

# Social events don't build unity for those who differ from the rest of the team

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The workers who may have the most to gain from attending company social events may be the ones who actually get the least value from them, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that, in general, workers tended to report closer relationships with their colleagues the more that they attended company social events and shared their nonwork lives with their co-workers.

But that positive association between workplace sharing and closer relationships didn't occur for workers who were racially dissimilar from their colleagues – for example, the only black person in an all-white office.

"There is something about being different from your co-workers that can make socializing less effective in building closer relationships," said Tracy Dumas, lead author of the study and assistant professor of management and human resources at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"We didn't see a [negative relationship](#) – it doesn't make things worse to socialize with your co-workers. But when you're racially dissimilar, it doesn't have the same positive impact."

Dumas said it is unfortunate that company socializing is least effective for those who are different from their office mates. "Those are the employees who are arguably the most in need of help in forming closer

relationships with their colleagues," she said.

The findings suggest that if employers promote social activities for workers, they should attend more closely to the quality of the workers' experiences at the events so that they benefit all attendees.

Dumas conducted the study with Katherine Phillips of the Columbia Business School at Columbia University, and Nancy Rothbard of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Their results appear online in the journal *Organization Science* and will appear in a future print edition.

The researchers conducted two related studies. The first study involved a series of surveys of 165 first-year MBA students in their first term of classes at a U.S. university. The students were either currently working or had been working immediately prior to enrolling. Of those surveyed, 10 percent were underrepresented minorities, including African Americans and Latinos.

Across three surveys, participants were asked several questions about how much [social interaction](#) they had with their colleagues, as well as the demographic information of those colleagues. For example, they were asked how much they discussed their nonwork life with co-workers and how often they attended company-sponsored or informal work-related gatherings.

They were also asked to rate on a five-point scale how close they felt to each individual colleague (up to 10 colleagues in total) in their immediate workplace.

The findings showed that the more social interaction participants had with their colleagues, the closer they felt – if they were racially similar. But those who were dissimilar from their colleagues did not see an

increase in closeness with more social interaction.

"This does not have to do with being a member of a particular racial category – it is really about whether you are similar to others in your workplace," Dumas said. "Our findings suggest that a white person in an office of African Americans would have a similar difficulty building closer relationships with co-workers as would an African American in an office of all Asian Americans."

The second study involved a national online sample of 141 adults, with 24 percent being underrepresented minorities. The participants were asked many of the same questions as were those in the first study, and the results were similar – social interaction was less likely to help workers feel closer to the colleagues when they were of a different race than the majority.

But this study dug deeper to find out why.

Results showed that workers who reported they enjoyed themselves more and felt more comfortable while socializing with their colleagues also reported closer relationships. Among employees who were racially similar to their coworkers, attending company social events more was associated with greater enjoyment and comfort at the events. But for those workers who were racially different from the majority, this positive association was not present.

"It's not that these dissimilar people were avoiding social encounters with their colleagues," Dumas said. "They were going, but for them, the connection between attending the events and enjoying the events was different. That seems to explain why they weren't feeling closer."

So why did they go if not to enjoy themselves?

Racially dissimilar people were more likely to report they participated in these social activities for external reasons, such as feeling they were expected to attend.

"Many feel like they have to go if they want to get ahead at the office or advance their career," she said. "They aren't going because they enjoy it."

Dumas said these results suggest employers need to do more than just provide social opportunities for their employees. They need to monitor the culture to determine whether employees see the events as mandatory, and also give more thought to what goes on at events like company parties so that all are included.

"We need to have experiences where everyone feels comfortable, where everyone has something to contribute. If everyone feels comfortable, that can lead to something positive."

Or, she said, employers can just put less emphasis on social events and opportunities as a way to build team cohesion.

"Sometimes you can create cohesion around the work task itself – you don't need outside social interaction. If everyone can feel good about the work they do and celebrate the successes they achieve together, it is not necessary to find ways to connect outside of work," she said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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