MASTER THESIS

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN SOCIAL RELATIONS AND PROFESSION – DO FRIENDSHIPS AT WORK REALLY WORK OUT?

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Abstract

Human beings have a social nature. They always try to be in contact with other people and to make relationships. Friendships develop in all kinds of settings. This happens all the time and in all parts of life, including work. At work, teamwork and workgroups gain more and more importance and are more prevalent in the workplace. This makes the study of friendships at work increasingly relevant. This article examines the attitudes and experiences of employees with regard to workplace friendships. The article is based on a study carried out in an organization in Germany. The goal of the study is to bring the aspects that are relevant for a development of workplace friendships to light and to discover reasons for and against workplace friendships. Furthermore, the study aims to analyse individual experiences. The study reveals how people develop workplace friendships, identifies the criteria that are relevant for the development of friendships and discusses whether friendships at work are relevant at all. Furthermore, rewards and risks of workplace friendships have been examined.

Twenty-four employees of the organization participated in face- to- face interviews. In total, 13 female and 11 male respondents working in the organization for two years and longer and more than 20 hours per week took part in the study. The respondents have worked for the organization for an average of 11 years. The interviews were all based on the same interview scheme, but it was space left for individual stories.

The results of the study show that workplace friendships are not perceived by the participants as extremely relevant. They see them as a nice benefit, but are not unnecessary. But good co-worker relations happen to be extremely important.The participants did not perceive their own workplace friendships as problematic. They indeed do have conflicts because of workplace friendships but did not feel disturbed by that. Especially those who do not have any friendships themselves had a more distant attitude towards workplace friendships.

The data showed that employees find it relevant to have a relaxed atmosphere at work and to be able to have private talks once in a while, but that friendships at work are not necessarily relevant. Overall, several participants even reported that they avoid the development of workplace friendships in order to prevent the development of conflicts at the workplace. The results showed clearly that people like to keep a distance to their co-workers to protect themselves.
The data showed that office gossip, the distraction from work and unprofessional decision making were the most relevant risks of workplace friendships. The creation of a good atmosphere at work, the enhancement of happiness and productivity and the possibility to gain more support were the most relevant rewards that arise out of workplace friendships.

Samenvatting

Mensen zijn sociale wezens. Zij willen altijd veel contact met andere mensen hebben en zijn op zoek naar vriendschappen. Vriendschappen ontstaan in veel verschillende omgevingen. De vorming van vriendschap gebeurt altijd en overall, ook op werk. Op werk krijgt groepswerk desondanks ook steeds meer attentie. Dat is een sterk reden om de studie naar vriendschap op werk meer uit te breiden.

 Het volgende artikel beschrijft een studie die gedaan werd in een organisatie in Duitsland. Het doel van de studie is het om de belangrijke aspecten en attitudes tegenover vriendschappen op het werk te ontdekken. Vervolgens wil de studie individuele ervaringen achterhalen. De studie onderzoekt de manier op welke mensen vriendschappen vormen en wat de belangrijke punten voor het lukken van een vriendschap zijn. Bovendien wordt onderzoekt of vriendschappen überhaupt belangrijk zijn en wat voor voordelen en nadelen uit een vriendschap op het werk kunnen ontstaan.

Overall hebben 24 medewerkers uit een organisatie aan de face- to- face interviews mee gedaan. 13 vrouwelijke en 11 mannelijke respondenten die allemaal tenminste twee jaar in de organisatie bezig zijn en tenminste 20 uur per week werken. Gemiddeld zijn de respondenten al 11 jaar in de organisatie werkzaam. De interviews hebben alle hetzelfde interview schema gevolgd, maar hadden ruimte voor individuele verhalen.

De resultaten van de studie laten zien, dat vriendschappen op het werk in het algemeen als minder belangrijk worden beoordeeld. De meeste respondenten vinden ze wel leuk om te hebben, maar niet bijzonder belangrijk. Een goede relatie met de andere werknemers te hebben was wel een belangrijk punt voor de respondenten. In het algemeen hebben de respondenten hun eigen vriendschappen niet als problematisch beoordeeld. Ze gaven wel aan soms conflicten te hebben, maar deze zijn niet zo erg dat ze tot problemen kunnen leiden of hebben geleidt. Maar vooral de respondenten die geen vrienden op het werk hebben, laten meestal een sceptische houding tegenover vriendschappen op het werk zien,

De data laat zien, dat werknemers het belangrijk vinden om een leuke omgeving op het werk te hebben en ook tussendoor leuke conversaties te kunnen hebben, maar dat ervoor niet per se vriendschappen nodig zijn.
Overall heeft een groot aantal respondenten aangegeven dat ze geen vriendschappen op het werk wensen om zelf minder aanvechtbaar te zijn en conflicten te voorkomen.
De data toont aan, dat vooral roddel op het werk, de afleiding van het werk en het nemen van onprofessionele besluiten als de meest grote risico van vriendschappen op het werk worden gezien. Op de andere kant zijn de leuke sfeer, de steiging van tevredenheid en een verhoging van de productiviteit grote voordelen van vriendschappen op het werk.

Preface

Finally…the day has come. I have finished this master thesis - a major part of my study. After finishing my Bachelor of Communication Science the question of how I wanted to continue arose. Several subjects of corporate communication always gained my interest and so I decided to pursue a Master in Corporate Communication.

It was a hard mission quite often. A lot of things had to be organized to achieve everything in the set time frame. But even if I had to motivate myself quite often to keep going, the whole process was interesting and challenging.

I want to thank the people who supported me in the last six months and motivated me. I would especially like to thank my tutors Dr. M.D.T de Jong and Ardion Beldad from the University of Twente for their advice and support. Further, I would like to thank my friends and family for giving me the needed emotional support. Finally, I want to thank the organization "ibau" that gave me the possibility to hold my interviews on their premises. They gave me all the facilities that I needed and helped me to gain the support of the employees to be able to hold good interviews.

I hope this Master thesis enriches the literature and that you enjoy reading it.

Münster, March 2011

Content

Article

Finding the right balance between social relations and profession – Do friendships at work really work out?

Friendship Development in Organizations

People tend to form friendships with people who are similar to them (Andrew & Montague, 1998). If people work in the same organization, many topics are of mutual interest for them and give a feeling of similarity. This indicates why people form relationships, fall in love or make friends with people they work with. The amount of time people spent together at work facilitates the quick formation of friendships. Frequent interaction and close proximity between individuals lead to friendship or at least to the opportunity for friendship formation (Riordan & Griffith, 1995; Sias & Gallagher, 2009). Relations and social interactions at work are of great importance for every individual in an organization and for the organization itself (Tschan, Semmer & Inversin, 2004). Social aspects are important for job satisfaction and regularly appear among the facets of job satisfaction measures (Tschan, Semmer & Inversin, 2004).

Andrew and Montague (1998) argued that friendships in organizations are likely to occur, because people spend a lot of time together. However, people do not form close relationships with every employee they are working with. Different processes happen when it comes to the development of friendships in an organization. Overall, employees can have a good relation to their coworkers without being friends. Sias and Gallagher (2009) found that the difference between a friendship and a good coworker relation is revealed in the depth of the relation. "Communication between friends tends to cover a greater variety of topics and is characterized by greater intimacy than communication between coworkers who are not friends" (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Employees are more likely to form intimate relationships with their coworkers when they perceive their supervisor as unsupportive, unfair, untrustworthy and unwilling to provide recognition of employee accomplishments (Oddden & Sias, 1998) "Friendship networks in organizations are not merely sets of linked friends. They are systems for making decisions, mobilizing resources, concealing or transmitting information's and performing other functions closely allied with work behavior and interaction" (Lincoln & Miller, 1979). Sias and Cahill (1998) describe that workplace friendships tend to experience three primary transitions as they grow closer. Those transitions are categorized in figure 1.

Figure 1: Friendship development

Coworkers → Friends → Close Friends → Almost Best Friends

According to Sias and Cahill (1998) people at work tend to call each other *friends* when they work a lot together, share common ground and have experienced extra-organizational socializing, like spending time together outside work. People who have *close friends* at work often discuss work or personal related problems and experience a more intimate and less cautious communication with each other and *almost best friends* distinguish their friendship

with others through events that they experience together over a long passage of time (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Of course, it must be noted that not all relationships pass through those transitions. Some become friends more quickly and most will never evolve to the almost best friend stage (Sias & Gallagher, 2009).

Rewards and Risks of workplace friendships

Most empirical studies suggests that social relationships at work affect whether people are satisfied with their jobs (Krackhardt & Kilduff, 1990). If people get along well with their co-workers, it has an influence on their general perception of the work situation (Tschan & Semmer & Inversin, 2004). People`s social life is crucial for their personal satisfaction at work and has a great influence on their identification with an organization and their work motivation (Tschan & Semmer & Inversin, 2004). Riordan and Griffith (1995) claimed that "within the work context, friendships among employees can provide increased interaction, communication, trust, respect, cooperation, growth, development, support, energy, and security, which in turn can influence work-related attitudes and behaviours". According to Sias and Cahill (1998) friendships at work are a great part of institutional participation and individual career- building. It thus serves the purposes of the employee as well as those of the organization. Furthermore, friends make the daily work more enjoyable, advance creativity and help with gaining promotions (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Social relations at work therefore tend to show a major influence on actual performance at work when it comes to making mistakes or not (Hofmann & Morgeson, 1999). Studies showed that friends at work are offered help four times more than disliked colleagues (Tschan, Semmer & Inversin, 2004). Nolan and Küpers (2009) found that the willingness to share knowledge and resources with friends is much higher compared to regular colleagues. Furthermore, work was much more discussed with friends than with other colleagues. That indicates an influence of the quality of the relations on the work-related interaction (Tschan, Semmer & Inversin, 2004). Friendships at work can have a great impact on the people themselves and can be of great influence on the personal well-being and the contribution that people deliver to their work. Employees who experience companionship often during their work time experience fewer negative and more positive feelings at the end of the workday (Buunk & Verhoeven, 1991).

Recently, especially in the USA, some organizations specifically recruit employees who live in the same area. This creates a social interaction among the employees, which happens to animate commitment to the organization and cooperation at work (Spagnolo, 1999). According to Berman et al. (2002) managers should even promote friendships at work, because they involve commitment, trust and shared values or interests between people at work and improve the quality of work.

Furthermore, through friendships, individuals support each other and managers stand up for people who support them. "They reduce stress, increase communication, help employees and managers accomplish their tasks and assist in the process of accepting organizational change" (Berman et al, 2002). According to Sias and Gallagher (2009) "social support and workplace friendships are associated with job satisfaction and may reduce job stress and anxiety and even discourage employee turnover", which is of great relevance for both the employees and the organization. Employees who experienced intense mentoring relationships received more promotions and had higher incomes than employees who did not

experience close mentoring relationships (Markeiwicz & Kausilas, 2000). Men especially tend to take advantage of personal relationships to achieve faster job promotions (Markeiwicz & Kausilas, 2000). Surely, close mentoring relationships are not necessarily friendships, but still imply a strong relationship.

Nevertheless, Buunk and Verhoeven (1991) admitted that a potential boomerang effect of social support might take place when assistance is given in an overprotective way, thereby threatening self esteem. If people get the impression that they get help and support all the time, they might feel that people do not trust them and do not want them to take any responsibility. Rocco and Jones (1978) explored relationships between job stress and social support from leaders and co-workers, in terms of direct and moderated relationships and found similar results.

When people gained a lot of social support from their co-workers, they showed job dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem and the intention to leave the organization (Andrew & Montague, 1998). Apparently, friendships offer many positive advantages for individuals and organizations either. Nevertheless, friendships at work can be risky for employees and organizations. Those relationships are partly shaped by work which makes it challenging to differentiate between work and the relationship (Andrew & Montague, 1998).

Some managers generally do not allow close relations in their organization, because they fear less loyalty to the organization and give the appearance of favoritism, unless the friendship develops between the manager and the employee (Berman et al., 2002). Relationships might create conflicts and interest situations in which employees would have to decide between their friends and the organization. Especially if friendships result in romantic liaisons and sexual harassment, those conflicts are foreseeable. Friends share confidential information that even if they are work-related, could be used against them (Berman et al., 2002). Additionally, it is argued that friendships at work are impractical and destined to fail, because of turnovers in employment (Berman et al., 2002). Krackhardt and Porter (1985) did research about the effects of turnovers on the employees left in the organization. They found that a negative change of attitude is possible if a friend is leaving the organization. It happens because "the employee attributes dissatisfaction to the friend who left. This creates dissonance, which is resolved in the triangle by the stayer becoming more dissatisfied with his or her job" (Krackhardt & Porter, 1985, 246).

It is questionable whether all people manage to separate their work and private life all the time. When friends meet at work plenty of social ground needs to be caught up. In fact, they want to discuss things that are important to them and connect them. Further, the relationship is partly shaped by work which makes it challenging to differentiate between work and the relationship (Andrew & Montague, 1998). Many situations can occur where conflict arises and people have to choose between their private life and work. It is possible that people experienced conflicts because of relationships that they have or had in their working career.

Overall, this study examines the way people form friendships at work and how they manage to differentiate friendly relationships from professional relations. It figures out relevant aspects in the process of friendship development and works out why some friendships are problematic while others are not. It is also examined what employees perceive as rewards and as risk of friendships and for which reasons they either have or do not have workplace friendships. Especially the individual differences between the participants form the major ingredient of the research.

The study's major finding establishes how people manage their relationships at work and how they find a balance between their professional work and the relationships. It examines how people decide when they have to make decisions that bring their workplace friendship and the profession into conflicts. Do people treat their friends the same as other colleagues when they are at work or are friends treated differently? Do people eventually put a lot of effort into friendships with people at work who might be able to help them with their working career?

Most previous research on workplace friendships focused on how social relationships at work affect employee satisfaction and how they have an influence on turnover (e.g. Buunk 1991, Krackhardt & Porter 1985, Markiewucz, Devine & Kausilas 2000, Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery & Pikington 1995). Others focused on the influence of friendships on productivity at work. The current study goes further in examining how those friendships develop and why people do or do not have workplace friendships. Additionally, the rewards of and the risks associated with those friendships are examined.
Furthermore, the conflicts that arise out of relationships at work and how those are being perceived by the surroundings are obtained. Do people appreciate friendships at work or do they think they are disturbing? One main question and two subquestions are formulated.

HOW DO PEOPLE FIND A BALANCE BETWEEN THEIR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THEIR PROFESSIONAL ROLES AT WORK?

1. *How do people form workplace friendships?*

2. *What are the implications of workplace friendships?*

Methods

Research instrument

By interviewing all the respondents, individual perceptions and experiences were explored. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were of an open-ended nature to be able to ask the respondent about facts as well as their personal opinions of a topic (Yin, 2002). An interview scheme gave directions for the development of the conversation.

Participants

The study was aimed under 24 participants with an average age of 52 years, who are all working in the same organization. It was held at a publishing company based in Germany which administers a homogenous structure with a low hierarchy. The organization employs 250 workers. In total, 13 female and 11 male respondents who have worked in the organization for at least two years for more than 20 hours per week took part. The respondents have worked for the organization for an average of 11 years. The study was restricted to only one organization to make sure that all the participants had to deal with equal rules, given by the organization and were dealing with the same organizational culture. It is necessary to understand the context of the organization in which the people are working. The respondents were recruited via a personal invitation. The selection of the respondents happened in two steps. First, all the respondents of the organization who fulfilled the criteria were selected and numbered. Secondly, from all the possible numbers, 24 employees were chosen randomly.

Every respondent got the same information about the procedure and background of the study in form of a written explanation. The interviews were held in a period of one month.

Procedure

One month before the start of the interviews, the employees of the organization were informed, via the intranet, about the study that would be done at the organization and that they might be selected to take part in the study. The 24 employees who had been selected randomly were asked if they would be willing to participate in the study with a personal invitation that was sent via email one week after the intranet message. The invitation contained the information that the study covers the topic of friendships and relationships at work and how people manage to balance that with work. However it did not give any detailed information. Approximately two weeks later, the employees who agreed to participate in the study, were interviewed in a private room at their workplace during their normal working hours. Participants were all assured that the participation was voluntary, that the results were treated as confidential and that they would receive summarized information about the results of the study. An interview scheme was used during all the interviews to give the interviewer better orientation during the interviews, but was not used as a strict requirement. Because all the interviews were held in an organization in Germany, the interview scheme was translated into German. The translation was controlled by back translating. The average duration of the interviews was between 30 and 45 minutes.

Analyses

The qualitative data of the study was collected by an audio recorder during the interviews. The files were subsequently transcribed for the analyses. To analyze the results of the interviews, the Grounded Theory approach was used. By using Grounded Theory, the data can be collected without an existing prior theoretical framework (Elliot, Jones & Parker, 2002). While studying the data of the interviews it has been defined what patterns, themes or issues can be exposed. Those themes have also been defined as the two research questions of the study.

Afterwards, the data was checked for evidence that answers and supports the chosen subquestions and it was analyzed how the different answers of the participants could be connected. In this way it was possible to generate results that perfectly fit the data.

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Results

The participants experiences told during the interviews are characterized and divided into several categories which also have been formulated as the subquestions.

The interviews found that opinions differ between a workplace friendship and a good coworker relationship. The major difference of a workplace friendship and a good coworker relationship is the amount of private information that is told to the other person. Furthermore, the participants defined friendship as "a relationship with a lot of trust", "sympathy", "having something in common" and a "personal connection". Less relevant happened to be the amount of private contact that they have apart from work. The participants reported that the feeling to be able to trust the other person makes the big difference between a friendship and a good coworker relationship.

> *"It is important to have a relaxed contact to your coworkers, because you see them all day long. I spent most of my time with them. Because of that it is extremely important to be able to get along well, to have fun at work and to be motivated. But still it is not necessary to be friends with them. I do not need to discuss private problems with them. I have friends after work for that".*

Within a good coworker relationship people do help each other and talk with each other in a friendly way but do not exchange a lot of private information. One participant explained the difference between a friend and a good coworker in the following way:

> *"It is especially the difference between work and privacy. I would not trust any colleague the same as I trust my friends. As I said, there are colleagues that I like and with whom I sometimes go out and that is great, but I would still do not tell them my deepest thoughts and secrets".*

How do people form workplace friendships?

Generally, the findings show that it is not very common to have friends at work. Workplace friendships are dispensable for most of the participants. But still several participants reported to have some friends but limited the amount of friends to a small number. Homophily of those people was found to be the most relevant key for the formation of friendships. Riordan and Griffith (2005) found that similarity seems to be of great importance for the development of workplace friendships. Furthermore, many participants reported that they generally do have favorable views according to workplace friendships, but they just did not develop yet. Most of them reported as reasons, the distances between the hometowns were too long and that the difference of age was too big to develop real friendships. Further, already existing friendships with people outside work did not allow the time to develop even more friendships. The two main issues that are of big influence on the fact whether people form friendships with their coworkers or not are thus:

1. Homophily
2. Issue of space and location

According to Rogers and Bhowmik (2011) one of the most obvious and fundamental principles of human communication is that the exchange of messages most frequently happens between people who are alike, similar, homophilous. Homophily refers to the

degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar with respect to certain attributes, such as beliefs, values, education, social status. If people can interact with any one of a number of different receivers, there is a strong tendency for him to select a receiver who is like himself (Rogers & Bhowmik, 2011).The importance of homophily especially came up according to age. The participants also reported, that age was of big influence to them according to the people who they became friends with. One participant reported:

"We almost had the same age, were at the same point of life, had kids that were just two years apart and so had a lot in common"

Another participant reported his experiences the following way:

"Her family also had kids so we always had a topic to share. They were also a little more alive than all the others".

An additional point that was mentioned was the fact that some time ago they did not work in open-plan offices but rather with just one or two colleagues in each office. Those small offices often advanced the development of workplace friendships. However nowadays, they work together in offices with more than seven other colleagues which leads to the reduction of opportunities for sharing private information and thus also inhibits the development of friendships.

"Me and my friend have been working here for many years and used to work together in the same office and worked together a lot. We both also had to go through some changes in our private life. That is why we connected".

"We got to know each other at work and developed sympathy during some talks. We then asked our supervisor if we could get an office together and this is how our friendships developed through the years".

A main barrier that was found for people to not form workplace friendships is the issue of space and location. The respondents feel that it costs too much effort if friends do not live in the same area as they do and thus prefer not to form workplace friendships with colleagues who live too far away. Furthermore, some respondents reported that they need some private space for themselves. If they are working together with several people they prefer not to spend their free time with them as well.

"Most people in my team are much younger than me. It is natural that I could not develop private contacts like that. And most of them live in completely other directions. If one has to drive 50 kilometers to the east and the other one to the west, it is way too complicated".

"I have lots of hobbies and activities that I like to do in my free time and I prefer not to spend this time with my colleagues, because then I would always be around the same people and I need some variety. Further, I have lots of friendships in my private life and not an everlasting amount of time to cultivate even more friendships".

What are the implications of workplace friendships?

The interviews found different implications of workplace friendships. Several risks and rewards were detected, whereas some findings happened to be risks for certain individuals and rewards for others.

Several of the participants reported that workplace friendships have many advantages for them. They explicitly said that they think friendships at work are very important and that they would not want to miss them. Most of the participants reported that especially the possibility to have private conversations in between and to be able to trust someone at work is of great advantage. The improvement of atmosphere and the ability to gain support from coworkers were the two most communicated advantages of workplace friendships.

Two participants formulated the personal need for workplace friendships like that.

"I could not imagine being here every day without having a nice atmosphere and without having good contact to my coworkers".

"Work goes much easier if you like the people around you and if you are able to talk to them in a friendly way and to trust them".

Another respondent reported the personal rewards of workplace friendships as follows:

"If you have friendships at work and they do not retrieve any problems, it advances a lot. You prefer to go to work much more and thus tend to work better as well".

It is very clear that friendships at work are also regarded as some kind of an outlet, people used to deal with difficulties encountered in the workplace. One participant explained it the following way:

"Workplace friendships gained more and more importance for me. Times were not always funny here so that it was important to be able to talk about the happenings with other people and to be able to discuss problems".

Some participants also reported that a great reward of friendship is the possibility to get support and to give support. The participants also experience the improvement of the atmosphere at work as a major reward as much as they report an increase of happiness and productivity with the existence of workplace friendships. One participant explained it like that:

"If am not really far with my work, my friends support me. They tell me to relax and that everything is going to be all right. That is what I call a friendship. Some others might say: "Let's leave earlier today", but a real friend would offer me some help and support me so that I can finish my work".

"Especially in the first three years and during the time of training it is extremely important if you are not able to reach your goals or guidelines that people tell you that it is going to get better and support you. I needed those people who told me that it is going to be better the next day and that it is not fatal if I do not achieve the desired results once in a while"..

Apart from all the advantages that arise because of workplace friendships, some of the respondents reported explicitly that they do not want close friends at work, because they do not want to exchange private information about themselves at the workplace to protect themselves. Furthermore, the respondents reported that a certain professionalism is of great importance to them at work and that they fear the risk of arguments if a friendship at work does not work out. The blurring of private life, the concept of justice and role conflicts and the

idea of strategic friendships are the main risks that have been formulated by the respondents. However, even if some facts happen to be risks for several people they might be advantages for others.

The idea of strategic friendships

A great majority of the respondents reported that they have a lot of experiences with office gossip, because of workplace friendships. The main reason for office gossip was the idea of strategic friendships. A majority of the respondents believes that people build friendships with supervisors to gain advantages from them and employees who seem to base their work related decisions to a large degree on whether they are friends with a person or not.

> "Some people seemed to have the idea that I just started the friendship to have better contacts with my supervisors. There were some bad things that have been said"

A remarkable finding of the interviews is that almost every respondent reported to have the idea that lots of colleagues used strategic friendships to gain any advantages from them at work.   But the answers gave some contradictory results. All of the participants reported that they would never fool someone about a friendship just to get any benefits from that. On the other hand most of the respondents reported that they often had experiences with other coworkers who obviously built up specific contacts to gain work related advantages. One participant gave the following example:

> "I mean it is pretty obvious if certain colleagues block the office of their supervisors daily for a long period of time, without any work related need for those meetings. Also, it is strange if people never used to be in contact with some people and then start inviting those people for birthdays or other things as soon as they get more influence. And there are also many supervisors who just do not recognize that or like the fact that they have people around them who do not give any contra".

The most risky and unfair result of those strategic friendships, according to the respondent is the possibility of biased decision making. The risk of biased decision making, because of friendships was not just a relevant issue of office gossip. Many participants also reported that they know that other people often base their decisions on sympathy and also admitted that they have done that themselves as well. One respondent also reported that it was not unusual that in times where decisions at work had to be made, one group of friends represents the same opinion about a work related decision and another group of friends represents another opinion. In situations like that it thus happened that a work related decision was obviously based on loyalty towards friends and not about the actual issue. Two different participants explained their experiences like that.

> "No one can say that you do not treat people who you like more in a different way than people you do not like. I also would never treat someone I like not as well as usual just to give other people the idea that I treat everyone the same. That is a natural thing. If someone I like needs my help or support he will always be in a better position to get what he wants compared with people I like less".

> "I think it is hard to differ between privacy and work all the time. Especially if I am supposed to expect the same effort and formality of my friends as I expect it from

other colleagues, because I like to treat my friends as friends and not as colleagues. Even at work".

<u>The blurring of the private life and the feeling of exclusion</u>

Several respondents reported that they prefer not to spread too much private information at their workplace to protect themselves. One respondent even gave the example that he used to be open to workplace friendships but revoked this attitude because of bad experiences in the organization. He concluded that people are likely to listen to problems of their colleagues and use them against them afterwards.

"There are some colleagues who I really like and with whom I have private meetings and that is nice, but friendships have not developed out of that. I also do not have the aim to develop friendships at work. I think if those friendships do not work out, if arguments begin… the nicer the time you had before, the worse it gets at work afterwards".

Another respondent reported that you can never be sure where the information is going to end up:

"I would never build up a workplace friendships here. There is so much gossip here and information goes around 54 corners and you never know where the information is going".

Another one explained the blurring of the private life like that:

"I think if you have too many friends at work, you tend to give too much private information of yourself. If one or two people have some detailed information about the personal life it is all right, but if that would be more I would feel uncomfortable".

According to a majority of the respondents people often are not able to differentiate between their private and work life and that those two parts blur as different parts and grow more together.

"I often have the idea that workplace friendships go on at work, like they do outside of work. People talk about their private lives all the time and stop working while doing so. And that does not only distract themselves. It also distracts all the other colleagues, because they have to listen to it as well".

Those situations show once more that on the one hand people would rate it as a reward that they have friends at work who they can talk to. On the other hand, those people who are not involved in that friendships rate that as a risk, because they feel disturbed by the friendships of others. They reported a feeling of exclusion if certain colleagues demonstrated their friendships very obvious at work. One participant gave the example:

"If you are sitting there and trying to get work done and there are always two people who are talking about private things, I often ask myself if they do not have anything to do and get angry because of them".

<u>The concept of justice and role conflicts</u>

Regarding conflicts between friends, several respondents reported to have experiences with that. Those conflicts developed out of different situations. Some reported that they could not always differentiate between their private life and their life at work and so happened to carry conflicts that developed at work into their private lives and got into arguments because of that. In other situations, people were afraid to defend a personal opinion at work that was contrary to their friend's opinion, because they were afraid to get into personal arguments and tried to avoid them. One respondent also got into conflict with his supervisor, because he did not treat his regular colleagues the same as his friends. Others also got into arguments with their friends, because they did not get enough support from their friends in work related issues.

> *"There was a conflict in the whole team, because of me…and the situation did not improve. There was also a friend of mine in the team who started to distance himself from me. That was really difficult for me, because I actually needed his support as a friend in this situation. That was a big disappointment for me".*

They were also asked if they felt that their friendships lead to dissatisfaction of coworkers. The answers showed that employees often feel that other colleagues sometimes show jealousy about their friendships. They get that impression because they sometimes hear comments on their friendships like:

> "*Look at those two, always hanging out together".*

Comments like that construed the idea that their friendships are a reason for gossip and lead to dissatisfaction of some coworkers. One participant who had a friendship with a supervisor also reported that she had the impression that coworkers think that she has an advantage in comparison to other colleagues and that they think she receives more information about work-related issues. She even reported that she tries to avoid being seen with the friend to minimize gossip.

Overall, the participants have great skepticism about the workplace friendships of their colleagues. Importantly, little support exists for friendships between managers and their subordinates. Some participants also reported that they had experiences with situations where colleagues had arguments with their friends and tried to get support by other colleagues and thus pulled them into conflict situations. Others felt disturbed by their colleagues if they have had any private arguments and then did not talk to each other at work and created a very uncomfortable atmosphere at the office.

> *"Some time ago, we had a terrible situation at the office. There were two friends who had a private fight which was pretty big. They were also working in the same office. When they came to work during this time they did not change a word. The whole atmosphere at the office was awful, because they did not say anything. Not even hello. And even if they do not try to get your support, it is still a very uncomfortable situation at work".*

One participant also described the situation of a colleague who obviously wanted to build up a friendship with the participant but the participant was not interested in a friendship with the particular person and got into conflict because the participant also did not want to disturb the good atmosphere at work.

Discussion

The present study obtained information regarding employees' attitudes about workplace friendships and the process of workplace friendship development. The results also give insights into the risks and rewards that arise because of workplace friendships.
The results indicate that employees are rather cautious with the development of workplace friendships and do not want to give too much detail about their private life away at work. Some of the participants do have workplace friendships but keep their amount of friends limited. Trust, sympathy and similarity, just as the issue of space and location are the most relevant factors that influence the development of workplace friendships.

The results show clearly that friendship is not extremely relevant for employees to feel comfortable at work, but a good relationship with their coworkers is of great importance. Work just to work without having a casual contact with coworkers turned out to be unimaginable for the participants. Generally, participants did not perceive their own workplace friendships as very problematic. They indeed do have conflicts because of workplace friendships but not to such a great amount that they feel restricted by that. Especially those who do not have any friendships themselves had a more distant attitude towards workplace friendships. While there is some concern that workplace friendships lead to office gossip and biased and unprofessional decisions, these outcomes are nonetheless perceived as feasible. The data indicates that people who do not have workplace friendships sometimes had negative experiences with workplace friendships and thus do not wish for anymore workplace friendships.

It is notable that people overall estimate workplace friendships of coworkers as more problematic than they estimate their own workplace friendships. That includes problems concerning the friends self and also conflicts of other people who felt uncomfortable in certain situations due to workplace friendships of coworkers. Those participants who do have workplace friendships mostly feel that it is difficult to deal the same with their friends and other coworkers and fear the risk of biased decision making. Further, the results showed that it is challenging to differentiate between work and the relationship, because the relation is partly shaped by work. Those findings support the results of previous studies. Different opinions have been reported about how to solve those conflicts. Mostly people reported trying to ignore conflicts that did not fully concern them. People who were directly involved into certain conflicts reported trying to solve them by talking about the problems.

Overall, workplace friendships happen to have many rewards as well. Mental and work related support just as the improvement of the work atmosphere and the enhancement of happiness and productivity are the most relevant findings. This supports the findings of several other studies like one done by Andrew and Montague (1998).

The data showed that employees generally like to differ between their workplace friendships and their professional roles at work. Even if they sometimes get into conflict between their role as a friend and the role as a colleague, the majority focuses on keeping a good atmosphere at work and thus prevents conflicts. They either do that by separating work and friendships totally or by trying to keep a professional relation to their friends.

In comparison to the existing literature, some findings are comparable with findings that have been found in the past. On the other hand some findings are contrary and give some new insights and theoretical implications for the development of workplace friendships.
Tschan, Semmer and Inversin (2004) for example, found that social interactions at work are of great importance for every individual in an organization which is similar to the results found in this study. As other studies before, the study showed that social aspects are important for job satisfaction. Furthermore, the results give additional input on the constitution of those relations. The data shows clearly that a good coworker relationship is more important than workplace friendships for employees to be satisfied with their job and to feel comfortable. Contrary to the existing literature, the data does not support the findings that employees are likely to develop workplace friendships by spending a lot of time together, like Andrew and Montague (1998) found.

Nevertheless, the study has some limitations. First of all, the basis for identifying a colleague as a friend is probably affected by the participants' culture and age. The average age of the participants was quite high. If the participants would have been younger it might be possible that they would have been more open for workplace friendships, because they have not built up such a regimented life yet and be more open for new friendships. The findings might probably be different in different cultures as well. It might be possible that Germans are not likely to call people their friends quickly, but allocate this privilege only to a few people whereas other cultures might tend to call people their friends faster.
Furthermore, the findings of this study are limited to the employees in a specific organization and should also be validated by studies in other organizations to be able to generalize the findings.

All these limitations of the study suggest the need for further research about the topic of workplace friendship. In following studies there should be a greater variety of participants. That includes a greater variety of participants regarding to culture, age and the organizations in which they are working. It is especially recommended to place one and the same research in many different organizations to get an impression of the results according to different work environments and managements.

In conclusion, it is found that people administer many risks and rewards of workplace friendships. Biased decision making, office gossip and distraction are the main risks that have been experienced by the participants. But still several participants appreciate workplace friendships and communicated that they could not imagine working in an organization where they do not have any friends. According to them, the main rewards of workplace friendships are the improved atmosphere and the support of their friends.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview schema

Interview information

Date interview: ___ / ___ / 20010

Time interview: ___:___ hours

Place interview: work respondent / home respondent / home interviewer / other

Relation with interviewee: _____

Length interview: ____ minutes

Personal information

Gender: male / female

Age: ____years

Education :   _____

Status: single / married or in a relationship

Children?   ___ children living at home/ ___ children living alone

Interview scheme

    1.   **Introduction**

Hello, my name is Ann-Kathrin Kiesel. Thank you for participating in my interview. First of all I would like to inform you that all the given information will be treated confidential. The interview examines how friendships and love relations arise in an organization and what consequences they have.

    2.   **Background information about the work**

In what kind of organization do you work?

- Contact with coworkers formal/informal

In what kind of position are you working?

- Name function

- Describe work

Are you in a leading position?

- To how many people do you give leading?

How many hours per week do you work here?

Since when do you work in this particular organization?

How much are you in contact with coworkers of your organization?

Do you think that the contact that you have with your colleagues is appropriate?

- Would you like to have more/less?

    3. **Perception of personal relations at work (If the respondent names more than one person as a friend, all the following questions of part 3 will be done separately for each person)**

- Do you have any relations at work that you would call friendships? (if yes, the questions continue in the normal way, if no questions continue at question 6)

- How did those friendships develop?

- Can you describe those relationships

- How would you describe your formal relation to them?

- Why would you say those are friends, when others are not?

- What is the difference between those relationships and those with who you just have a good coworker relation?

- Do you think friendships at work are important and necessary for yourself?

4. **Which criteria are relevant when it comes to the formation of personal relations at work?**

   - What is important to you when it comes to forming relationships?

   - Do you ever have personal relations with subordinates or leaders?

        -why yes/no?

   - Have you ever considered that friendships might be of advantage for your career?

5. **Consequences of own personal relations at work**

   - Do you ever get into conflicts between your personal and professional relation to that person?

        -how do you solve those conflicts?

   - Do you ever get any reactions to your personal relations at work?

   - How do your coworkers react to your personal relations at work?

   - Do your personal relations ever give reasons for discussion or gossip?

        - do you like that?

        - how do you cope with that?

        - why do you think do this problems exist?

6. **Consequences of personal relations at work in general**

   - Are there in your organization any problems with personal relations?

        - why yes/no?

        - what makes certain relations problematic and others not?

   - Have you ever made bad experiences with personal relations of others at work?

        - why yes/no?

   - Any decision that close friendships or love relations are prohibited?

7. Closing

Thank you for your time and effort! We are done here. Do you want to add anything according to the topic? (if not "Goodbye" if yes "what ?")

Appendix B: Interview transcripts