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Taking the chance out of chance encounters

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YOU'RE heading for your favourite cafe when your phone buzzes. Try the one round the corner, it suggests: you might run into a regular who shares your passion for collecting stamps.

Implausible? Perhaps not. The foundations of such a network are already here, in the form of a system that can predict where you'll go, and who you'll meet there (see ["Pre-social network' finds you friends in your hang-outs"](#)). But the questions it raises are more social than technical.

To help people with their social lives, the system would have to track them, not just their phones, match their identities to their social profiles and spot situations where their path might cross that of an interesting stranger.

Privacy concerns apart, would we even want computers to stage-manage our lives in this way? The popularity of satnavs, internet dating and now Apple's iPhone "voice assistant", Siri, suggests that we might.

Of course, we'd still have to take the initiative. Your phone may direct you to a "chance" encounter with someone of social, professional or even romantic interest. But would you be ready to make the first move? Perhaps we need an app for that, too.

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