



The State of *Human Connection* in 2026

How professionals are navigating relationships in the AI era

A RESEARCH COLLABORATION

Goodword × Julia Lynch Eckstein

January 2026 | n=542

Editor's Note

When we set out to survey 542 professionals about the state of human connection in 2026, we expected to find frustration. What we found instead was a profound paradox.

Professionals have more tools for connection than ever before — yet **75%** say their trust in outreach has collapsed entirely. AI has democratized communication at the exact moment it has destroyed trust in it.

"We've built a world optimized for connection at scale, yet we've never felt more disconnected."

And yet, one number stopped us in our tracks: **83%** of professionals believe social capital will be the most valuable asset in an AI-dominated future. In a world where AI can do the work, *who you know* — and who trusts you — becomes the ultimate differentiator. The need for relationships is rising. The bridges to building them are collapsing.

Across ten key findings, we discovered that professionals aren't failing at networking because they don't care. They care deeply — **81%** have regretted not keeping in touch, and **79%** have lost tangible opportunities by letting relationships go cold. The failure isn't intention. It's execution.

What do they actually want from AI? Not a ghostwriter — only **6%** want that. They want a "Chief of Staff" that handles the cognitive load while leaving the human to write the message, and do what humans do best: authentically build relationships.

"The paradox of our time: we're using artificial intelligence to solve the most human problem of all — staying genuinely connected to the people who matter most."

— Chris Fischer, Co-Founder & CPTO

We hope this research sparks new conversations about the future of professional relationships — and inspires you to reach out to someone you've been meaning to connect with.

— Caroline Dell & Chris Fischer
Co-Founders, Goodword

Executive Summary

Human connection is under siege. In a world where AI can write our messages, professionals are more skeptical, more overwhelmed, and more disconnected than ever — yet they crave authentic relationships now more than ever.

83%

say social capital will be most valuable in the AI era



So What Does This Mean?

If AI can handle the technical work, **relationships become the moat**. The professionals who invest in their network before they need it will be the ones who thrive.

"The professionals who win won't be the most connected. They'll be the ones who show up consistently before they need anything in return."

75%

report collapsed trust
in cold messages

81%

have regretted not
keeping in touch

79%

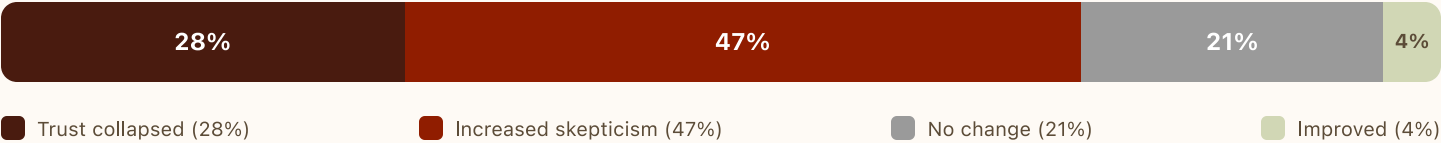
have lost opportunities
to cold relationships

THE BOTTOM LINE

Professionals know relationships matter. They want to stay connected. But they're drowning in fragmented tools, AI-generated noise, and the sheer effort of maintaining meaningful connections. **The gap isn't intention — it's execution.**

Finding 1: Trust in Cold Outreach Has Collapsed

"How has your trust in cold outreach changed since AI became widespread?"



"I assume every message is AI, because there is no one 'tell' — AI writes like a human because the people who made it stole the work of humans."

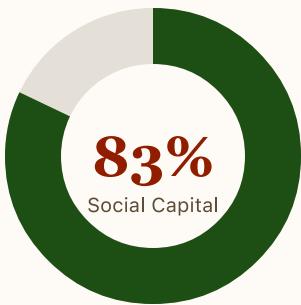
"Every LinkedIn DM now feels like it could be a bot. The default assumption has flipped."

THE INSIGHT

3 in 4 professionals now approach cold messages with skepticism or outright distrust. The AI detection game is lost — authenticity must be proven through relationship, not writing style.

Finding 2: Social Capital Is the New Currency

"If AI replaces technical tasks, what becomes most valuable?"



"In a world where AI can do the work, who you know — and who trusts you — becomes the differentiator."

"Your skills get commoditized. Your relationships don't."

"AI can learn anything. It can't build trust for you."

"The people who invested in relationships early are the ones getting the calls now."

THE INSIGHT

Relationships are no longer "nice to have." They're the moat. The currency of the future isn't what you know — it's who knows you.

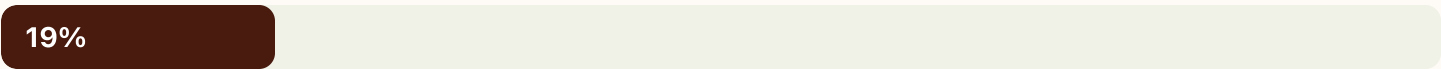
Finding 3: The Intention-Action Gap Is Real

"Have you ever lost an opportunity because you didn't stay in touch?"

Yes, minor loss (didn't stay top of mind)



Yes, major loss (missed a life-changing opportunity)



No, I'm on top of my network



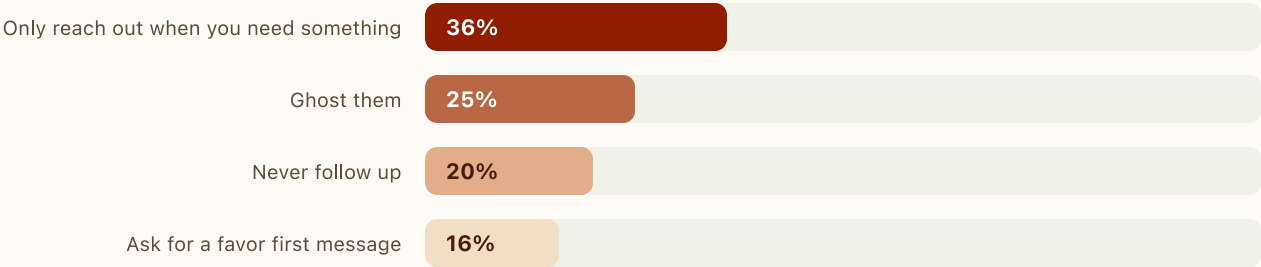
"I think about the job I didn't get because I let that relationship go cold. It still stings."

THE INSIGHT

79% have lost a tangible opportunity because they let a relationship go cold. The intent is there — the follow-through isn't.

Finding 4: What Actually Kills Relationships

"The fastest way to ruin a professional relationship is to..."



"People can smell transactional energy from a mile away. If you only show up when you need something, you've already lost."

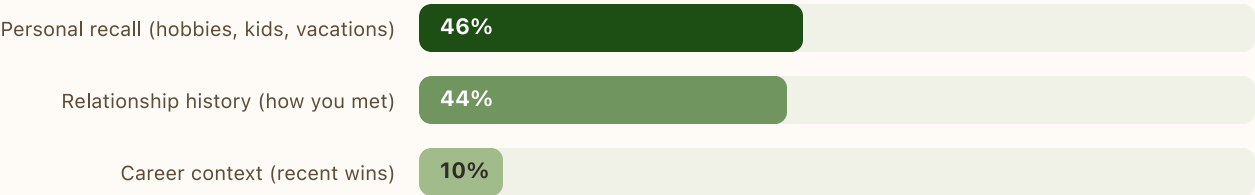
"The relationship was dead before they hit send. They just didn't know it yet."

THE PATTERN

The common thread: **transactional behavior**. People can tell when you only show up because you need something.

Finding 5: What Makes Reconnection Feel Meaningful

"When someone reconnects with you, what makes it feel genuine?"



"When someone remembers the little things — my kid's name, that trip I took, the project I was stressed about — that's when I know they actually care."

"It's the difference between 'Hey, how are you?' and 'How did your daughter's recital go?' One is generic. The other is human."

"The best reconnection I ever received referenced a conversation we had three years ago. I knew instantly it wasn't AI."

"Remembering someone's story is the ultimate sign of respect."

THE INSIGHT

Personal recall is the new signal of trust. In a world of AI-generated messages, remembering human details proves you're paying attention — and builds the trust that relationships require.

Finding 6: The AI Paradox

"What kind of AI assistance would you actually welcome for networking?"

Chief of Staff: Reminders + context, I write the message



Executive Assistant: Execute tasks as I instruct



Ghostwriter: Write and send messages for me



"I would even advocate preparing a draft follow-up email — BUT ONLY if I can edit it before sending. NO automatic sends!!"

"Tell me who to reach out to. Remind me what we talked about. But let me be the one who writes."

"I want AI to be my memory, not my voice."

"Give me the context. I'll bring the humanity."

THE INSIGHT

People don't want AI to replace their voice — they want AI to **augment their memory**.

Finding 7: What Drains Professionals About Networking

"What's the most exhausting part of maintaining your professional network?"

- 1 Follow-ups & keeping track
- 2 Finding time / scheduling
- 3 Cold outreach / getting responses
- 4 Transactional interactions
- 5 LinkedIn fatigue / spam

"The sheer magnitude of who I could reach out to and making sure the connection isn't just a transaction."

"It's not the networking itself. It's the administrative overhead of remembering to do it."

THE INSIGHT

The #1 pain isn't making connections — it's **maintaining them**. Follow-ups and keeping track drain professionals more than any other aspect. And there hasn't been a great tool to help — until now.

Finding 8: What They'd Do If Networking Felt Easier

"If networking took zero effort, what would you do more of?"



Meet in person
more often



Follow up
consistently



Casual check-ins
(no ask)



Reach out to
new contacts



Go deeper with
existing ties

"I'd actually enjoy networking if I didn't have to remember everything myself."

"I want to be the person who shows up — not because I need something, but because I genuinely care. I just need help getting there."

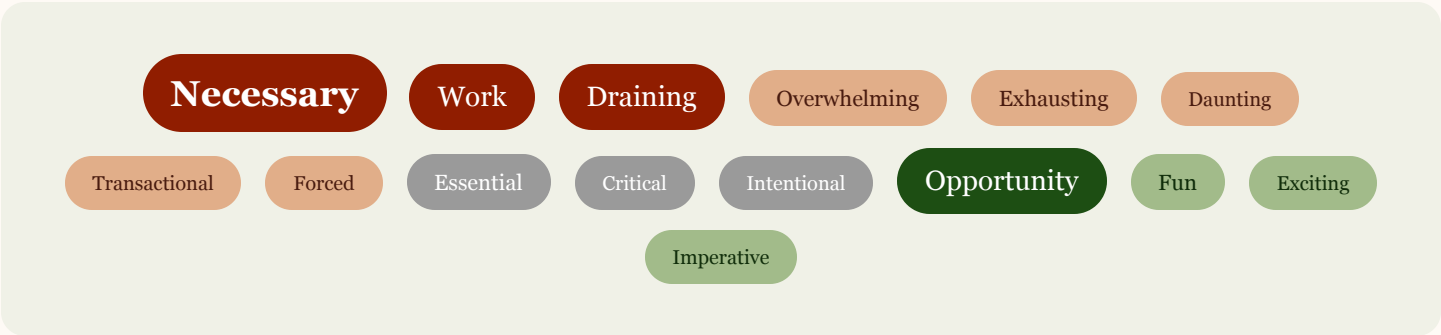
"If it were easier, I'd check in on people just to say hi. No agenda. Just human connection."

THE INSIGHT

The desire is there. The friction is what stops them. If the cognitive load disappeared, professionals would do *more* of the human parts.

Finding 9: Networking in 2026 — In One Word

"Describe networking today in one word."



"It feels like a second job I never signed up for."

THE SO WHAT

Professionals see networking as **necessary but exhausting**. They know it matters — but they're burned out. The opportunity? Make it feel less like work and more like genuine human connection.

Finding 10: Where Career Wins Come From

"Where did your biggest career opportunity come from?"



- Close friends & colleagues (49%)
- Acquaintances (30%)
- Cold outreach (21%)

"My first boss got me my second job. My college roommate got me my third."

MOST IMPACTFUL RELATIONSHIPS (RANKED)

- 1 First boss / early manager
- 2 College connections / mentors
- 3 Colleagues turned friends
- 4 Family members

THE INSIGHT

79% of career wins come from people you already know. The ROI is in nurturing existing relationships.

The Opportunity

The data points to three unmet needs:

1. MEMORY AT SCALE

Professionals can't remember who to contact, what was discussed, and when to follow up. They need a system that remembers for them.

2. AUTHENTICITY SIGNALS

In a world of AI-generated messages, proving you're human is now a differentiator. Personal recall and relationship history matter more than ever.

3. ACTION PROMPTS

People want to stay connected but need a nudge at the right time. The gap isn't intention — it's execution.

"Taken together, these findings reveal a fundamental truth: the future belongs to professionals who can bridge the gap between wanting to stay connected and actually doing it."

Implications

FOR PROFESSIONALS

- Relationships are your moat — invest before you need them
- Personal recall is the new currency of trust
- The follow-up is where value is won or lost

FOR THE FUTURE OF NETWORKING

- AI-assisted ≠ AI-automated — people want a copilot, not a replacement
- Cold outreach is dying; warm intros are premium
- In-person is making a comeback

THE BOTTOM LINE

The right connection changes everything. But in 2026, the challenge isn't making connections — it's maintaining them. The professionals who win will be those who bridge the gap between intention and action, showing up consistently before they need anything in return.

Ready to strengthen your network?

Goodword helps you stay connected to the people who matter most.

[Request Your Spot](#)

About Goodword

Our Mission: Goodword is on a mission to strengthen human connection in the AI era.

We believe the future of networking isn't more automation — it's augmented authenticity. Technology that handles the cognitive load of relationship maintenance while preserving the irreplaceable human moment of genuine connection.

Goodword integrates seamlessly across the platforms and tools used for networking today — intelligently organizing relationships, surfacing the right connections, and prompting action at the right time.

Follow us: @trygoodword | **Join the waitlist:** goodword.com/waitlist

About the Partners

CAROLINE DELL

Co-Founder & CEO of Goodword. Previously helped Chief scale from 200 to 20,000+ members and over \$100M in ARR. Built LOLA's operational foundation as an early employee. Started her career at Bain & Company.

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@smarterinasec. Career and personal brand strategist with 150K+ followers. Advised professionals at Google, McKinsey, J.P. Morgan, Adobe, and dozens of leading companies.

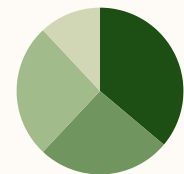
CHRIS FISCHER

Co-Founder & CPTO of Goodword. Proven technology and product executive with deep expertise in e-commerce, infrastructure, engineering, and product development. Previously at Shutterstock and Aaptiv.

Methodology

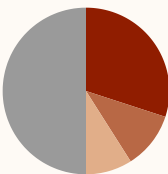
542 professionals participated in our survey during January 2026.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL



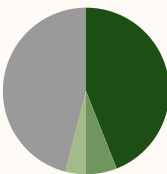
- Senior 36%
- Rising 26%
- Mid 26%
- Early 12%

TOP ROLES



- Founders 30%
- Executive 11%
- GTM 9%
- Other 50%

LOCATION



- NYC 44%
- SF 6%
- LA 4%
- Other 46%