

Employers should nurture friendship and support amongst co-workers to unlock creativity, new research shows

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Employers who want to see creative thinking in their workforce should value supportive friendships between colleagues as the key to unlocking

more resourcefulness and innovation.

The new study from the University of Bath's School of Management reveals care from a [co-worker](#) inspires people to be supportive to their partner at [home](#), showing that co-workers have a significant role to play in enabling couples to cope with balancing the demands of work and [family life](#). This spiral of [support](#) has knock on benefits for creative thinking at work.

"Employees take the support they receive from co-workers home with them, and in a loving relationship they transfer this support to their partner. This might mean they encourage them to open up about stresses, seek to resolve issues, or make improvements to the juggle of work-life arrangements that benefits the family," said Professor Yasin Rofcanin from the University of Bath's Future of Work research center.

"The result is that both members of a couple benefit. Spouses pass on support received from co-workers and partners will be more creative at work, in what is termed a 'gain spiral. So it pays for employers to recognize the value of caring co-workers."

Over and above work policies, or interventions by supervisors, it is informal support from co-workers that stands out as having the biggest impact on an individual's ability to manage the [work-life balance](#), spilling over to benefit the partner at home and in turn their own creative thinking at work.

Co-worker support can mean being on hand to listen and talk through life's issues and challenges as they arise, offering suggestions for problems at home, as well as providing cover for absence if a child is sick, or other caring responsibilities crop up. The research suggests organizations should give employees more flexibility to manage caring cover with a colleague without intervention from managers.

The research also alerts employers to the pitfalls of working practice and expectation taking a toll on [home life](#), encouraging employers to be mindful of the detrimental impact on relationships.

"So much research points to the stresses of being in a dual income couple, it's refreshing to see a win for loving relationships alongside work," said Rofcanin. "While we're not suggesting employers should meddle in relationships, they may be able to positively contribute to the quality of relationships at home by putting policies and procedures in place to minimize work-family conflict, such as limiting over time and expectations to respond to emails outside of hours."

The study, by the Universities of Bath, VU Amsterdam and IESE Business School, focused on diary entries over five weeks by over 200 full-time, dual income heterosexual couples in the United States, eighty per cent of which had children.

The researchers acknowledge that there could be drawbacks in relying on co-workers for support with work and family matters, with partners at home feeling jealous and upset about the closeness of 'work spouse' relationships. They suggest future research could examine the potential of this [relationship](#) dynamic to promote conflict at home.

The research is published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

More information: Jakob Stollberger et al, Sharing is caring: The role of compassionate love for sharing coworker work–family support at home to promote partners' creativity at work., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000985](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000985)

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