

# Alumni networks: the need to belong

Human beings are social animals

If you delve deeper into the meaning of this oft repeated adage, what it essentially denotes is that humans have an intrinsic need to 'belong'. 'Belongingness' is the essential emotional need to associate with and be accepted by members of a group and provide the same to the other members. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs: "Tribalism is one of the major motivators of human behaviour." Psychologists Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary go further and compare it to necessities like food and shelter, crucial to human survival. Each and every one of us requires, for our psychological and physical wellbeing, stable and lasting relationships.

In prehistoric times, intimate groups and relationships helped one survive during an enemy or animal attack. As civilisation made its slow progress, until modern times, most people were born, lived and died in the same place – migrating to another geography too was a group activity. Even with the advent of modernity, people continued to live with or close to their families. On the work front, professionals would join an organisation and stay on until retirement. Companies like Hindustan Motors, TISCO and BHEL established 'colonies' for their employees which fostered a feeling of belongingness. The railways and the steel factories in India were known for their 'colony life-styles'.

However, since the mid-1990s, life, especially work life, has been completely transformed. People change jobs every two or three years, work in start-ups instead of industrial behemoths, often switch sectors and move across geographies. This means that there is no social framework to bind people, no scope of belonging to a tribe.

## Enter alumni networks

A network of people you know from an educational institution is a relatively recent form of leveraging social connections. A part of its popularity is perhaps due to a certain amount of democratisation of (higher) education and the proliferation of management and engineering degrees and courses in the past couple of decades.

But a bigger reason for their efficacy is that they give individuals a chance to make lifelong and dependable relationships. People often make a choice to enter undergraduate or graduate courses themselves, where they make connections with others whose academic interests are closely aligned with their own. Other factors like shared goals, similar pop-culture interests, political beliefs, etc,



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engender a sense of belonging that fulfils the gaps left by a modern lifestyle.

Access to alumni network lets you expand and advance your careers. There are any number of examples where a former classmate would have helped another in getting a new job or funding for their start-up by facilitating an introduction. *The Harvard Business Review*, in an article titled *The Power of Alumni Networks*, has documented the effectiveness of the alumni business connect. They analysed 15 years' worth of investment data to say that the information that gets around through the alumni network improves investing performance.

Being engaged with your former classmates also gives you a chance to reconnect and reminisce about the good old days. This nostalgia is a sweet reminder of the bonds that you share with others and strengthens the sense of belonging. Additionally, the advent of social media has certainly helped in maintaining existing connections and creating newer ones.

## Helping the alma mater

Universities and academic institutions have started to harness the power of their alumni through regular meet ups and encouraging local alumni chapters. It's not far off the mark to say that people choose to study in Ivy League colleges in America and IIMs and IITs in India solely for their alumni networks. Former students can support the current batch through their skills and experience. A robust network benefits an institution also because it showcases the kind of people the institution produces thereby promoting the institution's brand informally. Successful alumni can provide scholarships and endowment funds to their alma mater. According to *The Economic Times*, alumni donations to the top five IITs were slated to cross ₹1,000 crore in 2019-20. During these Covid times, my alma mater, IIT-Kharagpur, raised over \$1 million from its alumni to assuage the pain for the various workers within the institute set-up.

## Connect to belong

Education is not just the qualifications or the degree you receive at the end. It's about the lessons you learn, the people you meet and the relationships you build. In this day and age, when support networks are hard to come by, having a ready-made one full of people with shared experiences just waiting to connect is a luxury that few can afford to turn down. ♦

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