

# Foster friendship to achieve results at work



Most employees spend as much time with their co-workers as they do with their families, so it's no surprise that nearly 60% of them admit they have participated in an office romance.

Even more say a colleague doubles as a friend.

And while vigilant HR pros might bristle at the notion of “work friends” and office romances because of the potential for gossip, favoritism and sexual harassment, cubicle camaraderie can be awfully good for morale—and, it turns out, the bottom line.

Two-thirds of employees report that having friends at work makes their jobs more fun, and 55% say it makes their work feel more worthwhile and satisfying, according to a report by the Randstad staffing and recruiting agency.

A University of Kentucky study concluded that office friendship serves as an antidote to low job satisfaction and a lack of engagement because it creates the feeling that the friends are “in it together,” even when things aren't going so well at work.

But the business benefits of workplace friendliness go far beyond feel-good.

In fact, a 2012 Gallup report found that half of employees who claim they have a best friend at work said they felt a strong connection with their companies, while just 10% of those who keep colleagues at arm's length felt the same way.

Randstad researchers concluded: “There is no denying that workplace friendships can contribute to a positive workplace culture, including increased productivity and creativity, heightened morale, enhanced personal performance and stronger team cohesiveness. Many times employees aren't even aware that these small, but positive changes are good for their company's overall business.”

## Risks offset by upside

Don't miss out on the benefits of a workplace that fosters friendly collegiality.

According to Les Kertay, author of a Lincoln Financial Group white paper on *Happiness and the Bottom Line*, HR can promote happiness among the staff by providing opportunities for employees to socialize, and encouraging it.

While too much socializing can interfere with productivity, if there is none at all, your employees are missing a

key ingredient for workplace happiness, Kertay says.

To be sure, mixing business with pleasure comes with its risks. Among them: more gossip and favoritism, blurred lines between the personal and professional boundaries and conflicts of interest.

Workplace cliques can make outsiders feel uncomfortable, and constructive feedback may even suffer because colleagues want to spare their friends' feelings.

## Benefits of friendship at work

Still, in the Randstad research, employees themselves noted many benefits of working with pals, including the sense that it creates a more supportive and friendly workplace, increases teamwork and morale, opens communications, improves job satisfaction, motivates employees, reduces turnover, makes them more productive and engaged and creates a more loyal staff.

Not all workplace friendships are the same, of course.

Nearly as many people say they never see their daytime friends outside of work as those who say they socialize with colleagues after hours. In Randstad's survey, 5% said their personal policy is to avoid workplace friendships altogether.

More women than men agreed that workplace friendships create a more friendly and supportive atmosphere on the job.

**Bottom line:** Workplace friendships are good for the bottom line.

In a blog for The Huffington Post, data analyst Jim Meyerle wrote that "healthy friendships on the job are ... improving overall workforce profitability. ... The data show friendship really matters."

So friendships among colleagues is a perk for both the company and the co-workers, the research shows.

## Supporting co-worker friendships

Here are a few ways your organization can encourage colleagues to get chummy:

- Create opportunities for co-workers to become exercise partners. Friends who exercise together during lunch breaks or after hours usually exercise more often, work out harder and get better results.
- Allow employees to bring their pets to work. Not only are four-legged friends good cubicle companions, too, but studies show that animals at work help lower stress levels and strengthen relationships among co-workers. About one in five businesses allows workers to bring some kinds of pets to work.
- Encourage employees to recommend their friends to fill job openings at your organization. New employees referred by friends typically are good workers. More organizations are fast-tracking the résumés of employee referrals. Many pay a bonus to the employee once a friend is hired and has been on the job for a few months. *Example:* Accounting firm Ernst & Young has set a goal to hire half of its nonentry-level jobs from employee recommendations.