

Making friends at work a tricky undertaking

By Amy Yelin, Globe Correspondent, 10/5/03

An e-mail appeared in my inbox recently that detailed how a 51-year-old proofreader named George passed away while working at his desk. For most of us, the idea of dying at our job - or even worse, *for* our job - is depressing enough.

But to add insult to injury, five days went by before anyone even noticed that this guy hadn't left his chair to use the restroom or get a sandwich. In the e-mail, his boss stated, "George was always the first here each morning and the last to leave at night, so no one found it unusual that he was in the position all that time and didn't say anything."

While the story sounds like an urban legend, its implications still disturbed me. Imagine, I thought, being so socially isolated at work that no one even noticed if you *died*? Imagine not having one friend around to nudge you - just to say, "Hey George - you still breathing, guy?"

As children, we are taught the value and importance of friendship. We are supposed to make friends, to share, to be nice. In our formative years, friends are a measure of how socially well-adjusted we are. I admit - I didn't start off strong in this area. During what was supposed to be my first sleepover, I refused to let Lisa from down the street play with my new McDonald Land set. She wouldn't stop crying until her mother came to pick her up.

In my preadolescent years, I got the hang of making friends. By the time I graduated college, I thought I knew everything there was to know about this important and timeless art. Then I entered the working world.

Let me first stress that I am a big believer in having friends at work. I can count at least a dozen or so friends who I've been lucky enough to meet through different jobs.

A recent study published by researchers at the University of Michigan supports the idea that we, as well as our employers, benefit from having emotional support at the office. By comparing the distinctly "impersonal" American work ethic with countries such as South Korea and Japan, which encourage personal relationships at the office, these researchers came to the conclusion that "keeping an emotional distance may not be the best way to get the job done."

Despite all the perks to making friends at our jobs, the workplace does seem to be the one place where relationships are almost guaranteed to get a little rocky.

Choosing who we want to spend time with outside the office (and who we don't) can be a tricky and sensitive issue. Several years ago I planned a barbecue and invited many of my peers at the office. One woman I did not invite, however, was quite unhappy. I discovered this when she barreled into my office with my carefully designed invitation rolled-up in her hand.

"Why wasn't I invited to your little shindig?" she demanded, pointing my invitation at me like a weapon. Not wanting to insult her by highlighting the fact that she would be at least 20 years older than everyone else at the party, I replied, "I didn't think you'd want to come, but you can if you want to." She then spent the next 15 minutes sharing stories of her crazy, hippy youth in the 1960s to prove to me that she was fun. Then she never showed up at the barbecue.

A few years later, I shared an office with a male co-worker six or seven years younger than myself. I was operating under the false belief that he thought I was cool until one day he stopped typing at his computer, turned to me and said, "You don't want to come to a party I'm having, right? I mean, you don't really want to hang out with a bunch of 20-somethings? You won't be hurt if I don't invite you?"

"Sure," I agreed, thinking he was probably right. What was I going to say to a group of 20-somethings? Still, the rejection surprised me and stung in a way that brought back horrible memories of waiting to be picked for a team in gym class.

The general nature of work introduces unique problems - money, job security - that can strain and test any relationship. I remember one job where a co-worker inadvertently left her paycheck on the copy machine. By the end of the day, news of her salary had made its way to everyone in the office. By the end of the week, she was sobbing in the bathroom as those of us who made less money had turned on her like a pack of angry lions, giving her the evil eye as we stalked past her cube and leaving her out of all lunch plans unless she was willing to treat.

One of the biggest friendship challenges I've had at work was when a colleague and good friend was unjustly and insensitively let go from her job. I knew she had been treated unfairly, and on the day it happened, I fantasized of standing up for my friend - of the two of us making a very vocal and dramatic joint exit in the spirit of Tom Cruise and Renee Zellweger in "Jerry Maguire." But I stayed put. How far we can go for our friends at work is strongly influenced by how much we need that paycheck - and most of need us need that paycheck.

The endurance of bonds formed with colleagues can be hard to predict. Work friendships are often stealthy little creatures, making it difficult to distinguish a "real" relationship from a transient one. I'll give you an example. Just a few weeks ago I met a former colleague for a drink. The conversation went something like this:

"Remember the way Louise used to always say the word 'awesome?' "

"Oh yeah, that was really annoying." Long pause.

"Remember how Joe always used to wear that stinky cologne?"

I didn't remember this at all, but as I am well-trained in the art of friendly conversation, I replied, "Oh yeah, horrible. I hated that stuff."

We were about 90 minutes into this stimulating trip down memory lane when it dawned on me that she and I had absolutely nothing in common - except for our old place of employment. I looked at my watch and uttered a quick, bad-date cliché: "Oh, would you look at the time!" followed by an even less sincere, "I'll call you!" as I was waving and running off to my car.

Perhaps the tale of George the proofreader is simply the sad story a man who, aware of the complexities and risks that come with making friends at the workplace, decides to keep to himself and suffers the ultimate consequence. I, on the other hand, wouldn't trade the friends that I've made on the job for anything. They've made even the worst job situations tolerable and fun - and those that are still around continue to bring joy to my life. Anyway, when you boil it all down, we're only human. We all appreciate a friendly hello when we get to work in the morning. Not to mention the occasional nudge - just to check, if you know what I mean.

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