

Why you should treat workplace friendships like your diet—aim for balance and variety

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The list of organizations abandoning the option of fully remote work for employees has grown recently, with the likes of Amazon, IBM, JPMorgan and Meta leading the charge back to the office.

These mandates have caused [considerable controversy](#), but they've also given attention to a crucial aspect of corporate life: workplace friendships. And, as the new work year looms, reuniting at work has its own special challenges.

Surveys [have shown](#) around three in ten employees have a close friend at work. Furthermore, [researchers argue](#) these relationships can be as important to our personal and professional lives as a nutritious diet is to physical health.

For [individuals](#), close personal ties with coworkers can increase [job satisfaction](#), provide a stronger sense of belonging, and promote [career advancement](#). For [organizations](#), workplace friendships have been linked to higher innovation, collaboration, profitability, productivity and employee retention.

However, like many relationships, workplace friendships are challenging to navigate. Differing [career goals](#), corporate power dynamics, tight deadlines and job insecurities can create resentment, conflict and disappointments that strain relationships.

So, how can we maintain meaningful friendships with work colleagues over time? Exploring this in previous research, we adopted a rather [unconventional approach](#) and took a deep (and sometimes uncomfortable) look at the relational dynamics in our own circles of work friends.

We analyzed our own group's dynamic, as well as others we were involved in, to examine what makes some workplace friendships work better than others. (While limited to insights from a small number of people, "[autoethnography](#)" is a recognized research methodology that can produce deeper understanding of emotions and values.)

Camaraderie in the workplace

On the surface, the five of us in the research group didn't have much in common. We were at different career stages, had diverse roots, different family constellations, and some had even moved to universities on the other side of the world.

Yet we were able to maintain and even strengthen our work friendship and continue to collaborate on joint projects for over ten years. We found workplace friendships rely on a distinct set of foundational elements (building blocks) whose importance ebbs and flows over time.

Sometimes, workplace friendships are strengthened through mutual support in the face of shared challenges. For instance, collaborative work under tight deadlines can create an intense "we're all in this together" feeling, where everyone chips in and makes personal sacrifices.

Similarly, collective moaning and gossiping about clients, company policies, superiors or coworkers can foster solidarity and deeper bonds.

Shared recollections of meaningful experiences that define relationships play a role. When we indulge in memories of office parties that went out of control, or collectively remember past achievements, feelings of belonging are reinforced.

Deliberating about potential future endeavors—from the next team event to thinking of joint initiatives—can strengthen workplace friendships by fostering a shared sense of direction and common purpose.

When workplace friendships go bad

Paradoxically, while these elements are fundamental to workplace

friendships, they can also erode those relationships if one element starts to overshadow the others.

For example, although working together on projects is essential, solely work-related friendships can quickly feel shallow or exploitative. Similarly, if collective moaning and negativity dominate all conversations, workplace friendships can start to feel toxic and emotionally drowning.

Hearing the same anecdotes or jokes over and over again can strain relationships, much like old school friends realizing the only thing they talk about is getting drunk together 20 years ago.

Finally, talking about future endeavors can create fractures if plans are consistently canceled and workplace friends don't make an effort to put ideas into reality.

This suggests maintaining workplace friendships depends on having good foundations to start with, but also on maintaining a balance between them.

Healthy relationships take work

To return to the healthy diet analogy, just as there is no single "magic bullet" for [healthy eating](#), there is no secret ingredient for workplace friendships. Instead, a balanced mix of ingredients and regular adjustments are needed.

Accomplishing this requires an awareness of the different factors that define workplace friendships, and an understanding of how imbalances can strain relationships. Most importantly, it takes deliberate effort to re-balance work and friendship if things go sour.

Our research calls for managers and individuals to pay closer attention to the dynamics of workplace friendships, and the efforts required to maintain them.

On the one hand, [decision-makers](#) can make social connections part of everyday work life, rather than trying to "force" them through occasional team-building events or annual celebrations.

On the other, workplace friends need to be sensitive to the risks posed by routine and habit creeping into those relationships, making us take each other for granted.

Like any relationship, workplace friendships take, well, work. While this might sound obvious, we can probably all do with reminding that honest reflection and personal investment are key to maintaining any healthy relationship.

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