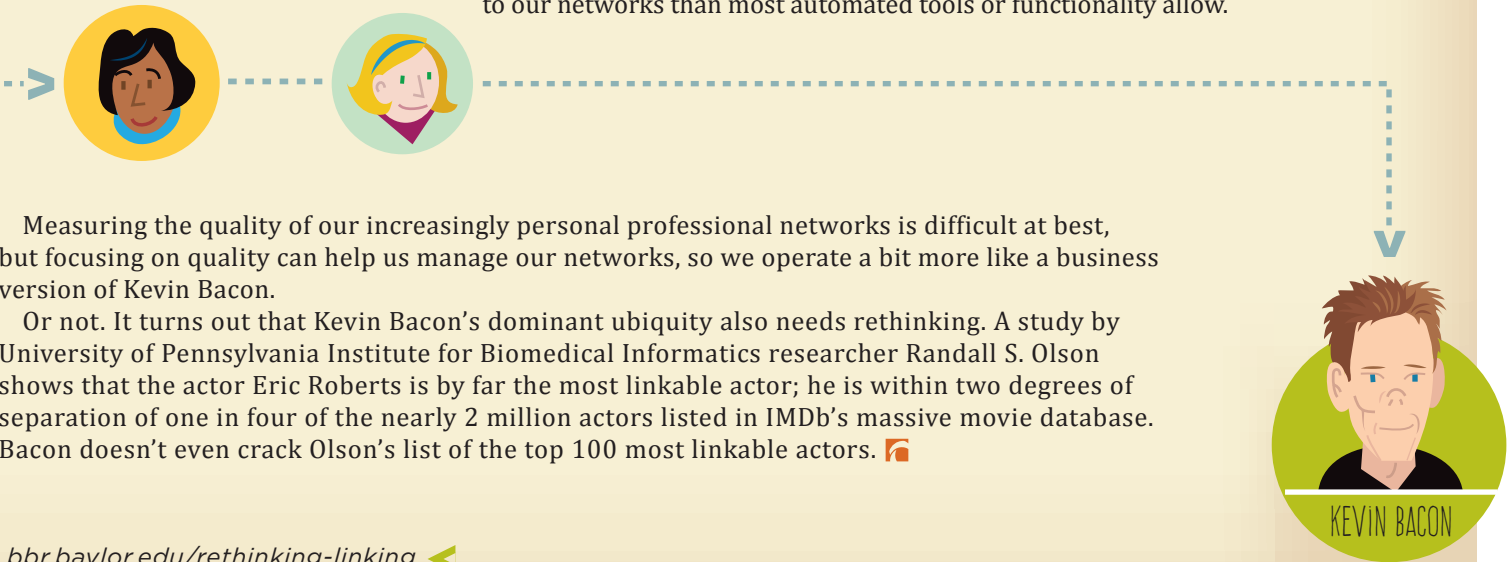
Many mid-career professionals know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of “Lost my job/looking for a new one!” email blasts from suddenly active network contacts. Once the job-loss empathy subsides, a less kindly skepticism sets in: *Why do I only hear from him when he needs something?* The most effective forms of networking are continuous, rather than event-driven. The best time to cultivate new network contacts is when you least need them. Consider devoting an hour or two to review your network at least once or twice a year, much as a mid-career professional should review her retirement portfolio.

how
to build your network

The best forms of networking don’t feel like networking at all. Whenever Hoffman sits down with one of his connections, he reportedly asks them how he might help them. It’s a basic and surprisingly effective approach; try it in your next networking encounter. (I have—and found that it A) equipped me with a friendly, focused way to open the discussion; and B) freed me from the sometimes awkward maneuver of asking for help because the other party has always repeated the same question later in our conversation.)

managing
your network

Who do you accept to your network and why? What types of folks do you seek to add to your network, and how often are you doing so? Addressing these questions—even in a relatively rudimentary manner, can strengthen your network and save time. Turning down LinkedIn connection proposals from anyone you have not yet met (virtually or in-person) can prevent virtual networks from becoming too unwieldy for some. Identifying the types of individuals we seek to add to our networks (e.g., other professionals in my industry, function or geography; more experienced, successful people in my field; or chief human resources officers) can bring more form and intentionality to our networks than most automated tools or functionality allow.



Measuring the quality of our increasingly personal professional networks is difficult at best, but focusing on quality can help us manage our networks, so we operate a bit more like a business version of Kevin Bacon.

Or not. It turns out that Kevin Bacon’s dominant ubiquity also needs rethinking. A study by University of Pennsylvania Institute for Biomedical Informatics researcher Randall S. Olson shows that the actor Eric Roberts is by far the most linkable actor; he is within two degrees of separation of one in four of the nearly 2 million actors listed in IMDb’s massive movie database. Bacon doesn’t even crack Olson’s list of the top 100 most linkable actors.

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