

## IEEE's Strength is Weak Ties

(J.Isaak, 14 Nov 2022, v1)

IEEE was one of the exemplary organizations in Robert Putnam's book "Bowling Alone" as an entity where social capital connections between individuals were established. In his most recent book, "The Upswing", Putnam documents the decline in social capital (aka trust/solidarity) as well as income equity, political comity and what he calls the "I-We-I" transition – all since the middle of the last century. He suggests we desperately need an "upswing", as occurred between 1900 and 1960. Oddly, IEEE is well positioned to participate in this in various ways, not the least is better engagement of our members.

If you have a question about some technical, or even non-technical issue beyond the wisdom of YouTube, who might you go to for more insight? It starts with the folks you know fairly well and who might have the right background or skill set. A limitation here is the lack of diversity of experiences.. But where to look next? This is where weak ties<sup>1</sup> come into play. Consider the "communities" where you are a participant. Some are online, perhaps Linked In or Facebook groups. Others are in-person, church, school, clubs, etc. In both cases you may find IEEE groups are part of your wider network.

If you are engaged with IEEE activities in any area – local events, section leadership, conferences, publication boards, STEM events, standards, etc. You have weak-ties to a wide range of persons worldwide. Also, the range of expertise/experience is unparalleled. Consider the range of IEEE fields from computers/robotics/AI/cyber security to energy/batteries/power systems to consumer devices, electron devices, communications – over forty societies, and even more when you look at councils and emerging technology groups, as well as other activities. You literally have at your fingertips access to the most diverse set of technologists in the world.

I have found insight on robotic controls, radio signal detection, operating systems, public/private encryption, accessibility and connections into dozens of job opportunities from my IEEE contacts. And not all of the contacts are technical. I've collaborated with IEEE colleagues in areas of public policy, places to visit in their home town/country, and toured Japanese temples, Belgian beer pubs, English moors, and geysers in New Zealand together. Even fixing a car, or getting a hand moving some stuff are easier when you have some weak-ties to draw upon.

The key of course is to be engaged. You won't know everybody by name, or the insight you would have with a friend, but you have a point of contact, and if she doesn't know, she may have the friend of a friend who is the real wizard you need. When the chances surface, volunteer.. Ideally with IEEE, but any number of activities will establish the weak-tie connections. Connect where you live, where you work, even online (as long as you avoid the flame pits of partisan rat holes.) The more diverse your connections the closer you will be to that answer you are looking for, the co-author, your next job, or the satisfaction of helping someone you just met who needs your expertise.

i Weak ties: Acquaintances who fall somewhere between stranger and friend (Useem, Jerry; "The End of Trust"; The Atlantic, Dec 2021)