

What is the value of socializing at work?

Background

Adults spend a substantial portion of their time at work (Statistics Canada, [2023](#)). In fact, if we spend 8 hours sleeping per day, then, on average, 30% of the average employee's waking time is spent working (Morrison & Cooper-Thomas, [2013](#)).¹ Across a life time, that is approximately one-in-six hours that you get to live your life; and while unions have made significant strides in reducing the burden of work, we still work substantially more than our nomadic ancestors (Lucassen, [2021](#); Suzeman, [2020](#); Thuold Rogers, [2005](#); Lee, [1979](#)). Given the prominence of work in our lives, it is important to understand the nature and impact of workplace relationships on our overall social health and wellbeing.

Purpose

The purpose of this evidence brief is to summarize existing research describing the role of employment, working conditions, and workplace relationships in shaping our social health.

Evidence from Existing Studies

Work can sometimes be stressful, all-consuming, and difficult to navigate—thereby contributing to greater risk for loneliness, isolation, and relationship strain with family members (Tasyikan & Demiral, [2022](#); Repetti et al., [2017](#); Matthews et al., [2012](#); Vezina et al., [2004](#)). However, the challenges associated with work are often contingent on modifiable workplace conditions, including working hours, pay, and emotional/cultural climate (Moens et al., [2021](#); Craig & Brown, [2014](#); Scheffel, [2011](#); Wright et al., [2005](#); Hodson, [2004](#)). In addition to these, the quality of workplace relationships and sense of belonging created thereby is critical to promoting health in the workplace (Thissen et al., [2023](#)).

Indeed, not only is employment associated with lower levels of loneliness (Morrish & Medina-Lara, [2021](#); Morrish et al., [2022](#)); but workplaces can provide a meaningful source of social fulfillment and inclusion. For example, they facilitate positive social interactions and expand our personal and professional social networks (David et al., [2023](#); Morrison & Cooper-Thomas, [2013](#); Hodson et al., [2004](#)); which, in turn, contributes to other benefits such as greater upward mobility, improved sense of wellbeing, and enhanced capacity for managing job strain and other workplace challenges (Chiao et al., [2022](#); Gonzalez-Mule & Yuan, [2022](#); Inoue et al., [2022](#); Sonderlund et al., [2017](#); Smith, [2006](#); Slomczynski & Dubrow, [2005](#); Marsden & Gorman, [2001](#)).

Of course, creating socially supportive workplaces requires intentional effort and substantial investments of time and resources. When such investments are made coworkers can develop a sense of belonging and cohesion with their fellow-workers (Bleakley et al., [2021](#); Garret et al.,

¹ Based on a 35-hour work week, with two weeks of vacation.

2017; Filstad & Traavik, 2019). However, when such experiences are missing, workplace climates can deteriorate—resulting in significant psychological distress among employees, including greater experiences of loneliness (Bryan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Firouzbakht et al., 2018).

Naturally, workplaces are complex social environments. They are frequently hierarchical, sometimes exploitative, can incentivize competition between peers, and may become burdened by conflicts of interest. The group-level dynamics at workplaces can also lead to harassment, bullying and other adverse social conditions (Nielsen et al., 2020; Rai et al., 2018). Compounding these challenges, individuals are frequently dependent on their jobs for economic survival. These factors increase the stakes of workplace relationships, and highlight the need for careful reputation and relationship management – even between friends (Fasbender et al., 2023; David et al., 2023; Margaryan et al., 2013; Fine, 1986). As such, it's natural to see why individuals might be (and perhaps sometimes should be) cautious or weary of forming friendships in the workplace (Sias et al., 2024; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018; Haslam et al., 2005) or why some forms of social interactions that are beneficial outside of work might be harmful in the context of workplaces. For example, receiving support from a spouse is critical to wellbeing, while support from a manager or co-worker might breed feelings of inadequacy or incompetence (Beehr et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, those who push forward and are successful at establishing such friendships are observed to reap the rewards, including greater wellbeing and life satisfaction, greater stress buffering, an enhanced appreciation for work, reduced turnover or quit ideation, greater work creativity, and better job performance (Durrah et al., 2022; Neupane et al., 2022; Tondokoro et al., 2022; Wang & Qu, 2022; De Clercq et al., 2020; Gomez-Solorzano et al., 2019; Craig & Kuykendall, 2019; French et al., 2018; Colbert et al., 2015; Cocu et al., 2015; Ptacek et al., 2014; Stephen et al., 2013; Janssen et al., 2011; Sapp et al., 2010).

Given these benefits and despite the difficulty of doing so, workplaces are (and should be) encouraged to create positive social climates (Berman & West, 2002). They can do this by facilitating positive exchange and interaction between employees and across levels of hierarchy (Adams et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2015; Tse et al., 2008), promoting face to face, formal and informal social interactions (Nguyen et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2008; Whittaker et al., 1994), and reinforcing social connections even among digital workers (Wax et al., 2022; Even et al., 2020; Hofeditz et al., 2020; Stray et al., 2019; Garrett et al., 2017).

Analyses from The Canadian Alliance for Social Connection and Health

Using data from the Canadian Social Connection Survey (n = 4,812), we examined the association between employment status and Dejong Emotional and Social Loneliness Scale Scores. Results showed that individuals who were employed had lower social loneliness ($\beta = -0.094$, SE = 0.043, $p < 0.001$), but did not differ according to their level of emotional loneliness ($\beta = -0.048$, SE = 0.040, $p = 0.236$).

Hypothesizing that this pattern may emerge because workplaces promote social inclusion while serving as a barrier to time with family, we examined associations between social support and number of hours worked per week among working age adults (65 years or younger) who worked at least 5 hours per week). These analyses showed that working more hours was associated



with lesser social support from family ($\beta = -0.007$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < 0.001$) and significant others ($\beta = -0.005$, $SE = 0.002$, $p = 0.018$), but not social support from friends ($\beta = -0.001$, $SE = 0.002$, $p = 0.553$). These results supported our hypothesis showing that work has a different impact on intimate (i.e., romantic partners & family) versus social (i.e., friends) relationships.

However, digging deeper we observed that time spent with coworkers over the past seven days was correlated with time spent with family members ($r = 0.486$, $p < 0.001$) and time spent with friends ($r = 0.652$, $p < 0.001$) – suggesting that time with family and friends was not substituted by time with coworkers. As such, we further hypothesized that job strain might result in individuals engaging less across their social network. We tested this looking at whether individuals who reported more work-related stress spent less time socializing, finding that more job stress was associated with less time with family ($r = -0.160$, $p < 0.001$), friends ($r = -0.078$, $p = 0.016$), and coworkers ($r = -0.08$, $p = 0.011$).

Discussion

The evidence reviewed above highlights the importance of work, workplaces, and relationships with coworkers, while also acknowledging the complexity of these social settings and the need for intentional investments in order to promote healthy social environments within organizations and settings. However, despite these risks and costs, it is clear that there are significant benefits for both employees and employers in creating healthy social environments at work. As such, individuals and organizations should thoughtfully explore opportunities to enhance the social connections in their workplaces – working together to co-create policies and practices that support social interaction and psychological wellbeing. Under such conditions, employees can be better empowered to provide social support to one another – helping to rebuff any unavoidable job related stressors such as those which are common place in many industries and workplaces.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence summarized above, we recommend programs and policies that promote social inclusion and belonging in the workplace and encourage organizations to make appropriate investments of time and energy to support their implementation and success.

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