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Headline: Commentary: Close friendships at work are lifelines that have frayed during the pandemic

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It was not that long ago, in the not-so-distant past, that going out to lunch with the same group of colleagues was a regular routine for most people at work.

It was as habitual as our daily commute to work. Yet both have been absent since COVID-19 forced most of us to work from home.

For more than a year now, we have been eating lunches alone at our home desks, missing our colleagues who used to help break a mundane workday with banter and even gossip.

With the shift towards working from home and fewer physical opportunities to connect if at all, many of our work friendships have been languishing.

Work flies on the wings of face-to-face interactions, chemistry and collaboration and yet gone are the serendipitous water cooler chats, brainstorming sessions and inside jokes.

Much of our joy and mind-meld also stemmed from the partnerships that bloomed out of shared challenges: A difficult colleague, an impossible appraisal goal or hygiene issues around the offices.

Yet now with workers disappearing back into homes, we are left to cope - often alone - with disruptions to our daily routines and events outside of work. They have sapped our energy, but we don't have the ballast of work friends to lean on.

Are you missing your colleagues? If this sounds like you, you're not alone.

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About 65 per cent of workers working from home due to the pandemic reported feeling less connected to their colleagues, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center involving over 10,300 working adults in the United States in October 2020.

In a more recent 2021 study published in *Journal of Applied Psychology*, a group of researchers from the University of Texas at Austin headed by Jae Kwon Jo showed COVID-19 has impacted friendship ties at work, likely due to social distancing reducing opportunities for employees to seek out help. This is despite work friendships being key source of social support.

In another 2020 study published in *Applied Psychology*, Professor Bin Wang and his colleagues found that employees working from home reported higher levels of loneliness due to fewer opportunities for physical interactions with colleagues and supervisors which made it challenging to maintain these relationships.

IMPACT ON ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE

The pandemic has resulted in increased stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion that threatens work friendships.

In a 2020 survey conducted by the National University Health System's (NUHS) Mind Science Centre involving 1,407 respondents, 61 per cent of those working from home reported feeling stressed, compared with 53 per cent of front-line workers.

This suggests that the impact of declining work friendships is more likely to be felt by those working from home.

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on work friendships is also evident at the firm level. In a large-scale survey, conducted by the Boston Consulting Group in 2020, involving over 12,000 employees in Germany, US and India, employees who experienced less social connectivity during the pandemic became less productive in collaborative work.

To that end, employees' impacted productivity, psychological and mental well-being as well as lower levels of team collaboration, are likely to have an adverse impact on organisational performance and culture.

Having a best friend at work has been often cited as a key reason why people stay on with an organisation so what happens when the friendship takes a beating?

FRIENDSHIPS ARE A LIFELINE AT WORK

The effects of working from home might run deeper. Friendships play a central role in people's lives. They provide joy and meaning.

In fact, one of the most reliable indicators of happiness and life satisfaction for all ages is the quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships and this extends to work friendships.

Although one might argue that work friendships are transactional relationships of convenience to some extent, this is more likely to occur in the initial stages of the friendship where people help one another while trying to complete a project or work task.

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But once workers settle down, research in communications suggests that workplace friendships share similar foundations as friendships outside of the workplace.

According to a 1998 study conducted by Professor Patricia M Sias and Professor Daniel J Cahill, found that co-workers can become closer over time and develop meaningful forms of companionship, with people sharing more work-related problems and aspects of their personal lives. They may also socialise outside of work, with communication becoming less cautious and more intimate.

So, work friendships are no less genuine or less important compared with friendships outside of work settings.

Those with “work spouses” in their organisations also benefit in multiple ways. Empirical studies have shown that work friends can offer task assistance, emotional support, work and non-work related advice - all of which are associated with positive work outcomes. Work friends experience higher job satisfaction and psychological well-being, feel more positive at work, and see work to be more meaningful

Good work friendships ultimately benefit teams and organisations by increasing organisational commitment, facilitating cooperation and cohesion, and driving creativity and innovation.

A 2016 study published in European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, psychologist Simone Donati and her colleagues found the greater the extent to which team members form friendships at work, the more likely team members will engage in innovative behaviours in which they constantly exchange information.

WITHERING FRIENDSHIPS

Given just how important work friendships are – not just to people’s own well-being but also that of a company - it is even more critical during a pandemic where a sense of isolation and loneliness has sunken in with extended remote working conditions.

This is why everyone needs to make it a point to maintain workplace friendships. Instead of waiting for work friends to reach out to you, be proactive and make the effort to check in more often with them.

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Colleagues could schedule a "virtual lunch date" where they can eat together, share about one another's personal challenges while being an active and empathetic listener. These conversations are not about work – but about lives outside of it, such as interests, hobbies, books people read or food they tried and liked.

Organisations can also play an important role by creating virtual opportunities for employees to build and maintain their work friendships.

When the pandemic struck in early 2020, Krissee Chasseur, brand aura research and development lead at online retailer Zappos, decided to host weekly virtual happy hours for her team of 100 and up to 60 people have participated each week.

Elsewhere, Boston Consulting Group provides meditation sessions and online fitness classes in many of their offices. Besides helping employees with their psychological well-being, these group wellness activities also allow them to remain connected with their work friends.

And perhaps when restrictions finally ease, hopefully in end-October in Singapore, we can reconnect and enjoy the benefits of friends at work.

Kenneth Tai is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behavior and Human Resources in the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at Singapore Management University.