

# Health determined by social relationships at work

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Whether you're an engineer, a nurse, or a call center worker, you are likely to spend an average of one third of your day on the job. In a new meta-analysis covering 58 studies and more than 19,000 people across the globe, psychologists have shown that how strongly we identify with the people or organization where we work is associated with better health and lower burnout.

The work appears in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

While many people assume that finding the right job that fits your personality and skills is the key to a healthy work life, this meta-analysis shows that health at work is determined to a large extent by our social relationships in the workplace—and, more particularly, the social groups we form there.

Previous studies on the relationships between people and their workplaces focus on issues of satisfaction, motivation, and performance in organizations, but much less on health and well-being.

"This study is the first large-scale analysis showing that organizational identification is related to [better health](#)," says lead researcher Dr. Niklas Steffens (University of Queensland, Australia). "These results show that both performance and health are enhanced to the extent that workplaces provide people with a sense of 'we' and 'us.'"

Prof. Alex Haslam and Prof. Jolanda Jetten (both University of Queensland), Dr. Sebastian Schuh (China Europe International Business School, China), and Prof. Rolf van Dick (Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany) also collaborated on the study. The team reviewed 58 studies covering people in a variety of occupations, from service and health to sales and military work, in 15 countries.

While the type of job was not a significant factor in the link between social identification and health benefits, several factors influenced the relationship.

"Social identification contributes to both psychological and physiological health, but the health benefits are stronger for psychological health," says Steffens.

The positive psychological benefit may stem from the support provided by the work group but also the meaning and purpose that people derive from membership in [social groups](#).

"We are less burnt out and have greater well-being when our team and our organization provide us with a sense of belonging and community—when it gives us a sense of 'we-ness,'" summarizes Steffens.

The authors also found that the health benefits of identifying with the workplace are strongest when there are similar levels of identification within a group—that is, when identification is shared. So if you identify strongly with your organization, then you get more [health benefits](#) if everyone else identifies strongly with the organization too.

The team was surprised to find that that the more women there were in a sample, the weaker the identification-health relationship.

"This was a finding that we had not predicted and, in the absence of any prior theorizing, we can only guess what gives rise to this effect," says Steffens. "However, one of the reasons may relate to the fact that we know from other research that there are still many workplaces that have somewhat 'masculine' cultures. This could mean that even when female employees identify with their team or organization, they still feel somewhat more marginal within their team or organization."

As part of their work, the researchers have several recommendations for future research.

"One important area where we need to do much more work is making use of this research in applied settings," says Steffens. "In particular, it is important to examine whether health may actually precede changes in performance and what role identification plays in this."

The team also recommends exploring the role of leadership. This is because other findings that emerge from the same program of research indicate that how leaders manage teams and groups has a strong influence on the social identification-health connection. "Leaders play a key role in shaping a sense of group identity in the workplace", Steffens said, "and this is important not only for team performance but also for the mental and physical health of employees."

**More information:** N. K. Steffens et al, A Meta-Analytic Review of Social Identification and Health in Organizational Contexts, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/1088868316656701](https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868316656701)

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