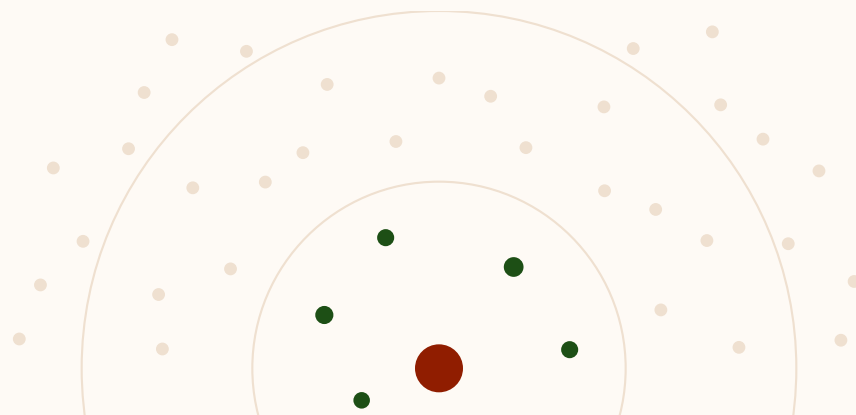


The Network Paradox:

Why More LinkedIn Connections Won't Save You

A new survey of 500 U.S. professionals reveals the gap between building a network and knowing who you can count on—and where AI is making things harder



Ask professionals whether a large network matters to their career, and the answer is clear: 81% say yes. Ask the same people how many of their connections would actually recognize them outside a notification, and the story changes fast. Nearly two-thirds say half or fewer of their connections actually know who they are. A third say fewer than half know them.

That's the finding at the center of a new survey from Goodword, a platform for professional relationships, which polled 500 U.S. professionals this fall. The results describe a workforce that has stopped believing its own networking metrics, even as it keeps compulsively growing them.

How many of your connections actually know you?

64%

say half or fewer of their LinkedIn connections actually know who they are.



Half or fewer

The pressure to build a network on LinkedIn contradicts the value professionals actually see. Nearly six in ten professionals, 59%, agree that LinkedIn rewards looking successful more than being useful, showing that a majority are pushing back on the value of the platform built almost entirely around personal branding.

One respondent summed up the resentment plainly:

"Those people are there to inflate numbers, or to give off an appearance of success."

The favor test

Connection counts are easy to inflate. Real help is harder to fake, so the survey asked a blunter question: how many people could you call today with an actual work problem and expect a real answer? Across all respondents, 47% said more than five.

The number gets more interesting once you cut it by network size. Among professionals with 500 or more connections, 73% could call more than five people. A bigger network, in this data, came with a bigger circle of people willing to help, not a smaller one. Networking isn't the zero-sum game the "quality over quantity" narrative usually assumes. It's just heavily front-loaded: most of the value sits with the people already at the top of the list.

People they could call for real work help

Share who can call more than five people

All respondents

47%



Professionals with 500+ connections

73%

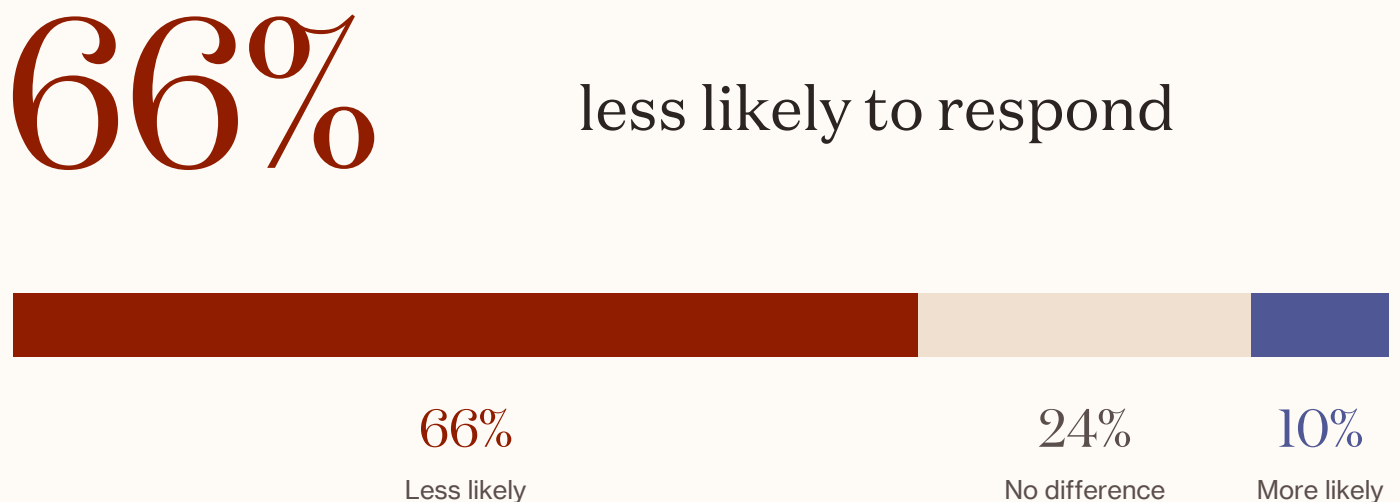


Larger-network group is a subset of the total.

AI outreach has a trust problem

If 2026's workplace has a villain, it's AI-written outreach. Two-thirds say they're less likely to respond to a message that sounds AI-generated. Just 10% say the opposite. The chilling effect has spread to how people show up publicly, too: 32% say they've posted less about their own work because of the volume of AI content online, more than three times the 9% who say they've posted more.

Reaction to a message that sounds AI-written



Professionals aren't giving up on networking. They're getting more selective about which parts of it they still trust.

When it's real, people go small

Ask professionals who they'd actually turn to for help tomorrow, a job lead, an introduction, a favor, and two-thirds, 67%, name their close circle first. Just 9% said they'd post publicly and see who responds.

Who would you turn to first for real help?

Selected responses

Close circle

67%



Post publicly and see who responds

9%



Other response options: broader network; not sure.

The instinct isn't paranoia. It's experience:

54%

of respondents say they've already realized, after an opportunity passed, that someone in their network could have helped.

Nearly 30% say they've missed an opportunity from their network more than once.

One relationship or 500 connections?

Given a straight choice between one strong relationship that could open the right door and 500 additional LinkedIn connections, professionals were clear: social capital wins. Nearly three-quarters, 74%, chose the relationship.

Which would help your career more?



The preference isn't sentimental.

97%

of professionals with a specific goal before year-end say the right person in their network could help them get there faster.

As one respondent put it:

"It's better to have four quarters than 100 pennies."

The takeaway

Professional networking has spent the past decade optimizing for size, because size was the easiest thing to measure and the easiest thing to show off. This survey suggests that return on connection count is running thin right as AI makes size even easier to fake. Depth was always the harder number to game. It may be the only one that was ever real.

About Goodword

Goodword is the modern relationship manager that turns the contacts scattered across your inbox, calendar, LinkedIn, and memory into your next opportunity.

[Learn more at Goodword.com.](https://www.goodword.com)

Methodology

500 U.S. professionals, ages 18–54, employed full-time or self-employed full-time, with a bachelor's degree or higher. Fielded via Pollfish, Fall 2026.