

Water-cooler friends

When we leave a job, we also leave behind our buddies

Sarah Treleaven, Financial Post

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About six months ago, my former work friend, John, sat down on the corner of my desk and exhaled heavily. He had recently given his notice and it was his second-to-last week of work. "We better go for coffee now," he said, "because after next week we're not going to be friends anymore."

I was on the other end of that experience when I quit a few months later. Mark, my long-standing coffee buddy, sniped with me daily about incompetent colleagues and even lousier managers. But when I walked out the office door forever, I surrendered my friend along with my Swingline stapler and dental plan. Somehow, I just knew we didn't have a future together.

We spend more time with the people we work with than we do with anyone else, and yet work friendships are often characterized by impermanence. When we leave a specific work environment, we tend to leave behind the relationships we've spent years building. As a friend recently observed: "I usually try to keep in touch for about a month and then I watch it fizzle."

Giselle Kovary, managing partner of n-gen People Performance Inc. and a workplace consultant for Speakers' Spotlight, says that work friendships are strong because of the need for somebody who can relate. "Other friends might not understand because they're not in our industry, not in our workplace and they wouldn't understand the specifics of our boss."

For Tanya, who works in advertising, her work friendships have been an important -- albeit temporary -- part of her professional life. "I think one of the most important things about having a job is those personal relationships and being able to joke with people," she says.

But as soon as that shared environment is shed, the convenience and utility of the workplace friendship similarly expires. "They're like relationships that are based around events," says Ms. Kovary. "You relate to them based on a specific activity."

The confinement of workplace friendships to a specific place and type of conversation often dooms them. "When you leave, it's like time stops and any subsequent conversation only relates to things that happened in the past," says Jake, who works in marketing. "But people move on, so eventually the things you have to talk about are less and less relevant."

Rachel, a lobbyist, acknowledges that her one work friendship has a typically narrow focus, and that they spend a disproportionately large amount of time discussing workplace issues. "Unfortunately, it's mostly complaining," she says.

Jake believes that most workplace friendships occupy a grey area between friend and acquaintance. "If you limit the definition of friendship to people you see outside the workplace, then your number of work friends drops off drastically. There are very few people you would ask for advice or a favour."

Work friends are also rarely fully integrated into each other's lives. "There are definitely things I like to keep private from the people I work with," says Mike, an editor. In other words, the tequila-loving version of you may clash slightly with the impression you attempt to maintain in a professional environment.

Accessibility and convenience are other key features of the workplace friendship. Once you no longer have reliable daily access to a colleague, it can become a chore to keep in touch. "At my previous job, my work friends and I used to have daily conversations about everything," says Tanya. "Now I hardly ever talk to them. You leave and things change and it takes so much time to update each other."

According to Ms. Kovary, work relationships will become tighter and more permanent as workforce demographics change. Baby Boomers (ages 43 to 61) and the Generation Xers (ages 27 to 42) might be content to separate work from life, but Ms. Kovary predicts that the next generation will augment the social landscape.

"Gen Xers create a really intimate bond with their colleagues, but once that environment changes, then that relationship may no longer have that utility," she says. "But Gen Ys (16 to 26), who travel in packs, are coming to work looking to make friends. For them, it's all about binding and blurring the line between coworker and friend."

And along with shifting generational presence, the popularity of online social networking sites makes it easier to stay in touch -- if only peripherally. Both Jake and Tanya acknowledge that most of their contact with former colleagues is occasional and online, through either MSN or FaceBook.

"But there's a difference between people on your MSN list and actual friends," says Jake.

As for Rachel, she's not holding her breath about the future prospects for her current work friendship. "I think it'll go the way of most office friendships," she says. "We'll try to keep in touch, but then once a month will turn into once every four months, which will turn into a holiday card."