

# **Office gossip isn't just idle chatter. It's a valuable—but risky—way to build relationships**

April 8 2024, by Rachel Morrison and James Greenslade-Yeats

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Gossip flows through the offices and lunchrooms of our workplaces, seemingly filling idle time. But perhaps, through these ubiquitous and intriguing conversations, we are influencing our workplace relationships more than we realize.

Is gossiping a route to friendship or a surefire way to make [workplace](#) enemies? It turns out the answer hinges on how the recipient of the gossip perceives the intentions of the gossiper.

Workplace gossip—[defined](#) as informal and evaluative talk about absent colleagues—is pervasive yet often misunderstood.

Traditionally frowned upon and branded as unproductive or even [deviant](#), recent research paints a more complex picture of gossip.

While some studies imply that gossip leads to [friendships](#) between coworkers, others suggest it [undermines](#) workplace relationships. [Our research](#) indicates these apparently contradictory findings stem from misunderstanding the nuances of how gossip shapes workplace social relations.

We focused on gossip recipients—the listeners—and asked how they perceived these exchanges, and what effect receiving gossip had on their relationships with coworkers.

## **Understanding workplace gossip**

Researchers use three frameworks or concepts to make sense of workplace gossip.

The "[exchange perspective](#)" holds that gossip binds coworkers to one another through a sort of quid pro quo. A colleague may offer informational morsels, with an expectation of social support and inside information in return.

The "[reputational information perspective](#)" focuses on how gossip shapes recipients' views of targets—the people the gossip is about. Vital information might be shared to warn others about toxic personalities or to signal someone as particularly trustworthy.

Finally, the "[gossip valence](#)" refers to whether gossip conveys positive or negative information about its target.

## **The effect of hearing gossip**

Our research looks at how gossip affects the recipient's perception of the person sharing the gossip.

Data was collected from participants using two techniques: written incident reports and follow-up interviews. This approach provided the researchers with detailed descriptions of how workplace gossip incidents affected interpersonal relationships from the recipient's perspective.

Our findings show that the recipients' perceptions of these exchanges matter a great deal. In particular, their interpretation of the gossipers' intentions can set off a chain reaction.

If the recipient judges the gossipers' intentions as genuine and authentic—a way of opening up about one's real views of coworkers—gossip can spark a new friendship or rekindle an old one.

When one person says, "I find it so frustrating when Mark talks down to me like that", for example, the recipient has been trusted with the gossip's true feelings about Mark, a problematic colleague. This creates a stronger bond—especially if the recipient agrees with the opinion.

Curiously—and perhaps a little worryingly—we found negative gossip was a stronger way of building friendships than positive gossip, provided intentions were interpreted as genuine.

If the recipient evaluates the intention as prosocial—in other words, sharing accurate and valuable information that benefits people other than the gossip—trust increases and collegial relationships are strengthened.

As one research participant explained: "I actually noticed that the source is the kind of guy that only really says positive things about people [...] That's why I think I began to trust him because he doesn't run people down too much."

If the gossip's intentions are perceived as self-serving, the recipient's trust in them goes down and there's little likelihood of the two becoming friends.

One participant explained: "They said this to damage her reputation and cause drama in the workplace."

While another said, "After listening to him gossiping about another waitress, I felt very uncomfortable. I was afraid of him saying negative things about me if I make mistakes."

## **Not just idle chatter**

Our study supports the idea that gossip isn't merely idle chatter but a



valuable (and risky) social currency.

We often engage in gossip without even thinking about why we're doing so. But our findings show other people pay a lot of attention to our motivations for gossiping.

Given we have little control over how our intentions are interpreted by others, this study is a timely reminder to think before you share [gossip](#).

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Office gossip isn't just idle chatter. It's a valuable—but risky—way to build relationships (2024, April 8) retrieved 17 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-04-office-gossip-isnt-idle-chatter.html>

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