

Workplace friendships can distract yet provide valuable info for employees

April 22 2010, by Cathy Keen

(PhysOrg.com) -- It pays to keep employees who are good friends side by side in the workplace, suggests a University of Florida study that finds pals often help each other by working closely on a job but can reduce productivity if they labor in separate departments.

Further complicating the generally accepted idea that [friendships](#) are good for work is that too much empathy and emotion between friends can reduce their performance, said Jessica Methot, who did the study for her doctoral dissertation in management at UF.

“Although previous research has suggested workplace friendships are positive because they raise employees’ morale, we found a dark side to these relationships,” she said. “When friendships involve someone who works outside your department or performs different kinds of tasks and is not able to help you with your job, they are more of a distraction.”

Too often these employees chat about non-office related topics with chums, interfering with their ability to focus on their duties and interrupting the flow of work, Methot said. Co-workers feel obligated to stop what they are doing to help their friends when they have a question, knowing their friends would do the same for them, she said.

While other studies find that having office buddies boosts [job satisfaction](#), they have not examined its effects on work performance, said Methot, who will become a professor at Rutgers University when she graduates.

The implications of workplace friendships are important in today's tough economy with businesses that have job openings increasingly relying on referrals from employees, who suggest people they know and like, Methot said. Such hires have better retention rates, prompting some employers to offer rewards to staff members who make referrals, she said.

“Referrals are a very common and inexpensive way for employers to hire people because they don't have to go through the entire recruitment and selection process,” she said.

Methot said good friends give each other — and their employers — a boost on the job through familiarity and freely sharing information that lead to jobs well done.

“Friends are much more open than other co-workers about providing each other with deep and valuable information, which can make a difference in how well they do their jobs,” she said. “This is especially important in the present economic downturn with people being laid off and supervisors having less time to spend with their employees.”

Methot, who owns and operates several restaurants with her husband, said she became intrigued with the topic after noticing that workplace friendships were a good influence on some people and not others. She surveyed 182 employees at three clothing stores and six restaurants in North Florida about the effects of these friendships. A month later she surveyed each of the employees' supervisors, who rated their job performance.

While it is more productive to keep friends in the same department, Methot also learned that personal closeness can backfire if employees become too emotional and distracted on the job. “This finding is quite interesting because it suggests that having co-workers who provide

empathy and boost one's spirits may actually detract from the ability to do the job," she said.

The emotional distress that went along with managing friendships in a professional setting — even though they offer some benefits — makes it more difficult for [employees](#) to focus on their work. “We found these relationships cause a certain amount of exhaustion to maintain,” she said. “If you have a disagreement with a friend, it means a lot more to you than having a disagreement with someone you don't know as well.”

Particularly problematic are reports of good news, such as raises and promotions, which cause hard feelings if co-workers feel they are passed over in favor of friends, Methot said. “When someone else is rewarded who does the same type of work, you want to be happy for them, but there is likely to be tension,” she said.

American businesses have shifted their emphasis from independent tasks to group-based work, with eight out of 10 U.S. organizations that employ 100 people or more using teams, Methot said. Managers try to build employee cohesion in this new work design by taking steps like creating informal break rooms and scheduling group picnics, she said.

These results suggest that organizations should focus on practices that promote friendship among co-workers who interact for work-related purposes, Methot said.

Despite the risks of these social connections, of a subsample of 26 survey respondents Methot personally interviewed, 23 people said such friendships were worth having.

With work's dominance in people's lives, it's not surprising how influential these relationships have become, Methot said. “Often times you end up spending more time with your co-worker than you do your

own family,” she said.

Provided by University of Florida

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