Why it is a bad idea for managers to attempt to engineer office friendships

Friends make employees more engaged. That’s no reason for companies to get involved



Scholars of happiness have found that close relationships are one of the critical ingredients of a contented life. What is true in general is also true of the workplace, according to research by Gallup. The pollster finds that having a “best friend at work” is closely associated with all manner of good things, from greater employee engagement to higher retention and better safety records.

At some level, that is unremarkable. Spending time with people you like makes most things more appealing, including work. If a job is sufficiently humdrum, camaraderie among colleagues can be the main draw. The support of friends can also encourage people to try new things. A study from 2015 by Erica Field of Duke University, and her co-authors, looked at the impact of business training given to Indian women. Women who attended the course with a friend were more likely to end up taking out loans than those who came alone.

研究幸福的学者发现，亲密的关系是幸福生活的关键因素之一。根据盖洛普的研究，这条生活中的准则在办公室也使用。民意调查发现，在工作中拥有关系亲密的朋友能带来很多好处，比如员工更加敬业、更高的员工雇佣率和刚好的安全记录。

在某种程度上，这并不引人注意。和喜欢的人共事会让很多事情变得更加有吸引力包括工作。如果一份工作过于单调， 那同事之间的友谊会成为这份工作主要的吸引力。朋友的支持也可以鼓励人们尝试新鲜的事务。杜克大学埃丽卡·菲尔德 (Erica Field) 及其合著者 2015 年开展的一项研究探讨了商业培训对印度女性的影响。和朋友一起参加培训的女性比独自参加培训的女性更有可能获得贷款(创业)。

The reverse also applies. Antagonistic relationships with co-workers are always likely to make working life miserable. A study conducted by Valerie Good of Grand Valley State University found that loneliness has an adverse effect on the performance of salespeople. Among other things, they start spending more on wining and dining their customers. The only thing worse than a salesperson who sees you as a way to make money is one who wants your company.

So friends matter. The problems come when managers see the words “higher employee engagement” and leap to the conclusion that they should try to engineer work friendships. In a report published last year Gallup gave the example of an unnamed organisation which has a weekly companywide meeting that spotlights one employee’s best friend at work. It’s not known if, in the q&a, others pop up to sob: “But I thought *we*were best friends at work.”

反之亦然。敌对的同事关系总是会使生活变得更加痛苦。大谷州立大学的瓦莱丽·古德（Valerie Good）进行的一项研究发现，孤独感会对销售人员的绩效产生不利影响。除此之外，他们开始花更多的钱来赢得和招待顾客。只有一件事比销售人员把你当做赚钱的方式更糟糕，那就是他还想要你陪。

所以朋友很重要。但是如果公司管理者一看到“更高的员工敬业度”这个词并贸然得出需要把控职场友谊的结论时，问题就来了。盖洛普在去年发布的一份报告中举了一个未具名公司的例子：该公司每周举行一次全公司会议，重点关注一名员工在工作中最佳好友。在问答环节，不知道是否有人突然抽泣起来：我认为我们俩才是工作中最好的朋友。

Startups also offer services to encourage work friendships. One monitors the depth of connections between people in different teams. It identifies shared interests (gluten-free baking, say, or workplace surveillance) between employees who don’t know each other and arranges meetings between them. You thought life was bad? At least you are not making crumpets with a stranger in finance.

It is a mistake for managers to wade into the business of friend-making, and not just because it royally misses the point. The defining characteristic of friendship is that it is voluntary. Employees are adults; they don’t need their managers to arrange play-dates. And the workplace throws people together, often under testing conditions: friendships will naturally follow.

初创企业也会提供一些服务来鼓励工作中的友好关系。有一家公司会检测不同员工之间联系的紧密程度。它先确认陌生员工之间的共同兴趣爱好（比如无麸质烘焙、当老板的眼线），然后给他们安排会议。你以为生活很糟糕吗？至少你不会和财务部的陌生同事一起做松饼。

管理者涉足交友业务是一个错误，不仅仅是因为他完全没有抓住要点。友谊本质的特征是自愿。员工是成年人；他们不需要他们的管理者来安排闲暇时间。而且工作场通常会将人们置于考验条件下，友谊会自然的形成。

The bigger problem is that workplace friendships are more double-edged than their advocates allow. They can quickly become messy when power dynamics change. The transition from friend to boss, or from friend to underling, is an inherently awkward one (“This is your final warning. Fancy a pint?”).

And friendships have the potential to look a lot like cronyism. A clever study by Zoe Cullen of Harvard Business School and Ricardo Perez-Truglia of University of California, Berkeley, found that employees’ social interactions with their managers could give their career prospects a boost relative to others.

更大的问题是，职场友谊比他们的提倡者所允许的更加具有双重性。当权利结构发生变化时，职场友谊可能迅速变成一团乱麻。从朋友转变为上司，或从朋友转变为下属，本质上是一种尴尬的转变（“这是你最后的警告。喝一杯怎么样？”）。

此外，友谊有可能看起来很像任人唯亲。哈佛商学院的佐伊·卡伦和加州大学伯克利分校的里卡多·佩雷斯-特鲁利亚进行了一项巧妙的研究，发现员工与经理的社交互动可以使他们的职业前景相对于其他人有所提升。

The researchers looked at promotions of smokers and non-smokers who worked for a large bank in South-East Asia, hypothesising that sharing smoking breaks with managers who also indulged might give workers a leg up. And so it did. Smokers who moved from a non-smoking boss to a puffer were promoted more quickly than those who moved to another non-smoker. The authors found that social interactions did not just help smokers; socialising between male managers and male employees played a large role in perpetuating gender pay gaps. If firms are going to make friendship their business, they should worry about its downsides, too.

Companies should facilitate interactions between employees, particularly in a world of hybrid and remote working. Social gatherings and buddy systems are reasonable ways to encourage colleagues to meet each other and to foster a culture. But a high-quality work relationship does not require friendship. It requires respect for each other’s competence, a level of trust and a desire to reach the same goal; it doesn’t need birthday cards and a shared interest in quiltmaking. Firms should do what they can to encourage these kinds of relationships. If individuals want to take it further, it’s entirely up to them. ■

研究人员调查了在东南亚一家大型银行工作的吸烟者和非吸烟者的晋升情况，假设与喜欢吸烟的管理者一起在休息时间吸烟，可能会给吸烟的员工带来一些优势。事实却是是这样。从一个不吸烟的上司转移到吸烟的上司的吸烟者比转移到另一个不吸烟者的吸烟者晋升更快。作者发现，社交互动不仅对吸烟者有帮助；男性管理者与男性员工之间的社交活动在延续性别工资差距方面起到了重要作用。如果公司要将友谊作为他们的业务，他们也应该担心其不利因素。

公司应该促进员工之间的互动。特别是在混合办公(现场和远程)的情况下。社交聚会和和好友系统是鼓励同事互相认识并培养文化的合理方式。但是友谊并不是高质量的工作关系的必需品。它需要的是尊重彼此的能力、一定程度的信任以及达成共同目标的意愿，而不是生日贺卡或者对缝制被子的共同爱好。企业应该尽其所能来鼓励这种工作关系，而员工是否想要关系更进一步，这完全取决于他们自己。

**Read more from Bartleby, our columnist on management and work:**[*Who is the most important person in your company?*](https://www.economist.com/business/article69426-prod.ece)*(Sep 14th)*[*Networking for introverts: a how-to guide*](https://www.economist.com/business/2023/09/07/networking-for-introverts-a-how-to-guide)*(Sep 7th)*[*The best bosses know how to subtract work*](https://www.economist.com/business/2023/08/31/the-best-bosses-know-how-to-subtract-work)*(Aug 31st)*

*Also: How the Bartleby column*[*got its name*](https://www.economist.com/column-names)