

Seven Habits of Highly Connected People

Stephen Downes

With apologies – and all due credit – to [Stephen Covey](#).

1. Be Reactive

There's a lot of talk about user-generated content on the web. That's great. But if publishing your own stuff comes at the expense of reading, and commenting on, other people's stuff, that's not so great.

The first thing any connected person should be is receptive. Whether on a discussion forum, mailing list, or in a blogging community or gaming site, it is important to spend some time listening and getting the lay of the land.

Then, your forays into creating content should be as reactions to other people's points of view. This will ensure, first of all, that they read your comment, and second, that your post is relevant to the discussion at hand.

Posting, after all, isn't about airing your own views. It's about connecting, and the best way to connect is to clearly draw the link between their content and yours.

2. Go With The Flow

We all know those people in our online community who are out to Prove Something, to Get Things Done, or to Market Themselves.

These are people we tend to avoid. Because no matter what the topic of discussion, they'll weigh in with their pet project, peeve, or talking point.

When connecting online, it is more important to find the places you can add value rather than to pursue a particular goal or objective. The web is a fast-changing medium, and you need to adapt to fit the needs of the moment, rather than to be driving it forward along a specific agenda.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't have any goals or principles for yourself. You should; that's what will inform your participation. It's just a reminder that your goals are not the same as other people's goals and therefore that your online participation needs to respect that fact.

3. Connection Comes First

People talk about not having time for email, of not having time for blogs. Sometimes they even talk about working without an internet connection.

It's good to take a break and go out camping, or to the club, or whatever. But the idea of replacing your online connecting with busy-work is mistaken.

In almost all fields, connecting with others online is the work. The papers you write, the memos you read and toss – all these have to do with connecting with people. Even if you work with your hands, making cabinets or rebuilding engines, all your contacts with customers and suppliers are about connecting with people.

If you don't have enough time for reading email, writing blog posts, or posting discussion lists, ask yourself what other activities you are doing that are cutting into your time. These are the things that are often less efficient uses of your time.

If you are spending time in meetings, spending time traveling or commuting to work, spending time reading books and magazines, spending time telephoning people (or worse, on hold, or playing phone tag), then you are wasting time that you could be spending connecting to people online.

If you make connecting a priority, you can take that walk in the forest or vacation in Cadiz without feeling you are not caught up.

4. Share

We've all heard the advice to "think win-win". Forget that advice. If you follow that advice, you will always be looking at things and saying, "what's in it for me?" That's exactly the wrong attitude to have in a connected world.

The way to function in a connected world is to share without thinking about what you will get in return. It is to share without worrying about so-called "free-riders" or people taking advantage of your work.

In a connected world, you want to be needed and wanted. This will, over time, cause resources to be sent to you, not as a reward for some piece of work, but because people will want to send you stuff to help you to be even more valuable to them.

When you share, people are more willing to share with you. In a networked world, this gives you access to more than you could ever produce or buy by yourself. By sharing, you increase your own capacity, which increases your marketability.

5. RTFM

RTFM stands for 'Read The Fine Manual' (or some variant thereof) and is one of the primary rules of conduct on the internet.

What it means, basically, is that people should make the effort to learn for themselves before seeking instruction from others.

Almost everything a person could need to know has been recorded somewhere online (by people who are sharing their knowledge freely). Taking the time and effort to look at this work is not merely respectful, it demonstrates a certain degree of competence and self-reliance.

For example, if your software fails to install, instead of calling customer service or posting a note on a bulletin board, copy the error message into the Google search field and look for answers. Almost every software error has been encountered (and documented) by someone before you.

Finally, when you do ask for help, you can state what you've read and tried, and why it didn't work. This saves people from giving you advice you don't need and helps them focus on what's unique about your problem.

6. Cooperate

Offline people collaborate. They join teams, share goals, and work together. Everybody works in the same place, they use the same tools, and they have the same underlying vision of the project or organization.

Online, people cooperate. They network. Each has his or her own goals and objectives, but what joins the whole is a web of protocols and communications. People contribute their own parts, created (as they say in open source programming) to 'satisfy their own itch'.

This is probably the consequence of distance. Online, it is not possible to enforce your will or (beyond a limited extent) to get your way by shouting and intimidation. This means that online communications are much more voluntary than offline communications. And successful online connectors recognize this.

To cooperate, it is necessary to know the protocols. These are not rules – anybody can break them. But they establish the basis for communication. Protocols exist in all facets of online communications, from the technologies that connect software (like TCP/IP and HTML) to the ways people talk with each other (like netiquette and emoticons).

7. Be Yourself

What makes online communication work is the realization that, at the other end of that lifeless terminal, is a living and breathing human being.

The only way to enable people to understand you is to allow them to sympathize with you, to get to know you, to feel empathy for you. Comprehension has as much to do with feeling as it does with cognition.

People who use online communications 'only for business' – or worse, feel that other people shouldn't be posting cat photos or playing Scrabble on Facebook – are employing only a small part of the communications capacity of the internet.

Learning and communicating are not merely acts of sending content over a wire. They are about engaging in (what Wittgenstein called) a 'Way of Life'. Having a cat is as important for a physicist as having an advanced research lab. These common everyday things form the mental structure on which we hang the highly theoretical structure.

The idea behind 'being yourself' is not that you have some sort of offline life (though you may). Rather, it's a recognition that your online life encompasses the many different facets of your life and that it is important that these facets all be represented and work together.

Previous Citation(s)

Downes, S. (2011). Access::Future. <https://www.downes.ca/me/mybooks.htm>





This content is provided to you freely by EdTech Books.

Access it online or download it at https://edtechbooks.org/open_scholar/seven_habits.