

Benefits of team building exercises jeopardized if not truly voluntary

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Employees who like to keep their work and private lives separate may want to avoid team-building exercises. Credit: Pexels

Zoom dress up parties and 'trust falls' - team building has become the go-to tool for managers trying to increase rapport and productivity, but

many employees resent compulsory bonding, often regarding it as the bane of their workplace existence.

A paper published this week by University of Sydney School of Project Management researchers in the *Journal of Social Networks* has found participants have mixed feelings about team-building interventions, with the research revealing ethical implications in forcing employees to take part.

"Since publishing our previous research on team-building exercises, many workers told us that they despise team building activities and see them as a waste of time, so we decided to look in more depth at what's behind this," said the paper's lead researcher, Dr. Petr Matous, who in 2019 published research with Dr. Julien Pollack that argued spending time developing relationships with people you aren't close to is more effective than general team-bonding exercises.

"Almost every day at work, workers are subjected to interventions that are implicitly or explicitly designed to change our networks of working relationships," said Dr. Matous.

"Teams are formed, merged and restructured, staff are relocated and office spaces are redesigned. We are expected to participate in drinks after work and team building events. All this is done with the aim of improving workplace effectiveness, efficiency, collaboration and cohesion—but does any of this work?" said Dr. Matous.

The study found that team-building exercises which focused on the sharing of, and intervening into personal attitudes and relationships between [team members](#) may be considered too heavy-handed and intrusive, although the researchers say some degree of openness and vulnerability is often necessary to make deep, effective connections with colleagues.

"Among the participants we interviewed, some were against team building exercises because they felt they were implicitly compulsory and did not welcome management's interest in their lives beyond their direct work performance."

"Many people do not want to be forced into having fun or making friends, especially not on top of their busy jobs or in stressful, dysfunctional environments where team building is typically called for," said Associate Professor Julien Pollack, Interim Director of the John Grill Institute of Project Leadership.

"These activities often feel implicitly mandatory. People can feel that management is being too nosy or trying to control their life too much.

"We recommend an approach where people can opt out of team building discreetly, by conducting team-building only among selected pairs of individuals who can choose whether or not to proceed with strengthening their [relationship](#). Their choice would not be visible to management.

"An important point is to target the right relationships, and we can do that by analytically identifying critical links in collaboration and communication networks among employees.

The researchers said there are numerous schools of thought that propose differing psychological methods for strengthening relationships.

In this study the researchers chose a self-disclosure approach where participants were guided through a series of questions that allowed them to increasingly disclose personal information and values. The method is well-tested and has been shown to increase interpersonal closeness, however, to be successful it must be voluntary.

"With caution, many relational methods to improve teams and

organizations can be borrowed from other fields. The question is how to apply them effectively to strengthen an entire collective, which is more than just the sum of individual relationships, and that's where analyzing methods using network science makes the main contribution," said Dr. Matous.

The study was an in-depth exploration and qualitative review of processes and personal perceptions, where the researchers interviewed a cohort of participants and their colleagues on team building. The published paper's purpose is to share experiences and challenges from organizing team-[building](#) interventions, collecting rigorous data for both managerial and academic applications.

More information: Petr Matous et al. Collecting experimental network data from interventions on critical links in workplace networks, *Social Networks* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socnet.2021.02.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2021.02.004)

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