

Friends in Deed

Why connecting with your coworkers on a personal level is a must



By Lisa A. Beach
Illustration by Martín Elfman

Different people tend to take very different approaches to their relationships with coworkers. While some of us are keen to share the details of our personal lives and plan afterwork activities with colleagues, others prefer to keep officemates at arm's length. If you're in the latter group, research shows that, for the sake of your own well-being, you may want to reconsider.

In a recent Gallup poll, women who strongly agreed that they have a best friend at work were more than twice as likely to be engrossed in their jobs (63 percent) than those who didn't agree (29 percent). Meanwhile, the Myers-Briggs Company has found that workers report "relationships" as the biggest contributor to workplace well-being. And the New Economics Foundation has found that loneliness among employees is detrimental to companies' bottom lines.

The question is, then, how can you nurture workplace friendships—especially in the current moment, when so many of us are working remotely? Shasta Nelson, the author of the new

book *The Business of Friendship: Making the Most of Our Relationships Where We Spend Most of Our Time* (HarperCollins Leadership), says that a close relationship needs positivity, consistency, and vulnerability. No matter if you're talking in-person or on a video chat, you want people to leave your presence feeling *good*. This is something that can be achieved through minor behaviors—offering compliments, laughing together, helping out, showing empathy, and celebrating each other. "Every time we experience those things," Nelson says, "it increases the feeling that we belong and want to bond with others."

Working remotely can cause those bonds to slip. In order to maintain consistent personal interactions, Nelson advises scheduling micro-moments: You might get together for a virtual lunch via Zoom or schedule a share-your-weekly-highlights phone call every Friday.

Another way to build connections is to actively seek to go deeper with colleagues, particularly those who come from backgrounds that are unlike your own. In a 2018 Barna research report, the majority of study participants said their current friends are mostly similar to themselves,

whether in religious beliefs (62 percent), race or ethnicity (74 percent), education level (63 percent), or political views (62 percent). It seems that few of us have diverse friendships—something that has become a key takeaway of the Black Lives Matter movement—and work can help you broaden your perspectives. "Our workplaces," Nelson says, "are one of the few opportunities we have to build relationships with people who are different than us."

Maintaining work friendships is perhaps trickiest for supervisors or team leaders. However, Nelson points out that being in such a position actually provides an opportunity to encourage personal interaction. "If you're running a meeting, value team sharing as much as productivity," she suggests. "Place personal-life sharing on the agenda."

Nelson's advice is the same whether you're the boss or an intern, working in-office or remotely. "Relationships in general are the number one factor for our happiness and our health," she says. "Our jobs are still the number one place where we make friends, and if we have a friend at work, we are both happier in our lives and more productive in our jobs."