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## Human resources

**Traditional methods of inspiring community involvement collapse in the face of tight schedules and reluctance to participate in enforced social activity. That's why we need to look to organisations to build social capital, claims Mario Luis Small.**

Anyone seeking guidance on how to [build social capital](#) need look no further than their nearest search engine. The idea of countering what Robert Putnam described in *Bowling Alone* as the weakening of community connections over the past 40 years has inspired hundreds of thousands of how-to guides. You can find everything from official papers by Harvard academics to how-to lists by obscure bloggers. There are guides for the hopeful, the angry, the lonely, the greedy and even the unemployed. The suggestions cover every realm of human activity, including the bland ("attend home parties when invited"), the labour-intensive ("organise a sports league"), the bewildering ("answer surveys when asked") and the easier-said-than-done ("innovate early and often"). For anyone concerned with building the social engagement needed for effective democracies, the internet is awash with solutions.

The problem, however, lies in the solutions. To be sure, they are not lacking in imagination, good intentions or variety. Nor do they rely on shoddy research. While critics have pointed out that new forms of community have emerged, particularly through online friendship sites, many conventional ways of socialising have almost certainly declined. As social capital scholars have argued, these are probably worth saving, since many forms of trust, friendship and community depend on interacting face to face. The existing solutions, if implemented, would go a long way towards achieving that goal, reducing some forms of isolation, reviving some types of group association and probably increasing voter participation.

The trouble is that few of the solutions stand much chance of being implemented. To see one reason why, set aside the fact that many people simply do not care and that even well-meaning people can sometimes dislike group sports, or volunteering, or crowds of any kind, or being forced to make conversation. Forget the fact that many would prefer to curl up with a book than participate in group activities for the sake of the common good. Assume instead that we seek to move solely those people who are receptive to the idea of building social capital.

The first problem is that this 'movable' sector of the population faces time pressures much greater than those it faced 40 years ago. Together with my research assistants, I spent six years interviewing a diverse set of mothers of young children in New York City. They were black, white and Latina; affluent, middle-class and poor; doctors, secretaries, dancers, teachers, welfare recipients and everything in between. Yet in spite of their diverse lives, the full span of their experiences with respect to time commitments only ranged from 'too busy' to 'overwhelmed'. Sociologist Suzanne Bianchi and her colleagues analysed decades' worth of US data and confirmed that parents are much busier on average than they were a generation ago. Who has time to start a bowling league?

### The willing few

Of course, some people do have time to start bowling leagues; they are the reason we continue to have bowling leagues. All societies enjoy the benefits of a small minority that possesses more time, energy and inclination than others to do the things the rest of us appreciate. These people are in short supply, however. (If they were not, we would not have a social capital problem.) They are the bake sale coordinators and the office party planners and the church volunteers and the presidents of parent-teacher groups; they are not the many of us who, while sympathetic, feel overcommitted. Rather than help organise, the rest of us prefer just to write a cheque.

A second problem is that, while many of the solutions are based on a powerful insight – that social capital only emerges from within groups, rather than from mandates by governments or organisations – they appropriate the wrong lesson from it. The existing solutions share the idea that the ordinary person can and should make a difference. And therein lies the rub: we need [civic engagement](#) to create the social capital that improves civic engagement. However, the fact that leaders cannot require people to develop



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social capital does not imply that they cannot structure organisations to make the growth of social capital a likely outcome.

I would like to propose that builders of social capital redirect their attention away from ordinary people and towards leaders of **businesses and nonprofit organisations**. Social capital can, in fact, be nudged into existence, but only within organisations. The key is not to try to dictate social connections but to better negotiate the realities of contemporary society. A more enlightened view begins by acknowledging that, given the many demands on their attention, few of the 'movable' people will devote themselves to an endeavour simply for the benefit of the common good. Rather than fighting this fact, social capitalists should embrace it by thinking differently about the routine organisations that structure everyday life, such as companies, gyms, schools, childcare centres, places of worship and other institutions.

### Levels of commitment

Consider the centres that cared for the children of the women we studied for several years. We interviewed the directors of many different kinds of childcare centre – 23 in all, ranging from the commercial to the nonprofit, the secular to the religious, the corporate to the standalone – and observed what staff, children, mothers and fathers (though few of the latter were visible) did over the course of operations.

At the end of our study, nothing surprised us more than how much the centres differed in their social capital. In some, most mothers forged new friendships among the other parents; together, they organised parties, arranged play dates, attended movies and dinners, and developed what many of them referred to as a new community. Joining the centre had measurably transformed their social networks (as we confirmed through statistical analyses of representative data). In other centres, mothers knew few, if any, of the other parents; they did not party or dine with them, or babysit their children. These centres served as little more than drop-off and pick-up locations. In one rare example, the director had even tried to build social capital but failed: she threw a pizza party for parents to socialise and almost none of them attended.

The socially effective centres did not differ from the others in the amount of leisure time the mothers had at their disposal; in all of them, most mothers worked full-time. Race, class, lifestyle and neighbourhood did not explain the difference, and nor did these centres have particularly heroic directors committed to creating a sense of community among the parents. On the contrary, few directors displayed any interest in building social capital for its own sake. Like the rest of us, they were busy; they had a centre to run.

Instead, social capital typically emerged when directors were trying to accomplish some other task, one that gave parents opportunities to interact or incentives to cooperate. For example, many directors believed strongly that children should be exposed to zoos, museums, libraries, children's parks and farms. But trips to these locations require many more adults than are needed in the classroom, to prevent children from sticking their hands in monkey cages, wandering off in parks or slipping into ponds at apple-picking expeditions. Since hiring more staff for these occasions was costly, the centres needed parents to attend. No parent volunteers, no field trips. Centres needed volunteers for other activities, too, such as sanding and painting playgrounds at the end of the year, contributing food for various ceremonies and raising money to keep tuition fees moderate. In some centres in low-income neighbourhoods, mothers were expected either to raise a certain amount over the course of the year – usually about US\$300 – or pay it out of pocket. To avoid paying the fee, parents had to volunteer for group fundraising activities, such as selling baked goods or holding raffles.

**“When organisations turn to members for the sake of their survival, they stimulate social capital into existence”**

All of these activities – field trips, clean-ups, ceremonies and raffles – required interaction and socialisation with others; they obliged parents to meet, talk, exchange phone numbers, arrange schedules and get organised. As a result, the centres that imposed greater demands on parents provided opportunities and incentives that, over the course of weeks and months, stimulated the formation of social capital.

Note that most mothers declared themselves too busy to attend purely social events, which is part of the reason the pizza party attempted by the director proved futile. But they were willing to carve some time out of their schedules for the sake of improving their children's education, keeping tuition fees low, maintaining the viability of the centre or guaranteeing their coveted childcare slot. In the highly underserved New York City childcare market, no rational mother would decline a slot because she might be expected to help organise a ceremony, sell some baked goods or chaperone a field trip.

Paradoxically enough, the centres negotiated busy mothers' time by asking more, not less, of them – not for the sake of making friendships, but for the sake of pooling resources for the survival of the centre and their children's education. Did the mothers, then, possess more free hours than they claimed? Not exactly. In those centres that demanded the greatest commitment, mothers found themselves slowly reconfiguring their time. The more they worked with these former strangers, the more they saw themselves as part of a new community and the more they folded other aspects of their

lives, such as playtime or trips to the zoo or film nights or drinks and dinner, into their newly formed networks.

### Habitual networking

The experience of childcare centres encourages us to think beyond the 'ordinary citizens' to the routine organisations in which people are embedded. We rarely form true, lasting friendships or communities by trying to 'network' more. We do so from repeated interactions with the parent in the centre, the worker in the office, the believer in the church, the stylist at the salon, the student in the lecture or the patron at the gym – provided that those organisations, unwittingly or otherwise, make it easy for us to form friendships.

The most effective directors recognised that parents were not merely clients, but members with the potential to offer valuable resources. They unwittingly encouraged social capital because those things that built it happened to be to their advantage. Of course, we cannot counteract the decades-long decline in many forms of group association solely by emulating the practices of these most effective centres. But these practices have, for a change, realistic odds of implementation, since many organisations benefit from channelling responsibilities to their members. When organisations turn to members for the sake of their survival – whether they are centres asking parents to paint swing sets, colleges asking alumni to run fundraisers, churches asking members to serve soup, deans asking professors to run workshops or unions asking workers to help candidates – they stimulate social capital into existence by essentially forcing members to get organised.

Rather than hoping that the 'movable middle' suddenly feels inspired, perhaps those concerned about social capital should turn to these organisations, since these have not only the means but also the incentive to alter their behaviour. The perspective I suggest reorients attention from the parent to the centre, from the ordinary person to the routine organisation. Want more bowling leagues? Stop hoping for enthusiasts. Convince the managers of bowling alleys, who have something to gain.

The rest of us have things to do.

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Mario Luis Small is professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. Mario Luis Small's book, [Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life](#), is published by Oxford University Press, USA.

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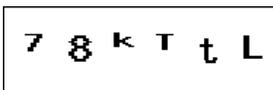
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