

The internet improves Americans' capacity to maintain their social networks and they gain a big payoff when they use the internet to activate those networks to solicit help

Washington (January 25, 2006) – The internet and email expand and strengthen the social ties that people maintain in the offline world, according to a new report released today by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

One major payoff comes when people use the internet to press their social networks into action as they face major challenges. People not only socialize online, but they also incorporate the internet into their quest for information and advice as they seek help and make decisions.

Disputing concerns that heavy use of the internet might diminish people's social relations, the report finds that the internet fits seamlessly with Americans' in-person and phone encounters. With the help of the internet, people are able to maintain active contact with sizable social networks, even though many of the people in those networks do not live close to them.

The report, "The Strength of Internet Ties," highlights how email supplements, rather than replaces, the communication people have with others in their network.

"The larger, the more far-flung, and the more diverse a person's network, the more important email is," argues Jeffrey Boase, a University of Toronto sociologist who co-authored the Pew Internet Project report. "You can't make phone calls or personal visits to all your friends very often, but you can 'cc' them regularly with a couple of keystrokes. That turns out to be very important."

One major benefit comes when people want to mobilize their networks as they face problems or significant decisions. The Pew Internet Project survey finds that internet users are more likely than non-users to have been helped by those in their networks as they faced important events in their life.

"Internet use provides online Americans a path to resources, such as access to people who may have the right information to help deal with family health crises or find a new job," says John Horrigan, Associate Director for Research at the Pew Internet Project and another author of the report. "When you need help these days, you don't need a bugle to call the cavalry, you need a big buddy list."

These survey findings fit into a larger transformation in social relations that sociologist Barry Wellman of the University of Toronto has called the rise of "networked individualism." He says that users of modern technology are less tied to local groups and increasingly tied to looser and more geographically scattered networks.

"The internet and the cell phone have transformed communication: Instead of being based on house-to-house interactions, they are built on person-to-person exchanges," maintains Wellman, also a co-author of the report. "This creates a new basis for community. Rather than relying on a single community for social support, individuals often must actively seek out a variety of appropriate people and resources for different situations."

In addition to using the internet to get help from their networks, some use the internet to get information and compare options as they face decisions and milestones in their lives. One of the Pew Internet Project surveys covered in this report shows that 45% of internet users – about 60 million Americans – say the internet has played an important or crucial role in helping them deal with at least one major life decision in the previous two years. That is a 33% increase from a similar survey in early 2002.

The eight major decisions queried in a March 2005 survey were:

- Getting additional training for your career: About 21 million said the internet had played a crucial or important role in this.
- Helping another person with a major illness or medical condition: About 17 million said the internet had played a crucial or important role in this.
- Choosing a school for yourself or a child: About 17 million said the internet had played a crucial or important role in this.
- Buying a car: About 16 million said the internet had played a crucial or important role in this.
- Making a major investment or financial decision: About 16 million said the internet had played a crucial or important role in this.
- Finding a new place to live: About 10 million said the internet had played a crucial or important role in this.
- Changing jobs: About 8 million said the internet had played a crucial or important role in this.
- Dealing oneself with a major illness or health condition: About 7 million said the internet had played a crucial or important role in this.

This report is based on the findings of two daily tracking surveys on Americans' use of the Internet. The Project's Social Ties survey was fielded from February 17, 2004, through March 17, 2004, and it involved interviews with 2,200 adults age 18 and older. The Project's Major Moments survey was fielded from February 21, 2004, through March 21, 2004, and it involved interviews with 2,201 adults. Both surveys have a margin of error of plus or minus two percentage points.

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