

'Frenemies'—how ambivalent relationships spur both stress and productivity on the job

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Who knew that co-workers who are neither friends nor enemies – especially those who float unpredictably between being both – can affect us more on the job than other colleagues?

A "frenemy" can be someone who helps you complete an important

project on Monday, then gossips about you on Tuesday. Think of it as an ambivalent relationship that runs hot and cold at the same time.

Most research oversimplifies interactions with co-workers as either good or bad, but "relationships are complicated," said Jessica Methot, a Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations associate professor and co-author of a new study for the *Journal of Management* that explores often-overlooked ambivalent and indifferent workplace relationships.

The review takes a novel, comprehensive look at such relationships to shed light on how they influence employees' emotions – "whether they induce happiness, envy, compassion, guilt, anger, boredom, etc.– and how these emotions signal information about the status of the relationship to others," Methot said.

Not surprisingly, these relationships often create mixed feelings in the workplace, which lead to mixed results.

Prior studies have shown a link to increased stress, [high blood pressure](#) and rapid aging – suggesting that "frenemies" are worse than enemies. Yet, ambivalent relationships are also associated with greater creativity and higher productivity, perhaps because they fuel a competitive spark, Methot said.

"Ambivalent relationships can be harmful for our health, but potentially generative for our work performance," she said. "They help employees expand the scope of information they consider when making decisions, making them more adaptable and open to change."

An indifferent relationship is neither good nor bad, generally involving very little contact and lack of depth. Examples include making small talk with a co-worker in the break room, or nodding hello to someone in the

elevator without ever knowing her name. These may account for the majority of our workplace interactions, and they can have a surprising impact on daily mood.

Technology is making it easier for indifferent relationships to form, according to the study. If you interact with the person in the next cubicle by direct message or email, instead of talking to him in person, the lack of [emotional](#) connection may encourage an indifferent relationship.

"Indifferent relationships are potentially the most frequent type of work relationship, yet also the most overlooked, likely because they seem inconsequential or disposable," Methot said. "However, our work acquaintances serve invaluable functions. They can help introduce us to unique information to perform our jobs or find out about job opportunities; they can be low-risk sounding boards for ideas or for rehearsing the disclosure of secrets; they can be called on in an emergency but not require much daily maintenance; and they help with becoming socially integrated by feeling connected to others."

While age, personality traits and other factors influence the formation of ambivalent and indifferent relationships – for instance, one prior study found that managers tend to be more competitive with people of the same age and social rank – Methot and her colleagues argue that emotions play a much larger role than originally thought.

We tend to project our emotions without even realizing it, signaling either ambivalence (appearing approachable but then starting an argument) or indifference (appearing bored or distracted during a conversation) toward our colleagues.

"People tend to reciprocate in these interactions by either showing more interest and support to protect the relationship or by withdrawing and harming the relationship," Methot said. "The emotions we display to our

colleagues have downstream implications for how the [relationship](#) evolves over time, and determine whether we can effectively work together or remain friends in the future."

More information: Jessica R. Methot et al. The Space Between Us, *Journal of Management* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0149206316685853](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316685853)

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