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What We Lose When We Don't See Our Work Acquaintances

They aren't close friends. But daily chats and check-ins with colleagues can help alleviate loneliness and boost well-being more than many people realize.



Being physically near people in an office creates opportunities for conversation about work and personal matters, as well as friendship.

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By Jeffrey A. Hall

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I miss Shawn. Before the pandemic, he worked just down the hall. Like me, he preferred working in the office rather than at home. And like me, he loved listening to post-punk music, riffing about politics, and brewing an afternoon espresso. Although few of our conversations lasted more than 10 minutes, for nearly every workday for 12 years, Shawn was part of the social fabric of my work life.

For the past year, we've texted a few times, emailed a few times. But we aren't connected like we used to be.

As companies start reopening offices, and perhaps give employees a choice as to whether to return, both companies and employees should consider that without a shared physical space, we will lose a kind of relationship we're rarely aware of, and that barely has a word to describe it. Somewhere between strangers and friends, these are people with whom we share moments of chats and check-ins. It's easy to dismiss them as superficial. But the relationships we develop with such workplace acquaintances are much more important to our sense of connection and community than many of us realize.

The water cooler

It perhaps goes without saying that spending time with people we love makes us less lonely and brings us greater life satisfaction.

But recent scholarship on human sociality, including my [research](#), has added some complexity and nuance to this equation, showing that social interactions with [acquaintances](#) and even [strangers](#) also have the potential to alleviate loneliness and boost well-being. These studies recognize the abundance of potential locations for conversation: public transit, the gym, the coffee shop. The workplace is certainly a place to socialize as well.

Conventional wisdom tells us water-cooler talk strengthens workplace performance and cohesion. I would contend that the most important value of these conversations isn't for the workplace. Having someone to talk to enriches the lives we live at work.

This is clear in the work of Mario Small, a professor of sociology at Harvard University, who recently challenged the long-held assumption that when we have something important to talk about, we seek out emotionally close companions. In his book "Someone to Talk To," Prof. Small asserted that "people are deeply responsive to the social interactions they encounter routinely." He found that we are more likely to talk about important matters to people who are available than people we are emotionally close to; access transforms acquaintances and workmates into confidants.

Thinking of who we talk to routinely as the foundation of relationships—rather than relationships being the reason for routine talk—is a paradigmatic shift when thinking about what we might lose if we never go back to the office.

In my pre-pandemic [research](#), I asked 116 people about their recent social interactions at five random times a day for five consecutive days. Across these 2,722 interactions, taking time to catch up, joke around or have a meaningful conversation with someone boosted connection and happiness—no matter who it was with.

Significantly, strictly focusing on workplace matters offered no such benefits. Unlike connecting conversation, peoples' reported happiness after conversations about work was indistinguishable from moments when they were alone.

Being physically near people, in other words, creates opportunities for conversation about work and personal matters alike. It also creates the opportunity for friendship. In my [research](#) on the number of hours it takes to make a friend, after the neighborhood (35.8%), the workplace was the most common place (25%) to make new friends. We don't make friends with everyone we work with and hundreds of hours of time together doesn't guarantee that friendship will necessarily emerge. But all friendships have to start somewhere.

New acquaintances are the minor leagues of friendship. Making new friends is like calling up promising candidates to the majors. With fewer people to meet and much less time spent together during this pandemic, the minor leagues of friendship might as well have been disbanded.

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Shared spaces

To reap any of these benefits—whether it is from the bonds formed between acquaintances or the friendship that grows out of an office mate—one thing is crucial: a shared space. There lies the key difference between working *with* someone and working *near* someone.

Consider, for instance, that the most common reason that friendships disappear is someone moves away. For all of us still working remotely, it was as if all of our workplace neighbors up and left. And with those people, so went all of those daily moments of contact and communion—the very foundation of friendship.

Of course, Zoom, Slack and email flooded in to replace workplace communication, but those tools are fundamentally different from routine face-to-face conversation.

Many of the conversations that would have previously taken place during a quick catch-up chat in the hallway or an informal huddle after a meeting now either don't happen or have to be scheduled. Video chat and email are neither accidental nor casual; you must be intentional while considerate of making demands on colleagues' time and autonomy.

To re-establish routine conversations with office colleagues and friends, we essentially have to treat them as friends we want to keep in touch with.

Unfortunately, people are bad at keeping in touch. For those who don't live with us, daily contact is exceedingly rare. And this isn't a new phenomenon: It was true in the era of posted letters and landline phone calls, which suggests it is unlikely to change.

If only the closest relationships manage to endure the loss of routine interaction, are we going to make an exception for those weak ties from work? Almost certainly not.

Suggestions for companies

What, then, can companies do? Can they find new ways to foster these bonds? Without bringing people back to work in person, I am doubtful.

In pre-pandemic times, companies that created social environments after hours or on weekends may have confronted resentment from employees who felt it was an infringement on their free time. These days, requiring employees to converse with one another via video chat for the sake of keeping in touch might be met with even greater resistance. And if employees were made accountable for doing so, it would defeat the purpose of a friendly catch-up chat in the first place.

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What do you miss most about not being in the office? Join the conversation below.

Once it is safe to return, if companies have far fewer in-person requirements, I offer three suggestions.

- First, remember that relationships take time—preferably free time. If employees are given time to catch up with one

another, perhaps interspersed with required activities during those in-person days, it reduces the infringement on free time inherent to after-hours gatherings.

- Second, consistency matters. If employees work in person only sporadically, and some don't come back to work at all, the predictability and routine of seeing the same people will be lost.

- Finally, relationships require space. Employers could design in-person workdays to balance free and obligatory time housed in a place that accommodates talk for its own sake—outside the office or at least away from people's desks. It is important to simulate what made those shared spaces valuable in the first place—a feeling of having a friend just down the hall.

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