

## The problem with friends in high places

By Nikki Williamson  
The Sydney Morning Herald

### Mixing work with pleasure can be dangerous if you're not careful.

You're starting work in a new office.

Is the best approach to keep your own counsel and avoid getting too close to your new colleagues?

Or should you sign up for the social club, make five lunch dates with workmates in your first week in between planning for Friday night drinks?

Experts on the subject say somewhere in the middle will pay the best dividends.

On one hand, human beings are social creatures. We like to form groups and developing positive workplace bonds keeps us happy.

Cris Popp from consultancy Workplace Wellbeing says happy, trusting, sociable workplaces are also among the most productive.

"There is no other way to build trust than to give a little of yourself away," he says. "We most often do that when we socialise with each other."

Jane Lowder, a career coach from Max Coaching, says if you're new in a job, a reasonable level of socialising will make adjusting to your new environment and position easier.

"Making friends with co-workers, from the front door security guard through to the chief executive officer, can positively impact on your productivity and the ease with which you can fulfil your role," she says.

On the negative side of the ledger there are risks involved in playing with colleagues. Between 66 per cent and 80 per cent of workers report harassment at some stage of their career and while after-work drinks can encourage bonding, they can also open the way for inappropriate behaviour and language.

Leanne Fink, a human resources consultant with HRintegration, says you should set boundaries when socialising and respect the boundaries of others.

Jackie Waite from human resources consultancy Grey Global Group agrees. "The most common mistake people make is being too personal and forgetting that people have varying comfort levels when talking about their life outside of work," Waite says. "When alcohol flows too freely, there can also be issues around unwanted advances."

Popp says it's best to take your lead from the other person when it comes to what is and isn't appropriate. Be wary of who you're confessing to. "You can open up to some people you work with," says Popp. "But there are other people that will take information and use it against you".

Lowder agrees: "Do be wary of anyone who tries to become your best friend on your first day," she says. "This is often a giveaway that there's a hidden agenda at hand. No sooner have you been lured into sharing your deepest secrets, or adverse opinions of your new boss, than you find this information hasn't been kept confidential or, worse still, has been used against you."

Fink says it's wise to brush up on legal requirements on how you behave towards colleagues and how they should treat you.

"Employees need to acquaint themselves with their organisation's [equal opportunity], discrimination and harassment policies," she says. "They should also be aware of their obligations under the corresponding state and federal legislation, too."

Whether you're telling a joke or commenting on news events, you always need to consider your colleagues and be respectful.

"We have a culturally diverse workforce," says Fink. "You need to respect and take into consideration cultural differences."

Lowder says another hazard of workplace sociability is time-wasting. "It's when the five-minute catch-up at the coffee station turns into a daily 40-minute rundown of the previous night's activities that the positives of socialising at work turn into a negative," she says.

"This is noticed quickly by managers, not to mention co-workers who have to hear the intricacies of your life, whether they want to or not."

And don't forget to be careful about using technology to socialise at work.

Fink says email, sharing photos and video footage can all cause major problems. "When people use email to socialise they [often] forget about the company logo and signature at the bottom of their message," she says.

Who you send your email to initially is not where it may end up. Emails can be added to, altered and forwarded on to anywhere, she warns.

Also, whether it's in-house socialising over coffee or heading down to the pub for a drink after hours, someone is always watching. "Whether its colleagues or not, your behaviour is always going to be linked to your company and your professionalism," says Fink.

If you go to the pub wearing the company logo on your shirt, it's a good idea to change, cover the logo or simply keep yourself under control.

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