



Friendship at Work

This digest summarises the article [‘True Friends at Work’](#) by Alison Beard (2020, Harvard Business Review).

Beard’s article draws evidence from three books, also published in 2020, these are:

1. [Together](#) by Vivek Murthy, a former US Surgeon General.
2. [Social Chemistry](#) by Marissa King, a professor at Harvard University
3. [Friendship](#) by Lydia Denworth a science journalist

I’ve added data from these books in the digest and have also drawn from Tom Rath’s (2006) book [Vital Friends](#). Please note that due to accessing the Kindle versions, there are no page numbers in my references.

Definition

People use the term friendship differently, so defining friendship is subjective: “Friendship doesn’t have hard edges, allowing for wide differences in approach. Some people guard the word jealously, bestowing the title ‘friend’ on a select view. Others use it more generously, even as a generalised term of address” (Denworth, introduction).

The prevalence of friendship and its significance for mental health and wellbeing.

Friendship is a protective factor for mental health in the workplace but not everyone has friends at work. Prevalence data for the U.S suggests that approximately half of people in the workforce today have at least one friend at work, and that there were more work friendships in 1985 than there are today. Baby boomers, statistics show, are about 10% more likely to have friends at work than millennials (King, introduction).

The people we work with have a profound effect on our physical and mental health. It has been found that how much we like a person in our physical orbit influences our blood pressure and immune cells functioning (Denworth, chapter 1). This is significant when we consider that, online and offline, we spent *more hours of our week with coworkers* than we do with family and non-work friends.

Evidence-base

Supportive data drawn from the article and books for the beneficial value of work friendship include:

- Teams of friends perform better with group tasks than teams of strangers.
- People with friends at work are less stressed and have better work life balance.
- People with strong personal ties with members of their team share more information and ideas.
- People with friends at work have higher levels of self-confidence and capacity for learning than people without friends at work.



- Friends give us purpose, meaning and a more positive outlook.
- Having a friend at work can make it easier to tackle challenges.

While studies are growing, evidence of the links between work friendship, wellbeing, and productivity are rooted in evolutionary psychology, ethnological science in the 1950s and 1960s. In 2006 Tom Rath [published a book](#) based on a massive study of friendship. One of his findings is that if one of your colleagues is a very good friend you are *seven times more engaged at work* than the average person (Rath 2006, p. 58). The variable of ‘very good friend’ is important here, rather than just a ‘friend’ or even a ‘good friend’. If you have a best friend at work, you are likely to be more effective in your work, and your organisation is thus going to be better off as well.

As well as finding workplace friendships are an important factor in overall organisational success, Rath also found:

- People without a best friend at work have only a one in 12 chance of being engaged in their job.
- People with at least three close friends at work are 96% more likely to be extremely satisfied with their life.
- Closer friendships at work can increase satisfaction with your company by nearly 50%.

Cultivating friendships for mentally healthy workplaces

If friendships are a critical part of a healthy workplace, it is time for organisations to take steps to create environments that encourages their cultivation. This lies in work-design features which encourage the development of friendships, such as seating similar people together, giving opportunities for informal socialisation and facilitating reciprocity.

Developing more and better friendships at work relies on being patient. It takes time to make friends. People generally need 80 to 100 hours together before they can call one another a friend, and more than 200 hours together before they would be able to say best friends (Denworth, chapter one).

According to the science of friendship, making friends also relies on the following three factors:

1. **Proximity:** Physical closeness can foster friendship. One study of cadets found that seating assignments were a stronger predictor of friendship than religion or hobbies. Another study showed that half of employee interactions were between people sitting next to each other, while the rest were between coworkers in the same row are on the same floor.
2. **Similarity:** Is another predictor and facilitator of friendship. Typically, people of the same age and background are more likely to hit it off, but so too can people who share passions, hobbies, and worldviews.
3. **Reciprocity:** Taking turns giving and taking is part of the dance of making friends, and deepening friendships. Reciprocity refers not only to material things – like snacks and shouting coffees – but emotional giving. This includes taking turns (balancing) the showing of care, of self-disclosure, and asking for help. Becoming a better listener, trying to understand each other’s perspective and being a more thoughtful questioner, can build trust and friendship. The best friendships invite vulnerability” (Denworth, chapter one).