

Using Social Capital to Access Opportunities and Contribute to our Communities

“Social capital” has been covered in a wide range of disciplines including economics, education, history, medicine, sociology, human rights, and politics. As our society has undergone significant shifts demographically, culturally, and politically; it has become a hot topic with regards to people with disabilities and others who strive for full participation and increased opportunities in the broader community. Social capital refers to all of the connections that people have to other people, in every aspect of their lives, throughout a person’s lifetime. Other words to describe these connections are relationships and networks. People who have a lot of social capital experience more opportunities, greater happiness, and achieve more of their desired outcomes than those who have very little social capital. This fact sheet will present information on social capital as it relates to improving the lives of people with disabilities from the viewpoints of people with disabilities.



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QUESTION:

Are there different types of social capital?

ANSWER

Social capital includes three different types of networks.

- ▶ Bonding Networks
- ▶ Bridging Networks
- ▶ Linking Networks

Bonding Networks are characterized by the close ties that help people get by on a daily basis. They are primarily homogeneous connections with family, friends and neighbors who share similar beliefs and life circumstances. These are people that an individual knows well and with whom they share things in common.

A bridging network consists of connections with others outside of a person’s bonding network making it heterogeneous in nature. Typically, these are people the individual doesn’t know well. The advantage of a bridging network is that it links the person to external resources and gives him or her access to more opportunities than typically available and is also an avenue for disseminating information. For example, a bridging network is very valuable to a person looking for job contacts, ideas and leads. It provides access for the person to gain new experiences. It’s the collective VALUE that comes from these bridging networks, or groups that make it possible for an individual to achieve things he or she couldn’t access on their own. These networks offer benefits, not just for individuals within a network, but for the community as a whole. More concepts emerge from such networks: trust, reciprocity, altruism, generosity.

Linking networks provide an individual with access to organizations and systems that help people obtain resources or create change. These can include foundations, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and financial institutions. Although these groups are very different from one another, their members find a mutually beneficial reason for working together.



QUESTION:

What are the benefits of having social capital?

ANSWER

“Social capital is strongly linked to subjective well-being through many independent channels and in several different forms. Marriage and family, ties to friends and neighbors, workplace ties, civic engagement (both individually and collectively), trustworthiness, and trust all appear independently and robustly related to happiness and life satisfaction” (Helliwell, J. and Putnam, R, 2009).



There appear to be relationships between the number connections people have with a number of beneficial outcomes.

- ▶ Better health and well-being
- ▶ Greater access to diverse options and opportunities
- ▶ Expanded sense of hopefulness and optimism about the future
- ▶ Increased willingness to make tangible contributions to the community
- ▶ Stronger self-determination

Self-determination is such a powerful concept for all people but certainly for those with disabilities. Self-determined individuals have the power to make decisions and have choices. They have a large measure of control over their lives. They have access to resources and supports that they need. It follows that a person's ability to live a self-determined life is compromised if they lack social capital.

QUESTION:

How do people typically acquire social capital?

ANSWER

For most of people, social capital is initially transmitted at an early age, by an individual's parents and families. The amount of initial social capital a child "inherits" from family members can differ significantly, from a tremendous amount, to almost none. Social capital is greatly influenced by a person's bonding network. As part of the maturation process people begin to acquire social capital by discovering their passions, being recognized for these passions, and finding avenues for expressing them within a community. An individual's social capital expands as he or she encounters others who will encourage, support and guidance. An individual begins to develop a sense of purpose and a positive view of the future.

QUESTION:

What are some of the unique challenges for people with disabilities in building social capital?

ANSWER

By the very nature of their disabilities, many individuals are likely to have limited opportunities to form the kinds of relationships and connections that build social capital. Lack of transportation, limited opportunities to participate in community activities, and being unemployed may be beyond the control of the individual with a disability. However, these things restrict opportunities for people to make valuable connections. People who do not have disabilities have around 150 connections; however, those with disabilities typically have as few as 25. Alexandra Dixon encourages us to be mindful of the fact that some of us, because of our backgrounds, have more advantages than others do. This influences a person's social capital.

"So I'm thinking about intersecting identities and how that may limit the amount of social capital one is able to access. For example, being a person of color and disabled might mean that access to social capital is different than it is for me. When it comes to education -- because social capital is about how we resource our schools -- those who don't have a lot of social capital may not be able to get the resources they need to have good schools which further perpetuates systemic inequality."

QUESTION:

What are some characteristics of people with disabilities with high levels of social capital?

ANSWER

The following list of characteristics is based on general trends in the disability field as well as input from people disabilities. Individuals with high levels of social capital have the following:

- ▶ Resources;
- ▶ Ability to leverage those resources;
- ▶ Influence, control, autonomy;
- ▶ Natural supports;
- ▶ Desire and ability to advocate for others;
- ▶ Emotionally satisfying life styles;
- ▶ Options and choices
- ▶ Ability to ask for, and make referrals and recommendations;
- ▶ Motivation and means to attend events (social, work-related, recreational);
- ▶ Willingness to contribute time, talents, energy and other resources to the community;
- ▶ Ability to evaluate where the holes are in their network, and strive to fill those holes;
- ▶ Connections through ongoing education and training;
- ▶ Access to social media;
- ▶ Ability to get to the places they want to go to;

- ▶ Ability to communicate, with and without accommodations or assistive technology to express what they want and need, obtain information, identify problems, generate solutions, and manage conflicts;
- ▶ Desire to bring people together to meet common needs;
- ▶ Strong sense of self-efficacy;
- ▶ Belief in the power of collective action;
- ▶ Understanding of their limitations and willingness to ask for specific help;
- ▶ Desire to reciprocate and help others in any way they can;
- ▶ A spirit of adventure such as a willingness to “put themselves out there;”
- ▶ Strategic alliances;
- ▶ A personality that draws people to them; and
- ▶ Access to information and opportunities for skill-building.

QUESTION:

What other “tips” can people with disabilities use to build social capital?

ANSWER

The following tips are provided by people with disabilities:



Neil Jacobson, Former Senior Vice President Wells Fargo

“I know that all the technical stuff can be learned if the social capital is there. Conversely, without social capital, technical skills are often useless.”

Relationships are critical as “it is not who I know, but who knows me.” Social capital is the ability to be liked. It is by far the most important asset anyone has in both their professional and personal lives. All other assets and attributes can be acquired or compensated for if a person knows how to network and develop relationships. It takes WORK...hard work to build a network and to create the valuable relationships needed to impact you personally and professionally:

- ▶ Ingratiate oneself within a solid and respected network;
- ▶ Collect names, contacts and resources;
- ▶ Ask for referrals/recommendations; and
- ▶ Attend frequent events to get your name and abilities out into the region, even if accommodations are needed.

“At many of the Bank’s functions, everyone stood and chatted with each other. From my wheelchair, all I could see were butts and ... No one could hear me above the din. My colleague suggested that before each function I contact people I wanted to meet and arrange times they could meet me in the hallway, sit down, and chat with me for a few minutes. It worked! I met many people that way and it was fun!”

“When I first worked at Wells Fargo, my team members always went to a bar Friday afternoons. I hate the taste of liquor. I quickly learned the importance of joining them at the bar that was where many decisions were made. My drink – rum and coke without rum. I’ve often said that one of my biggest handicaps working for a bank was my dislike for wine and sports. Many company dinners were preceded by hours of wine tasting. Many company meetings were held right before sports events. I attended every party, dinner and event that I could, and I enjoyed them too!”



Alexandra Dixon, Community Partnerships Coordinator HealthWorks

Use your network and others you know to get what you need/want.

“Last year, the very first snow storm that dumped 23 inches I was stuck in the house I was renting for five days, because my street had not been plowed. At the end of five days, my patience wore out, and I called every politician I knew, from my US Senators and Congressmen, to my State Assembly folks, to my board of supervisor people. I was plowed out in an hour and a half.”

Get to know people who are very different from you.

“I think that part of the reason I have such a wide social network is that I have people from all kinds of different walks of life. I have theater folks, I have healthcare folks, I have teacher folks, I know the head of Virginia’s ACLU. I have lots of politicians in my network. I know people working on immigration justice

issues, reproductive justice issues, environmental issues. I have ministers not only from the UU tradition, but also from the Episcopal tradition and UCC, and Baptist. I often say, If I don't know someone who can directly solve this issue, maybe I know someone who knows someone. "



Chris Mielo, Self-employed Video Consultant

"Most clients I have are through connections I've made through various volunteer activities or through referrals... With my network, I can grow my business to support myself."

Build relationships over time using strategies that include handwritten notes, frequent emails and invitations to various events of mutual interests. Volunteer! Many contacts are the result of connections made through various activities.



Chaz Kellam, Center for Race and Gender Equity, YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh

"Many in my area have worked hard to get new people involved and engaged to impact our community. By hoping to get more involved, this will make our region better and provide better opportunities for employment and successful independent living opportunities."

Contribute one's time, talents, and resources to the community. Take on new and challenging tasks, especially if you haven't had the professional opportunity to demonstrate proficiency. This could lead to new roles, responsibilities and opportunities. Use social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Participate in high school or college alumni activities. Return favors if others lend a hand on a project one needs help completing, do something as a thank you.



Chris Mielo, Self-employed video consultant

"Living independently comes with household tasks that are beyond my ability. Friends, family, and neighbors will often lend a hand on a project I need help completing, and I, in turn, will cook dinner as a thank you... I may not be able to build a deck or put up a fence, but if I can prepare food, bring drinks, set up music, or do some small thing to help a part of the project, I will. "

Talk to people and hear their stories. Show up; people will ask you to do things. Be open to possibilities. Unless there is a really good reason why not, say "yes" to opportunities that come your way even if you don't consider the situation or setting ideal.

QUESTION:

Can you summarize why someone should be concerned with social capital?

ANSWER

Put quite simply, social capital is available to all of us – and makes our lives better. It expands the more it is shared. Think of it as an investment. Similar to building financial capital, the more you invest, the bigger your return -- but unlike money, the more social capital you spend, the more you have! There is no better investment.

REFERENCE: Helliwell, J.F., Huang, H., & Putnam, R.D. (2009). How's the Job? Are trust and social capital neglected workplace investments? In V.O. Bartkus & J.H. Davis (Eds.), *Social Capital: Reaching In, Reaching Out* (87-144). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

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