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28 June – 1 July 2007:
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26 June 2007

Best friends distracting at work, study finds

A study into workplace relationships has found having a close friend at work can be a major distraction.

Respondents cited excessive chatting, having too much fun and an inability to separate work from play as contributing to a lack of focus.

Giving critical feedback, wanting to avoid showing favouritism and issues with confidentiality were among the other difficulties with having a best friend at work, according to the research.

“When faced with a work-related problem many people will prioritise their friendship over their responsibilities to their organisation, which businesses may find concerning,” said psychologist and Auckland University of Technology lecturer, Dr Rachel Morrison.

“Workplace friendships are like a double-edged sword. The benefits of a friendly workplace can be really positive, but organisations should be aware of the potential difficulties and how to manage friendships at work.”

According to the study, many people were concerned about going ‘softer’ with their friends and being expected to treat them with special privileges.

“People naturally want to make their friends feel special, but this conflicts with organisational practices or norms that are set up around fairness and equality. Difficulty in managing these expectations can create tension in the relationship.”

“Respondents also experienced a great deal of anxiety about speaking to close friends about substandard work. A basic rule of friendship is being non-judgemental and accepting your friends’ weaknesses, but giving critical performance feedback conflicts with this.

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“We also found issues related to confidentiality practices, which could mean friends have to refrain from sharing information. This can be really challenging for close friendships that have norms of openness and disclosure,” Dr Morrison said.

Dr Morrison said organisations should try to provide friendly environments and encourage workplace friendships, but have policies in place to manage potential difficulties.

“Organisations need unambiguous and transparent processes and to set clear guidelines about workplace relationships.”

The research was undertaken online with 230 respondents. Dr Morrison will present the results at the annual Industrial and Organisational Psychology (IOP) Conference at the Adelaide Convention Centre from June 28 to July 1.

Dr Morrison’s tips to help manage workplace friends are:

1. Be aware of how organisational friendships can impact on the workplace.
2. Be wary of becoming a best friend at work, but recognise that it is really healthy and important to have good friendships.
3. If you are experiencing problems surrounding favouritism and confidentiality, be aware of your organisation’s policies.
4. Be open with your co-workers about what is work-related and what is not.

For more information please visit: www.iopconference.com.au

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Dr Morrison is available for interview during the conference. Please call Elaine Grant on: 0412 683 068.

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