
Too much of a good thing? Difficulties with workplace friendships

- Rachel Morrison & Terry Nolan



IAN SCOTT, *Lattice No. 63*, 1979, acrylic on canvas.
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Too much of a good thing?

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Workplace friendships are often viewed as a positive aspect of organisational culture, but they can also be the cause of discomfort for employees and inefficiency in the organisation.

By Rachel L. Morrison and Terry Nolan

Having friends is almost universally considered to be a good thing. Both outside and within the work context friends can enrich the environment, providing support and sociability.¹ Given that research also generally links a friendly workplace with positive organisational outcomes,² it is reasonable to assume that friends at work benefit all concerned. However, this situation may not be as clear-cut as it seems. The current interest in the concept of social support and the potential benefits that may be provided often ignores or downplays the notion that social relations

entail costs as well as rewards.³

This paper explores difficulties that arise from having close friends in the workplace. The findings come from a study in which over two hundred people outlined how workplace friendships made their work more difficult. The results

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indicate that, although friendships may be valuable both for both employees and organisations, some aspects of these relationships (such as the blurring of boundaries, having to devote time to the friendship and distraction from work) mean that having friends within the workplace can create numerous difficulties for employees. The secondary effects from these difficulties are that employers may have reduced work outputs, a result of distraction or anxiety caused by employees having to manage their workplace friendships. The definition of close friends provided to respondents in the current study comes from Kram and Isabella's seminal work on peer relationships.⁴ The close friend in this context, is an organisational peer that an individual feels they would be friends with even if they didn't work together, they would likely consider the person much more than merely a co-worker, feeling that they know each other very well.

Executive Brief

Having friends within the work context can provide support and sociability and a friendly workplace is generally linked with positive organisational outcomes. However, this situation may not be as clear-cut as it seems - social relations can entail costs as well as rewards. A workplace study of over two hundred people explores the difficulties that arise from having close friends in the workplace. Although friendships may be valuable both for employees and organisations, the findings indicate that negative effects, such as the blurring of boundaries; having to devote time to the friendship; and distraction from work can create numerous difficulties. These can cause distraction and anxiety, ultimately resulting in reduced work outputs.

desire to like the other person if only because a pleasant work environment is more rewarding than an unpleasant one. This further increases the likelihood of friendships forming within a workplace.⁸

Given that friendships within the workplace are not only likely, but practically inevitable, it is surprising that workplace friendships have received relatively little empirical attention, especially when compared to that given to formal organisational relationships such as superior-subordinate⁹ and mentor-protégé.¹⁰ Another type of relationship within the workplace is the "office romance".¹¹ These relationships too, have received far less attention than formal relationships but are outside of the scope of the current study.

RELATIONSHIP DILEMMAS

Academic literature to-date provides few clues about relationships that are both professional and personal, and despite the established frequency of close

friends who are also work associates, we know very little about how this dual personal/role relationship functions. In the organisational literature these relationships are known as "blended."

The extent to which employees experience dilemmas or contradictions posed by the friendship and work-association components of their relationships at work has been examined by Bridge and Baxter,¹² who conceptualise friendship as a role. Though this conceptualisation is somewhat unusual (given that friendships are not formally prescribed), friendship relationships do nonetheless entail felt obligations and accepted behaviours for the parties concerned. The contradictions or dilemmas will likely be more salient as the relationship becomes closer; i.e., for simple collegial relationships the work role will always be prioritised, it is only when the obligations and responsibilities that come with genuine friendship are present that the two roles (co-worker vs. friend) will clash. Further, almost anyone who works with a close friend; be they a peer, a subordinate or a supervisor could find themselves dealing with the potentially incompatible demands associated with the dual roles of "friend" and "work associate" outlined below.¹³

LITERATURE

In many ways business organisations create the ideal environment in which to make friends. Simply put, they are places where people who have a lot in common are put in close proximity to one another. Proximity and similarity are two of the most salient aspects of interpersonal attraction and friendship formation. Frequent exposure to another person is often enough to lead to more positive

evaluations of that person, increasing the likelihood of friendship.⁵ Similarity also facilitates friendship formation; with co-workers attracted to people they perceive to be similar to themselves, particularly with respect to attitudes, values and interests.⁶ By definition, organisational peers are similar

with respect to status level, will perform similar work, in similar occupations and probably have a similar educational background. Researchers Sias and Cahill⁷ consider the organisation to be more than merely a "container" or context for relationships, but also to impact on the way friendships develop. For example, working towards a common goal entails both sharing the goal and co-operative behaviour towards achieving it. In addition, an aspect of the workplace that may not exist in other contexts, is that when people are committed to working together there is a

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Instrumentality and affection.

Reciprocity has been shown to be an important aspect of friendship, and a lack of reciprocity is associated with negative emotions.¹⁴ Utilitarian support, on the other hand, may create feelings of indebtedness exploitation or suspicion of another's motives, thereby undermining the friendship. A situation where one member of the

dyad receives more benefits (as in a relationship with an organisational superior) may create a lack of reciprocity in the relationship and may cause tension for the dyad.

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Impartiality and favouritism.

Organisational practices usually aim to provide equitable treatment for everyone with no

personal bias. However people usually expect their friends to display special treatment and favouritism, thereby indicating that they regard each other as unique and special.

Openness versus closedness.

Friends are expected to be fully open and honest with one another, trusting and displaying trustworthiness. However, confidentially practices may mean that close friends refrain from full disclosure. In addition disclosing other information for a work related reason may violate a friend's expectation of confidentiality and privacy.

Judgement and acceptance.

Friendship is built on an expectation of mutual affirmation and acceptance (work-mates may be ideal to provide empathy regarding work-related angst). However, work associates may find themselves in conflict because of competing interests associated with their work roles or because of a performance evaluation process.

Individuals appear to encounter great difficulty when required to provide negative feedback or to censure a friend

Autonomy versus connection.

The sheer proximity afforded by the workplace facilitates interpersonal attraction between persons. Hiring practices mean that people are likely to perceive themselves as similar to their work-mates, which in turn facilitates friendship development and maintenance. However, daily

contact with the other person may provide too little autonomy or separation, thereby jeopardising the friendship.¹⁵

Thus, although close friendships at work are considered to have predominantly positive consequences, the possibility that friendships at work will result in stress and conflict is also present. Related to this apparent dual role conflict, Meyer and Allen¹⁶ found that role conflict significantly reduces commitment to the organisation.

The study

This paper examines employees' experiences of difficulties that arise out of friendships in the workplace. Using a self-administered, Internet-based questionnaire, two recruitment avenues were used: (1) convenience sampling and "snowballing"¹⁷ among individuals known to the researchers (68 questionnaires distributed), and (2) via two email networks, EmoNet (a list of academics and practitioners in the field of emotions in organisations) and IOnet (a list of Industrial Organisational psychologists in New Zealand). The emails contained a link to the questionnaire that could be downloaded and anonymously returned to the researchers. The initial respondents were selected for their interest in this research and for their opportunities to forward information about the research to other professionals and employees. Data were collected from 445 individuals. Respondents ranged from 19 to 64 years in age, with a mean age of 35 years, 68% were female. A large variety of industries/sectors were represented; the largest reported sector was tertiary education (92 respondents) followed by health care (including psychology, psychiatry and physiotherapy, 53 respondents). People responded to the survey both from within New Zealand and internationally and, although respondents were primarily from Western countries, the international mix gives the findings wider generalisability than previous studies, which have used American respondents.¹⁸

Of the full sample, 230 responded to the research question: "Please briefly outline how a friendly relationship with someone with whom you work(ed) has made your work more difficult." Refer to Table 1 for a summary of responses. It is worth noting that this

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The first of our findings shows how having friends can create extra work. It is interesting to note how the word "friend" was not used by respondents when describing this outcome, perhaps indicating that the friendship was already on the wane:

"A peer sitting next to me in a similar PA role does very little work and spends much time communicating by email, text messaging, personal phone calls and long lunch breaks. This puts strain on our relationship and increases our work load"
"Had to do that person's job and my job too"

Friendships can also have a major "distracting effect" from one's work, complained a number of respondents. This problem can be exacerbated when friends work in close proximity with each other, creating what Bridge and Baxter²⁵ termed the "autonomy versus connection" tension, whereby the workplace does not provide the usual degree of separation expected in a friendship. Excessive chatting, having "too much fun" and an inability to separate work

question was part of a larger set of questions which also asked about how friends were of benefit in the workplace, and how the workplace impacted on their friendships.

In order to handle the relatively large number of qualitative responses, the researchers adopted a technique involving three linked processes: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. Responses were assigned to two thematic categories: The first category related to instances of

work performance being affected by friendships. The second (and by far the larger) category, examined data relating to *interpersonal tensions* and the ways in which people managed these tensions (refer Table 1). A number of overlapping themes emerged between these two categories. In the Discussion of results section, we present and interpret each category in turn, using a selection of verbatim responses to illustrate the case in point.

TABLE 1

Thematic Category 1: Effects on work caused by friendships	Categories	Sub-categories	number of responses
	(a) Task related	Having to do extra work	6
		Distraction from work	20
	(b) Effects on the workplace	Overflow of negativity to the rest of the team	15
Thematic Category 2: Interpersonal tensions caused by friendships	Categories	Sub-categories	number of responses
(a) Hierarchical effects		Having to criticise or discipline friends	36
		Being told what to do by friend	5
		Telling friend what to do	21
(b) Conflicts of interest		Boundary violations	16
		Favouritism	14
		Being in competition with a friend	9
		Breach of confidentiality	5
(c) Maintenance		Negative emotions and maintenance	9
		Friendship turned sour	6
Other responses			number of responses
			68
Total			230

from play, were cited as contributing to frustration with the work friend, as in this case:

"They couldn't separate friendship from work and wanted to talk all the time instead of work"

A larger number of respondents reported more indirect effects upon performance arising from friendly behaviour. These comments mostly referred to times when conflict or misunderstandings arose amongst friends, or when "things got petty." Respondents spoke of the need to resolve matters quickly in order to restore healthy social relations within the larger workgroup. One respondent stated:

"...two people at work had an argument that nearly blew the group apart."

Another person stated:

"...difficult to stay neutral when others have conflicts with each other"

In general, our findings from this first thematic category

indicate that some people may be more aware than others of the duality between maintaining a friendly working environment and the performance of their formal role. The strain and effort required in maintaining friendships is also evident in the respondents' tone, where often people felt obliged to exercise great restraint in concealing their true feelings to friends.

In our second thematic category, we read short accounts of attempts to handle dilemmas, contradictions, obligations and responsibilities associated with maintaining friendships within the workplace. The data turned up nine causative sub-categories (refer Table 1).

Hierarchical friendships (e.g., a friendship between a supervisor and team member) seem to create strain for people. One particular cause of this tension relates to "judgement and acceptance" whereby individuals appear to encounter great difficulty when required to provide negative feedback or to censure a friend in some way. Disciplining a friend is an extreme scenario and it appears that people experience a great deal of anxiety when called upon to

reprimand or notify a friend because their work is not up to par. However, with only one respondent openly admitting to “covering up for others” to avoid giving a reprimand, it remains inconclusive whether most people choose to suffer the hardship of reprimanding friends or in fact find it too hard and thus avoid doing it. For example:

“It makes it hard to comment on someone’s incompetence when everybody has a culture of being unconditionally nice”

and,

“...have found it difficult to be manager for a friend when there is a performance issue”

It appears from the data that people find it difficult to step outside of the subjective world that governs friendships, into an objective, performance-driven domain of reference.

It appears from the data that people find it difficult to step outside of the subjective world that governs friendships

Most respondents expressed the wish that people could take criticism objectively rather than personally, and spoke of diluting their criticism by being over-tactful. Interestingly though, several responses from people on the receiving end of negative criticism, point out their awareness of this difficulty:

“My friend felt unable to be frank with me professionally for fear I might take any criticism personally and it may affect our friendship.”

Perceptions surrounding this difficult issue may be warranted however, as in the case below:

“I had to make two close friends redundant. One has never spoken to me since.”

Unsurprisingly, it appears that less discomfort is caused when issuing orders to a friend or being told what to do by a friend, than when being critical. Respondents used terms such as “difficult”, “uncomfortable”, “awkward” and “challenging” to describe their feelings when having to issue or take orders from friends. A number of terms and phrases from the data perhaps illustrate how the dialectical tensions between work role and work friendships affect behaviour. One respondent finds it difficult to “disagree with a stance” taken by a friend. Others report problems in being “assertive” and “confrontational”, while one respondent laments that she,

“...can’t rant and rave when something is not done or ordered.”

Difficulties experienced in balancing friendships roles and work roles (relating to the tension between impartiality and favouritism) are illustrated by the respondent below who experiences tension when her friend makes what she feels is an unreasonable work request:

“Harder to tell them that you cannot do a favour for them”

Conflicts of interest figure highly in this study, with the notion of a “boundary” (Category ‘b’, Table 1) between work roles and friendships being alluded to most strongly. A number of respondents refer directly to a “boundary” or “line”, such as:

“don’t know where to draw the line sometimes, especially when we are both of different ranks within the organization, e.g. taking humour a step too far...”

and;

“sometimes it’s hard to know whether we are talking as friends or colleagues, especially if we disagree.”

In the response below, it is clear that a “boundary” has been crossed by a friend, yet the respondent appears still to be struggling with the tension between the “closedness” that defines her work role and the “openness” defining friendships.

“There is one person where I work that I have become very good friends with, but recently we have discovered that she is an internal theft problem. It is very difficult to work with her and be her friend knowing this about her. Even worse is knowing that I can’t let her know that we’ve caught on to her.”

The same “openness” and “closedness” rules affect people when they act as guardians of confidential organisational information. Several respondents experienced difficulties in keeping secrets from friends especially when that friend’s future is affected.

Competition between friends for promotion or resources can be a cause of strain on a friendship. Tensions such as “petty rivalries” and “jealousy” test the rules of “openness and closedness” that govern friendships. One person (below) confesses to somewhat underhanded methods:

“I am in direct competition with friends so sometimes have to achieve well surreptitiously. I know that in the future we will be in competition for jobs.”

We continue our discussion, switching our attention to Category ‘c’ (maintenance) from Table 1, examining how people work to sustain friendships. Here we relate again to Bridge and Baxter’s tension between acting impartially and displaying favouritism towards friends. A number of respondents seemed to consider it reasonable to grant special favours to friends as in this case:

“You sometimes feel obliged to take sides when it is not appropriate”

and:

“Handling of mistakes so as not to implicate the friend. This goes vice versa.”

It should be emphasised however, that most respondents expressed concern about going “softer” on a friend and felt that friends should not be afforded favoured treatment simply because of the relationship. Several respondents even expressed annoyance that friends could be manipulative and expecting

of favours. Given that special treatment is one of the central tenets of genuine friendship, perhaps this tension is to be expected.

Going by the data so far presented, it should not be surprising that workplace friendships occasionally breakdown. We conclude this section by examining comments recalling past friendships, the reasons for their demise and the after effects within the workplace (friendships turned sour).

When respondents reflected upon past friendships they appear to use calmer, less emotional language than those who speak of current events. Comments speak of “growing apart”, of a friendship being “misconstrued”.

Several responses allude to the themes outlined in the literature above (see in particular Anderson and Hunsaker⁸): that maintaining a friendship can be difficult outside of the workplace. For instance:

“Thought they were my friends, we would go on holiday together then an incident happened, my partner left and they turned nasty and our friendship no longer exists”

“I don’t think that it has made work more difficult, but it can be difficult when one or other of you leaves and then you find that there is no common area of interest anymore. It can be difficult if, within a friendship, you find that you do not have the same views and standards”

Finally we return to Bridge and Baxter’s concept of

“autonomy and connection” with this respondent perhaps summarising the ultimate outcome of expending so much effort on one’s work friends in stating:

“familiarity breeds contempt.”

CONCLUSION

The literature to date, speaks generally of the benefits accruing from friendly interpersonal relationships at work. For example, benefits accrue to the organisation when friends share and co-operate towards common goals. The literature also points to the inevitability of friendships forming, due largely to proximate working. Previous research into friendship formation indicated that people are motivated to make friends for the rewards they provide,¹⁹ be they social or more tangible and functional. Thus within the workplace too, it is reasonable to assume that some people make friends so as to enhance their own working conditions.

The research question, which provides the focus for this paper, examined friendships at work within an inherently negative frame of reference. However, this negative slant has provided a range of interesting and unexpected responses from which a number of important issues have emerged that may cause us to question some previous literature promoting the “happy workplace”. We outline some of these below:

Friendships at work operate at the “boundary” between the social norms governing friendship and the expectations surrounding organisational work roles. Thus, a person’s ability to maintain a friendship while sustaining his or her performance levels is contingent upon the ability to handle contradictory behaviours such as making objective judgements about friends, whilst simultaneously providing unqualified support for them. The findings from this paper provide qualitative accounts to support the “dilemmas and contradictions” which people face when confronted by this boundary.

Workplace friendships can present a major, distracting influence, both to the “friends” themselves and to those on the periphery of friendly relationships. When work

turns out to be “too much fun”, one wonders just how much actual work is being done. We argue that these distractions are as likely to hinder workplace performance as to enhance it. The mental efforts required to maintain friendships will, in all likelihood, drain an individual’s personal resources.

Our data suggests that many people, when faced with dual-role dilemmas, will prioritise their friendship above their responsibilities to the organisation. This finding is consistent with Kram and Isabella’s²⁰ definition of the “special peer” in which formal workplace roles are ignored or downplayed. The implication here is that management must strike the right balance between, on the one hand, promoting sociability within the workplace

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and in preventing relationships from becoming too close on the other.

There is a crucial distinction between having *friends at work* and working in a *friendly* environment. Whereas the former situation is perhaps important at certain times and for certain individuals; the latter situation does not require a deep emotional involvement between individuals and may be more beneficial in terms of organisational performance.

Perhaps workplace friendships are indeed becoming more problematic for organisations in their quest for greater productivity and the tendency towards longer working hours. It may be less surprising if we pause to consider how expectations regarding work processes have altered

in the “information age.” Working within this new paradigm, narrowly focused tasks are out: the new role of the “knowledge worker” is to develop peer-to-peer networks and social capital, by communicating freely and extensively within and across large distances and organisational boundaries. As personal networks expand, issues of proximity and similarity are bound to arise and, with them, friendships.

The “problem” of workplace friendships is nicely summarised by one respondent who states rather sagely:

“No different to everyday life. The closer you are to someone or to a group of individuals the more personal they can be which may not be great for the work environment.”

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