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# Dunbar's number

## Managing meaningful relationships in an ever-expanding world



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**By Miles B. Cooper**

The lawyer picked up the call from a colleague. Near the end of the conversation, the colleague said, "I want to compliment you and your team. You're responsive. In an era where I frequently need to send multiple emails just to nudge someone on the same project, it stands out. Keep up the good work!" The lawyer rang off and thought about it. Being responsive was great. Yet it came at a price – every response took time. And the more people one knew, the more connected one became, the more time one needed for responses in order to be responsive. And responding, while sometimes fruitful and enjoyable, was different than producing. The tension made the lawyer think about Dunbar's number and how the concept applied to today's busy world.

### A man walks into Dunbar

In 1992, British anthropologist Robin Dunbar theorized that we have cognitive limits to the number of people we can maintain stable social relationships with. Dunbar reached this figure by looking at primate groups, their social group sizes, their neocortex size, and then extrapolating that to humans. Bigger brains, bigger tribes. Dunbar reached the conclusion that the human mean group size is 148, with a large error margin of 100-230. While others have criticized Dunbar's methods, the concept has become a tool in management and forecasting.

Why are we talking about Dunbar's number? Evaluating the concept helps us understand why some of us can feel like our monkey brains can't keep up with our hyperconnected world. One opens a phone to text a loved one. A half hour later one is still holding the phone, original reason forgotten but having responded to many other people. Consider our myriad connections: in-person connections, including co-workers, the legal community, family, friends, neighbors, and for parents, all the kids' school and potentially extracurricular connections. Layer on texts, emails, and phone calls. Then the digital town halls including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and others. These platforms sing their social siren songs – Like! Comment! Post! Connect! And each has direct messages. It's no wonder we feel like we cannot keep up, and simultaneously that folks are non-responsive. There's no malice. There's simply not enough time. So, how can we be responsive without responding becoming a full-time job?

### Response requested

First, question the premise. Is responding one's primary job? For some managers, leaders, and salespeople, connecting with people, answering questions, and responding is the job. For the rest of us we need a responsiveness strategy. Otherwise, responding, and the fear of people's opinions stress from not responding, can be overwhelming. Know that the more successful one is, the more connections present themselves. This means one must learn how to (1) say no; (2) introduce folks to others to help them; (3) work with an assistant who triages, time blocks, and sometimes drafts responses; (4) sometimes be okay with not responding. For those needing time for deep work (most professionals), there are some best practices. First, time block with a stopwatch, triage, and batch. Have a window (or if one is truly indispensable, two) during the day, preferably after one's deep work time block. Why after? Doing it before can tempt one to spend more time responding, eating into deep work. One's inbox is everyone else's To Do list.

Stick to that responding time block. Fifteen to thirty minutes. Move inbox items into one's pre-existing folders (Today, Someday, FYI.) Forward anything that can be handled by others to those others, "Please draft a meet and confer response to this for my signature, due by 4 p.m. tomorrow." If one has the luxury of having a good assistant, with training much of this can be done by one's assistant. Then respond to as many of the Today items as one has time for in the time block. Stop when the time block ends, no matter what. If one communication requires significant time, build a response time block for that communication.

This same time blocking technique can be applied to anything one has to respond to on a regular basis. For example, if LinkedIn is a significant networking tool, time block it. Get in, get it done, and get out. After any social media foray take a moment to go outside and, if possible, walk around the block (or further.) Remind oneself that social platforms are where people put their best face forward. Researchers have noted that folks universally feel worse, not better, after scrolling social media. So why do we do it? A combination of wanting to feel connected and a desire for dopamine.

### Outro

The lawyer, having reflected on connection and Dunbar's number, arrived at a conclusion. Yes, there's finite time to respond to folks. But being with people, in person, is more nurturing and more productive than digital engagement. The best way to maintain that human connection while building in time for deep work? Build containment strategies to limit digital engagement to less than 10% of one's work time. The best use for digital engagement? Planning in-person engagement.

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