

Time to Rub Shoulders

When I first heard about Timebanking, some 12 years ago, I was working as the Community Development Adviser for Gloucestershire County Council. I inhabited a 'no mans' land between local communities and the Shire Hall, between the world as it is and the world that officers and elected members wanted it to be. The social fabric and quality of community life was being eroded before my eyes while public servants held meetings and wrote reports about 'inclusion' and 'engagement'. Seldom did the two worlds meet.

I was determined, therefore, to develop a system for community development where everyone could make a contribution and where everyone's contribution was valued equally. A system where local people were offered incentives to reconnect with each other and where the social networks that emerged remained shaped and controlled by local people.

I set up Fair Shares, the first time bank in the UK, as I knew intuitively that a 'time based currency' could become every bit as effective at the local level as conventional cash is in the global market place. The only difference being, that conventional cash rewards the competitive and the greedy whereas the new kind of social money circulated by timebanking rewards collaboration, caring and co-operation.

The growth of timebanking over these past 12 years has far exceeded my most optimistic expectations and we have been particularly successful in engaging those hitherto labelled 'the hard to reach'.

Community organising and co-production are now the 'hot topics' at those Shire Hall meetings but yet again the outcomes of all this thought leadership and documentation have not lead to the enhancement of the legitimacy, capacity and authority of local communities to resolve their own social problems. Citizens are actually reconnected through timebanking and the social networks that evolve encourage the further sharing of skills, local knowledge, kindness and friendship. People rediscover the power of mutuality and experience the boost to their self confidence that comes from belonging to a social network that they can rely on and trust.

Up until quite recently people valued their reputations as good neighbours, active citizens and supporters of civic life. They shared stories about the contributions they and others made to what we now label 'social capital'. There was a collective memory in communities about the favours that had been exchanged and people knew what skills others had and who was likely to respond positively when called upon to help. This information was gathered and circulated by informal local networks. People trusted each other more and

exchanged favours in the knowledge that if they did, others would be more likely to be there for them when they needed it.

It is now harder to know what motivates people and whether or not they might take advantage of the situation if we asked them to do a favour.

What sanctions do you now have if people mess up, don't show up or fail to reciprocate when they are expected to?

In short, it becomes all too difficult to bother.

Timebanking greatly reduces these 'transaction costs' and is making social capital available once again. Timebanking is unique in that it builds trust and reciprocity and in time generates opportunities for people to reflect together on issues of common concern and then take collective action to improve things for each other and for the wider community.

The timebanking community currency values the contributions people make to their local social capital:

- An hour of involvement is rewarded with one 'time credit', a community loyalty point.
- Time credits are deposited at the time bank and can then be spent when needed on services from other local people.
- A software programme holds a local information system on who is available, when and with what skills.
- The time bank provides a safe, broad based framework for connecting people and acts as a letter of introduction.
- Once in circulation the 'time based local currency' takes on a meaning of its own and is every bit as real as the cash in people's pockets.

Timebanking UK is the national umbrella organization and are the original custodians of knowledge and expertise. We co-ordinate a network of over 200 time banks with over 20,000 participants and work to create an environment where time banking can flourish. See www.timebanking.org

Timebanking sets in motion a chain reaction that forms bonds between strangers and brings people together in unforeseen and unpredictable alliances, there is an inbuilt multiplier effect as one act of kindness leads to another. People find it easier to ask for a favour when they know they can pay back and everyone feels safer and more secure knowing there are people around they can trust and can rely on in an emergency. It is the ultimate community development tool and a safe framework for people who would not normally meet to come together and learn how to exercise both their powers and responsibilities as caring citizens.

Cuts in public finances, the gradual dismantling of the welfare state, a general mistrust of the political process and in it's inability to join citizens together in a sense of common purpose, combined with an ever weakening social environment, provide immense challenges to the coalition government's rhetoric around building the 'Big Society'. We have a proud history in this country of what I call 'single issue' community development, of coming together to stop what we don't want to see happening. Alongside this, public service providers and voluntary organisations have been obliged to operate in an increasingly competitive environment and some have even become hostile to one another. Some have completely lost sight of social change and social justice.

In order for them all now to join together in a common purpose with local communities, (and to fully accept that together they can do more than they can do working apart), a new culture of openness, generosity and trust is needed. This will not happen by 'nudging' citizens into new ways of being unless we begin 'rubbing shoulders' with each other, unless those endless meetings inside Shire Halls stop and the focus shifts to building relationships.

I have been privileged to be at the centre of a quiet social revolution and have been keeping a record of all the ordinary, everyday 'miracles' that timebankng has brought about. I have written a book, "**Your Money or Your Life: Time for Both**", about the emergence of a powerful social movement that is reconnecting thousands of people with each other and to the places where they live. It is the first to be written on timebanking in the UK and reminds us just how much we need each other. It shows us that as human beings we are 'hard-wired' to co-operate and it explores the different approaches that people are now using to break free from an ill advised dependency on financial remedies to our social problems. It is an invitation to change your life and that of those around you, to enjoy a richer and happier life and be a part of a powerful new social movement. See www.freedomfavours.com

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