

Should you be friends with your co-workers? Here's what the research says

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In my teens and twenties, I didn't think much about how important it was to like the people I worked with. At the time, I was working as a waiter at a Toronto diner and being friends with my colleagues was part of the experience.

But once I became a university professor and an executive educator, I realized the importance of workplace relationships. I now know that [workplaces function better](#) when colleagues have good relationships with one another.

These findings conflict with a common sentiment I've noticed in my 20-plus years of working with employees: believing it isn't necessary to be friends with your colleagues. While this viewpoint is understandable, it isn't useful—especially when it comes to working alongside individuals you don't get along with.

Types of work friendships

About 30% of North Americans [say they have a best friend at work](#). The rest report having regular work friends.

It's useful to differentiate between different types of friendships, as not all relationships offer the same advantages. By specifying friendship types, and understanding the benefits of each, we can make informed decisions about whether investing in specific relationships is worthwhile.

Using previous [psychological research](#) about [different types of workplace friendships](#), along with my experience working with thousands of managers and leaders, I have created four friendship categories for the workplace.

1. Workplace best friend. This is a very close friendship with a colleague that is characterized by personal disclosure. Workplace best friends hold each other in high regard, exercising trust and honesty.

2. Workplace close friendly. These are [close friendships](#), but not quite at the level of the best [friend](#). Most people in these relationships want to remain good friends, even if one person leaves the workplace.

3. Workplace friendly. This relationship has some of the same qualities as above, but is less likely to persist beyond work. There is also usually less personal disclosure. In other words, it's the work buddy—the kind of person you grab a lunch or coffee with.

4. Co-worker acquaintance. This refers to someone you might frequently see at work, but your interactions with them are limited to exchanging smiles or brief pleasantries.

Benefits of workplace friendships

Friendships at work provide enhanced [innovation, feelings of psychological safety](#) and compassion. When employers balance leadership and friendship with their employees, [it encourages the vulnerability, adaptability and humility](#) that is required in today's business environments.

Elton Mayo, one of the founders of modern organizational theory, recognized that [opportunities for social-emotional connections at work](#) were [crucial for performance](#).

Merely sharing information with another person doesn't provide these opportunities though—an emotional exchange is needed. An emotional exchange requires being open about one's feelings and concerns, while an information exchange does not.

Because of these emotional exchanges, [workplace friendships can be difficult](#). They require a [significant time investment](#), as well as trust and disclosure, both of which can be daunting for some.

Which relationships are worthwhile?

Making and keeping friends at work has [become increasingly important to people](#) since the start of the pandemic. As remote and hybrid work have become more prevalent, friendships at work have taken on the crucial role of providing essential social and emotional support.

The workplace best friend relationship provides the most benefits because it provides the most opportunity for emotional exchanges between colleagues. These benefits include [increasing happiness](#), productivity and [motivation](#) in workers.

But [close relationships are difficult](#) and [exhausting to maintain](#), meaning these types of relationships [are usually rarer compared to other types](#).

Workplace close friendly and friendly relationships are the most likely to provide these benefits without being too emotionally draining or hard to maintain. Still, it's important to note that close friendly relationships face similar challenges as having a [best friend](#) at work—namely, a higher risk of personal conflict spilling over into work.

Co-worker acquaintances are the one type of workplace relationship that don't provide any of the benefits that come from having friends at work. If you want to get the most out of work, your best bet is to try and make friends.

Unfriendliness doesn't pay off

But what if you have a colleague you truly can't stand? Other than grinning and bearing their presence, you can make the choice to remove yourself. This could mean leaving the role or trying to distance yourself from that person without sacrificing your ability to perform.

While avoiding those you dislike can be helpful, it's often challenging to do at work. In addition, being unfriendly at work—either because

forming friendships is too difficult or because you are avoiding a particular person—can make work [less enjoyable and engaging](#).

Less-engaged employees [find less meaning in their work](#) and receive [less opportunities for advancement](#). Unfriendliness can also lead to higher levels of [loneliness and isolation](#), which can end up making you sick.

A new perspective

If you decide to maintain a friendly relationship with a colleague you dislike, there are some strategies you can use to maintain a productive working [relationship](#) with them. One of these strategies involves using positive reframing to change the way you think and interpret your colleague's behavior.

Using metaphors to shift your perspective can be a helpful way to accomplish this. One particularly useful metaphor is likening your colleague to a book. When reading a book, even if it's enjoyable, there may be parts you dislike and overlook. However, you never dismiss the entire book.

Applying this metaphor to colleagues can help you highlight the parts about a person you like while letting go of the less desirable parts. It's important to recognize no one is perfect—in or outside of work.

While there will always be colleagues you don't care for, it can be empowering to know that with some reframing, you can help create a better [workplace](#) for yourself and those around you.

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