



The Importance of Positive Relationships in the Workplace



The workplace retains a central role in many people's lives.

With lots of people spending more time at work than on any other daily activity, it is vital that individuals within any organization feel connected and supported by peers, subordinates, and leaders.

Psychosocial hazards related to the culture within an organization, such as poor interpersonal relations and a lack of policies and practices related to respect for workers, are significant contributors to workplace stress.

While prolonged exposure to these psychosocial hazards is related to increased psychiatric and physiological health problems, positive social relationships among employees are how work gets done.

Whether organizations and their employees flounder or flourish largely depends on the quality of the social relationships therein.

This article will take a look at the science behind positive relationships at work and the importance of positive social interactions, and discuss some of the ways positive employee interaction can be introduced and encouraged in the workplace.

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The Science Behind Positive Relationships at Work

Psychologists have long identified the desire to feel connected to others as a basic human need, and interpersonal relationships have a significant impact on our mental health, health behavior, physical health, and mortality risk. Our physiological systems are highly responsive to positive social interactions.

Humans are endowed with separate reflexive brain networks for social thinking. Close relationships are linked to health as they build certain biological systems that may protect against



the adverse effects of stress. Their research found that in response to social contact, the brain releases oxytocin, a powerful hormone linked to trustworthiness and motivation to help others in the workplace.

When individuals experience social pain in the workplace from feeling isolated, for instance, the region of the brain that is activated is the same as if physical pain had been experienced.

Conversely, when relationships in the workplace are characterized by cooperation, trust, and fairness, the reward center of the brain is activated, which encourages future interactions that promote employee trust, respect, and confidence, with employees believing the best in each other and inspiring each other in their performance.

Positive social interactions at work directly affect the body's physiological processes. Positive social interactions serve to bolster physiological resourcefulness by fortifying the cardiovascular, immune, and neuroendocrine systems through immediate and enduring decreases in cardiovascular reactivity, strengthened immune responses, and healthier hormonal patterns.

Put simply, when employees experience positive relationships, the body's ability to build, maintain, and repair itself is improved both in and out of the workplace.

What Are the Benefits of Social Interaction at Work?

1. Employee engagement

Social interactions play an essential role in wellbeing, which, in turn, has a positive impact on employee engagement.

Organizations with higher levels of employee engagement indicated lower business costs, improved performance outcomes, lower staff turnover and absenteeism, and fewer safety incidents.

2. Shared knowledge

Social interaction can lead to knowledge and productivity spillover from trained to untrained workers in collaborative team settings or between senior and junior workers, particularly in low-skilled tasks and occupations.

For instance, the article *'Peers at Work'* in the American Economic Review found that productivity was improved when employees were assigned to work alongside faster, more knowledgeable coworkers.

3. Employee satisfaction

Employees who are satisfied with the overall quality of their workplace relationships are likely to be more attached to the organization.

Leaders who encourage informal interactions, such as after-hours social gatherings, can foster the development of more positive relationships and significantly influence and improve employee satisfaction.



4. Reduce health risks

A lack of social interaction in the workplace can have potentially negative consequences in relation to social support.

Several studies have indicated that the sense of isolation that comes from this lack of social support is associated with a host of negative health consequences, including a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, compromised immunity, increased risk of depression, and shortened lifespan.

5. Innovation

Strong within-group ties with coworkers (characterized by frequent social interactions) provide opportunities to facilitate innovative thinking.

The strong ties developed by social interactions assist innovators in the search for inspiration, sponsorship, and support within the workplace.

6. Connection

Social interactions in the workplace help to ensure everyone in a group is on the same page. Peer relationships (also referred to as equivalent-status relationships) represent the most common type of employee interaction.

These peer relationships exist between coworkers with no formal authority over one another and act as an important source of informational and emotional support for employees. Coworkers who possess knowledge about and an understanding of their specific workplace experience are given opportunities to feel connected and included through the sharing of information through regular social interactions.

7. Positive feelings

Social interactions in the workplace have been found to increase self-reported positive feelings at the end of the workday.

8. Trust

Repeated positive social interactions cultivate greater shared experiences and the gradual development of more trusting relationships. When trust exists between team members, they are more likely to engage in positive, cooperative behavior, which in turn increases employee access to valuable resources.

9. Altruism

Employees who engage in positive social interactions also tend to exhibit more altruistic behaviors by providing coworkers with help, guidance, advice, and feedback on various work-related matters.

10. Team performance

The information collated through social interaction can help a team collectively improve its performance and the precision of its estimates.



11. Improved motivation

Social interaction and positive relationships are important for various attitudinal, wellbeing, and performance-related outcomes. Employees in both low- and high-status positions reported higher levels of motivation when interpersonal relationships with coworkers were good.

Why Are Positive Interactions in the Workplace So Important?

As with any interpersonal relationship, those formed in the workplace reflect a varying and dynamic spectrum of quality.

At their very best, interactions can be a source of enrichment and vitality that helps and encourages individuals, groups, and organizations as a whole to thrive and flourish.

Conversely, negative workplace interactions have the potential to be a source of psychological distress, depletion, and dysfunction.

Positive social interactions are often referred to as appetitive. They are characterized by the pursuit of rewarding and desirable outcomes, while negative ones are aversive and commonly characterized by unwelcome and punishing results.

Positive interactions in the workplace have been shown to improve job satisfaction and positively influence staff turnover, as employees who experience support from colleagues are more likely to remain in an organization long term.

Furthermore, positive interactions between supportive coworkers who provide help and clarify tasks can improve an individual's understanding of their role, thus reducing job role ambiguity and workload, which may ultimately increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Positive interactions in the workplace are marked by trust, mutual regard, and active engagement. Interactions characterized in this way can improve employee awareness of others, foster positive emotions such as empathy and compassion, and increase the likelihood of trusting, respectful engagement between individuals.

In contrast, negative ties between two individuals at work are characterized by animosity, exclusion, or avoidance, which can cause stress and job dissatisfaction.

This can, unsurprisingly, have a detrimental effect upon an employee's emotional wellbeing; social relations at work that are disrespectful, distrustful, and lack reciprocity are independent predictors of medically diagnosed depression.

Employees tend to be involved in many dyadic relationships within the workplace, with individuals generally possessing both negative and positive ties. However, when individuals have



more negative associations with coworkers than positive, they might experience negative moods, emotions, and other adverse outcomes such as social ostracism.

A 2014 study indicated that wellbeing is enhanced through work interactions when those interactions are trusting, collaborative, and positive, and when employees feel valued and respected. Interactions lacking these characteristics were found to detract from wellbeing and negatively impacted sleeping and eating patterns, socializing, exercise, personal relations, careers, and energy.

With the amount of time we spend at work, it is imperative that employees feel connected and supported through positive social relationships. Another study noted that happiness could not be achieved without social relationships, and while social relationships do not guarantee happiness, happiness does not often occur without them.

Such connections and interactions give energy to individuals and to the organization in which they work, whereas negative relationships may deplete energy and lead to individual and corporate floundering.

How to Foster Employee Interaction in the Workplace

Given the organizational and personal benefits of positive workplace relationships, creating opportunities for and fostering positive social interactions should be a paramount objective for team leaders and managers.

According to the Society for Human Resource Management's 2016 Employee Job Satisfaction and Employee Report, relationships with colleagues were the number one contributor to employee engagement, with 77% of respondents listing workplace connections as a priority.

It is therefore crucial that leaders and managers determine ways to promote positive workplace relationships. In doing so, organizations are better able to adopt a more relationship-centric outlook wherein the fostering of positive employee interactions becomes a goal in and of itself. Elevating interactions is a critical requirement in creating a positive work environment.

In general, maximizing engagement levels can be boiled down to two key concepts: removing barriers that limit social interaction in the workplace and creating opportunities for employees to engage with each other. These outcomes can be achieved in several ways, and while not all approaches are suitable for all organizational types, the concepts hold true.

Promote face-to-face interaction

With the advent of digital communication, we're now only ever a few clicks away from contact with virtually anyone anywhere in the world. While the internet has facilitated communication on a scale hereto unrivaled, there's a lot to be said for traditional face-to-face interaction. An email might be easier, but we lose the nuances of nonverbal cues and tone.

For traditional workplaces, consider the layout of shared working environments. Is the layout of the office conducive to employee interaction? Considering the stereotypical 'bull-pen' office

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environment, literally removing the barriers between employees can open doors for social interaction opportunities.



Include remote workers

What about employees who work remotely? The upward trend in telecommuting is expected to continue over the coming years, with more employees working from home (or otherwise remotely), posing fresh challenges for the relationship-centric organization.

While organizations have been keen to reap the benefits of access to a broader talent pool and reduced office overheads, remote workers pose a challenge to the relationship-centric workplace.

Where in-person interaction isn't feasible, face-to-face interaction can still be facilitated using social technology. Using video-conferencing software regularly can help to foster positive social relationships for remote workers.

Plan collaborative events

Dedicating time to specifically promoting positive social interactions in the workplace can be a powerful route to ensuring the relationship-centric approach doesn't fall by the wayside amidst organizational pressure to achieve.

Set aside time for employees to interact; focus on interests and experiences out of work to direct attention to shared interests to allow for employees to discover commonalities and relatedness.

Effectively mediate conflict

Both employees and employers require meaningful relationships with others in the workplace, and yet these needs may be impeded by counterproductive and destructive workplace practices.

Organizational leaders should attempt to minimize negative interactions between employees by proactively mediating and resolving differences and building a culture of open communication that fosters trust and relationship building.

Lead by example

Creating a physical environment that nurtures positive social interactions between employees is a significant first step, but to promote relationships, a good team leader, supervisor, or manager should practice what they preach.

By establishing consistent patterns of behavior that exemplify the desired culture, you can promote an emotional environment of inclusivity and positivity.

Positive psychology founding father Martin Seligman's PERMA model highlights five critical elements for mental wellbeing, which business leaders can adopt to promote a positive culture that encourages belonging.

The five elements of the PERMA model are:

- Positive emotion
- Engagement
- Positive relationships



- Meaning
- Achievement/accomplishment

A Take-Home Message

The workplace is one of the few environments where people are ‘forced’ into relationships. By their very nature, workplace environments are made up of a blend of diverse groups of people, many of whom would have very little interest in freely meeting or socializing outside of the workplace. While a company’s greatest asset is its employees, those employees do not work together harmoniously all the time.

There are, however, actions that any individual or organization can take to encourage employee interaction and develop an inclusive workplace culture. Through the promotion of positive social interactions, workplace relationships can be a source of individual and collective growth, learning, and flourishing.

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