

From reality to the virtual reality of social networks

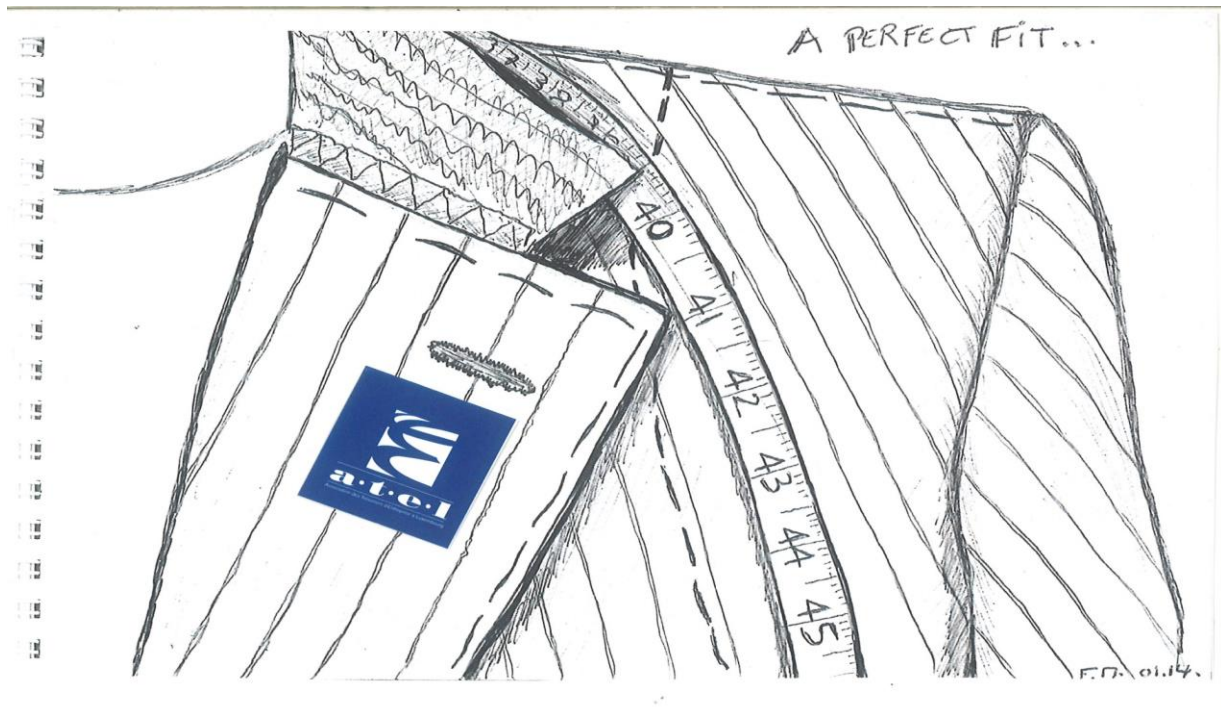
We may wonder at a change between generations in the way that generation “Y” and the millennials, no longer have the same approach to the concept of networks as their predecessors or previous generations. Networking consists of nurturing your relations with other people. It is about creating them and maintaining them within a corporation, particularly, so as to have useful contacts in your day-to-day working life. Having a good network is a little like having the assurance that you can count on someone being there if you need them, for example when you're looking for help or information. This requires physical (by presence) investment and maintenance to exist and last. Today, we need professional networks, regardless of job, to find mentors, peers, friends, contacts and potentially other people's help. More than ever in situations of economic crisis and financial difficulties, the network concept comes fully into its own. If you have no network, you are like the improvident cicada in Lafontaine's fable, which failed to lay in stores against the coming winter.



It is striking how, today, young people see networks as being "virtual" or "social" as they are usually called. You very quickly become a "friend", a "contact" or whatever. I am not trying to downplay the benefits of social networks. Quite the

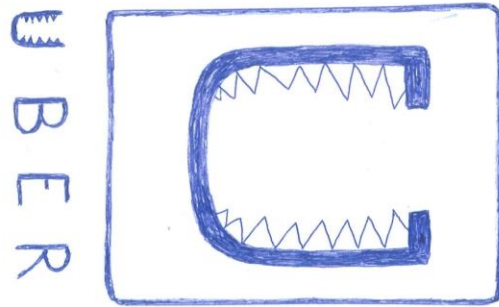
opposite, relying on only one form of social networking would be a big mistake, which far too many young people are making. **Social networks are certainly useful, but they are unpredictable, tenuous, relative and superficial. They can never replace physical networks and face-to-face relationships.** To build those, you have to go out and meet people, attend association meetings, take part in conferences and so forth, to develop this professional network. Young generations need to return to the future, developing real professional networks at the same time as virtual networks. Virtual networks are a useful supplement, but no sort of substitute for actual networks, as many people think.

Treasurer associations must resist this trend and fight against the real risk that one day these associations themselves will also become "virtual" and tenuous. Social networks produce a sort of smoke and mirrors effect that makes young people think that they are in contact with other people and that they can rely on them. Networks are exactly like friendship: they have to be built up and be maintained. In a way, mentioning "virtual reality" in connection with a network is self-contradictory. We have to go back to the reality of networks, obviously without in the process neglecting social networks and their particular contributions.



In combination they would seem to be ideal. We see them as being mutually reinforcing rather than alternatives. Over time, neglecting this threatens to end up with us no longer even seeing each other. Do not let us lose one of the strengths of human beings: contact (which means physical, and not just "virtual").

Our treasurer associations need to resist this trend to avoid falling into this looming trap in the fullness of time. This is just another risk or possible consequence of digitalisation taken to extremes. Instead, we need to prove the merit of belonging to a group, and that is much more difficult to demonstrate. Associations must show dynamism, creativity and innovation to recreate these networks that are no longer there or are disappearing. Relations between us must not be conducted just through a wire, or rather wirelessly over the internet. We need to steer projects in the direction of strengthening the feeling of belonging to a group, and we need to come together up more than just virtually. This is a challenge for associations in a digital world. We need to avoid the *Uberisation* of treasurer associations. We need to prevent the associations that have been our strength and worked in our interests for so many years being swallowed up or destroyed. Never let us forget to develop a robust network (it can never be robust enough), and let us maintain it carefully and consolidate it. **Networks are a sort of life assurance policy that everyone would prefer not to have to call upon, but which give reassurance by existing.** As the soothsayer Agamemnon said (and this could apply to social networks) *"it is a net with no way out, a real fishing net that I cast around him, a cloak of splendid perfidy"*.



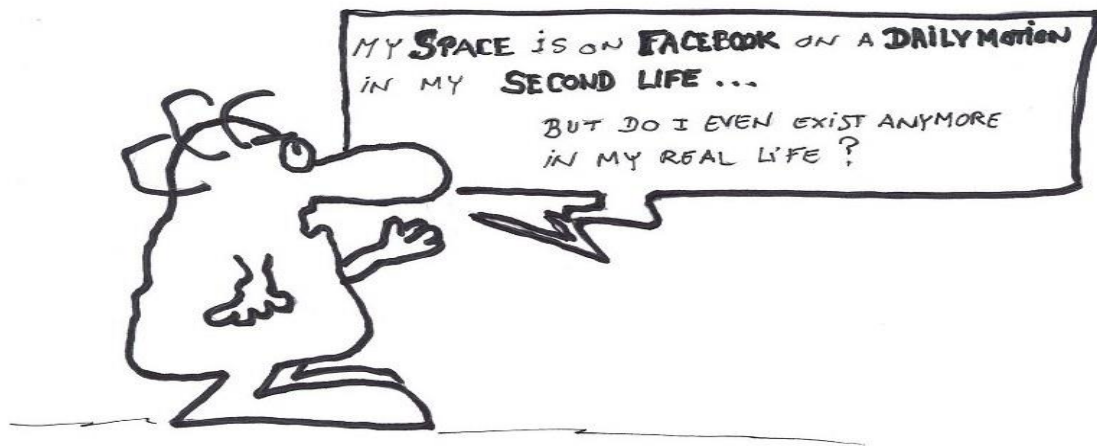
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So, the killer question is: "Is there any risk of UBERISATION of our treasurer associations?"

Perhaps without going quite as far as that, we may wonder whether treasurer associations, too, face a transformation in their economic and operational model.

The younger generation is becoming ever more virtual in their networks and in managing them, but also in preferring to look at videos rather than going off somewhere to attend events. The medium of video, as for media companies, has become crucial. Not seeing the danger and failing to provide educational and technical content in that format amounts almost to negligence. Associations need to consider re-looking their websites to make them more modern and more in tune with what the younger generation wants. Our member base is, of course, ageing and needs to be renewed. To achieve this, and to remain attractive and draw people in, associations need to use modern methods, to dematerialise more and continue to provide quality in "live" format to secure their long-term future. We may imagine associations of the future, virtual and dematerialised, with members but no headquarters, with webinars but no conferences, with an e-magazine but no longer a paper magazine, with videos but no more off-site courses, with forums and other dynamic messaging systems, but no nibbles and

drinks. That is where the future lies, and we need to embrace it and adapt to retain our members and to "materialise" them, by encouraging them to come to events "physically". That is quite a challenge, even though there is no immediate danger. It is amazing to see how few associations have yet considered these possible changes. The challenge seems to involve offering a range of services and activities (real and effective) that would bring people physically together in the same place. Change is inevitable for a number of reasons that include lack of time, distance, the expense and time of travelling, the environmental effects of travel, the always high costs of organisation and, finally, access to information over the internet that is easier than ever before. Why go to a treasurer association conference? That is the key question to ask yourself if you want to be able to adapt to a constantly changing world that will no longer spare treasurer associations. Are treasurer associations themselves becoming virtual in the "cloud", characterless and bland or even completely faceless? Nobody knows, but the fact that many of them are certainly seeing their member bases eroded demonstrates the urgent need to start to make changes and to remain vigilant so as to continue to attract the treasurers of the future. If the "in-person" aspect, the feeling of belonging to a strong community that unites us and protects us, should disappear, it would sound the death knell for the treasurer association movement. Lobbying, networking, member support, in-house training and training courses, friendship and a fraternal spirit, for example, could help reinforce the real (as opposed to virtual) aspect of associations. A powerful identity and pride in belonging to a community with which we identify are vital. We should not naïvely think that, by some miracle, our associations will be spared from the growing *Uberisation* that society is currently experiencing. Otherwise, sooner or later, they risk becoming obsolete and falling into disuse. If you love your association, as I do, you have to react and envisage a future that involves flexing to demand. We have nothing to sell, but our long-term survival depends on it, I fear.



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"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, but the most responsive to change" (Charles Darwin)

François Masquelier, Chairman ATEL.