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**Shaping positive
work experiences:
Workplace relationships
in disruptive times**

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Shaping positive work experiences: workplace relationships in disruptive times

We are living and working in a context of increasing disruption. Forces ranging from global change, climate crisis, trade wars, rising populism (such as Brexit with its potential economic fallout), to the challenge of AI and robotics, and more recently the impact of a global pandemic, are influencing the workplace. The one constant is the need for people to work together to respond to, or mitigate, these and other challenges.

Continuing uncertainty often results in organisational demands to increase productivity, cut costs and intensify work. In a worst-case scenario, it could lead to the possible demise of the organisation and radical restructuring of the sector. This can drive different ways of working that are sometimes precarious and/or remote from colleagues, but often lead to potential burnout, exhaustion and concerns about mental health and wellbeing. Organisational actions are often in response to a problem rather than preventing minor issues from becoming sources of anxiety and stress.

Changing patterns of work and lifestyles have meant that work spills over into other areas of our lives, leading to flexible working arrangements and the ability to choose when and where we work. This often means more time spent working and trying to juggle different roles simultaneously. When this is work we find meaningful, with people we feel comfortable with, and when we have the resources needed – both physical and psychological – this can be engaging and fulfilling. These conditions are often dependent on the people we work with and, over the last 20 years, the importance of our workplace relationships has increasingly been recognised ([Kahn and Heaphy 2014](#)). However, it is still an under-researched area, despite social elements of work having been identified as a key need in motivation over decades of research in the second half of the twentieth century.

This article presents results of research into the role of workplace relationships supporting engagement and wellbeing in challenging environments, commissioned by the Henley Forum, of Henley Business School, with members that are practitioners representing a number of public and private sector organisations. In this research, we wanted to understand the extent to which workplace relationships impact on engagement and wellbeing in times of disruptive change. This disruption included external unplanned change, extensive internal but planned change in restructuring and redesign, and the effects of Brexit, in the organisations participating in the research. The research took place between July 2019 and January 2020, and its implications are as relevant to subsequent events (that is, the COVID-19 pandemic) as they were to the issues being addressed during the period of the study.

The research was carried out with member organisations of the Henley Forum. We used the Staff Participation Engagement and Communication (SPEaC Happy) app, developed by clinicians within the NHS, that was already used in this sector as a mechanism to understand mood, enable staff to highlight positive experiences as well as raise problems and frustrations with their local management anonymously and in real time ([Frampton et al 2017](#)). We compared our findings with those of the original work undertaken in the NHS.

The Happy App: a way of recording engagement and staff satisfaction

The research collaboration started out to understand how friendship and relationships at work support engagement, and why the SPEaC Happy App was successful in increasing engagement and wellbeing levels, and feelings of being supported. We had both been interested in engagement, from a practical and an academic perspective, with meaningful work, employee and patient outcomes and retention as indicators of success.

A desire to improve patient care by unpicking the frustrations and issues that staff faced daily and to collect their feedback on what was going well, as well as being able to address what was getting in the way, led to the development of the SPEaC Happy App (Happy App) in consultation with stakeholders across University Hospitals Bristol (UHB). This fitted well with the findings that NHS organisations deliver better patient experience and quality care with high levels of engagement, staff satisfaction and involvement in decision-making ([King's Fund 2012](#)). The resulting Happy App is an interactive web-based tool to gather real-time anonymous feedback from staff, used as a mechanism to understand mood, enable participating staff to highlight positive experiences, make suggestions, celebrate success, and recognise good practice, as well as raise problems and frustrations with their local management in real time ([Frampton et al 2017](#)). Its major aims were to encourage staff engagement, facilitate feedback to and action from local leaders.

The likely contribution of the Happy App to increasing staff engagement and wellbeing levels could be its ability to allow issues to be dealt with as they arise, enabling people to carry out their roles and minimising any frustration. It also provides an ongoing indicator of engagement levels in advance of the formal annual NHS engagement survey.

This project was set in a context of unprecedented change, shortage of resources and increasingly overstretched staff. The government departments that took part in the Henley Forum study had unparalleled workloads in the run up to Brexit and the utility company was implementing a complete restructuring of the organisation and ways of working. What is already known about the study topic and its design came from three main areas of research: workplace friendships and relationships, employee engagement and relational systems.

Workplace friendships and relationships: The interest in friends and relationships at work has increased recently, with research recognising benefits including communication, information-sharing, team effectiveness and leadership. Traditionally it has been assumed that friendships at work were used as a means to pursue work objectives and perhaps this explains why most research has been from a negative behaviours perspective of bullying, incivility, injustice, and ostracism. This negative focus has left friendship and similar positive relationships under-researched, despite the increasing interest in their role amid growing general concern about mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. Opportunities to work together have increased with the potential for a continuum of relationships from special, close colleague relationships (friendship) at one end to weaker, purely work-related, co-worker (acquaintances) at the other ([Kram and Isabella 1985](#)).

Friendships are voluntary and, unlike other workplace relationships, work friends communicate with each other as 'whole persons', not simply as occupants of job roles. They often have the mutual trust, shared interests and reciprocal liking which can lead to genuine attachment and

compassion, providing a safe space for self-expression:

Friendship is first and foremost something that is felt – a genuine attachment, sympathy and compassion among people ... a love of life, instead of being guided by desire to dominate, by fear of treating others with mistrust (Boje and Jørgensen 2014).

Engagement: Kahn's work on engagement over the last 30 years tells us that to be engaged with distinct components of cognitive, emotional and physical engagement, people need three conditions at work: meaningfulness and belonging; to feel psychologically safe and supported; and to feel available by having the physical and psychological resources they need. For him, engagement has a strong emotional element, as he sees individuals fitting an 'emotionally charged' organisational life by building relationships with others as a coping mechanism (Kahn 1990). Kahn's definition of personal engagement is about the whole person as opposed to work engagement, which is focused on being dedicated and absorbed in the task itself.

Emotional and relational context: In the past, there was denial of an emotional context at work – an impersonal workplace assumed that people interacted for the purposes of their work and organisational goals. Traditionally, emotions were seen as caused by environmental forces and separate from the rational selves that we took to work. More recent thinking recognises that most of our emotions come from interactions with other people and involve our sense of self, what we value, our self-esteem and endow our lives with meaning (Solomon 1993). Increased incidence of poor mental health and wellbeing from higher levels of uncertainty and burnout in workplaces has led to research interest in the importance of these interactions, relationships, and positive organisational cultures. Negative emotions (such as anger) come from a feeling of our sense of self being violated by someone else, or positive emotions (such as admiration) arise when working together increases joint self-esteem.

Seen as the 'white spaces' in the organisation chart, or its nervous system, workplace relationships contribute to the creation of meaningfulness, safety and availability in organisations. These provide the relational context for engagement (Kahn and Heaphy 2014), mirrored in the NHS as perceived organisational support (King's Fund 2012). They provide 'holding environments' as they support people in establishing a sense of identity and belongingness, offering safe spaces where emotions can happen and promoting wellbeing (McBain and Parkinson 2017).

Understanding three different 'selves'

The Henley Forum study was focused on understanding the role of workplace relationships in engagement and wellbeing from the experience of the participants and used qualitative methods in two stages. We adapted the SPEaC Happy App used on smartphones, tablets or laptops to diary interactions with work colleagues over a period of two to four weeks in each of the three organisations at separate times. This had the advantage of proven technology that had been used extensively for nearly five years in large organisations, mostly in the public sector.

The Happy App allowed participants to record their mood after an interaction with a co-worker, colleague or close colleague, followed by an optional comment which they could allocate to a theme based on aspects of meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability.

Available at all times during the study period of about three weeks, this allowed participants to add entries in real time or when convenient and to contribute 'likes' to other participants' comments. The comments and overall mood were public to all participants and strictly anonymous but moderated.

We wanted to understand three different 'selves' ([Conner and Barrett 2012](#)): the 'experiencing self', reacting to interactions with their core relationship network in the moment; the 'remembering self', capturing reflections and learning from them, partly in the diary but also in interviews; and the 'believing self', maintaining identities over time, captured from interviews after diarying. Questions focused on Kahn's conditions for engagement – meaningfulness, psychological safety, and availability. The different relationships used definitions built from [Kram and Isabella's \(1985\)](#) peer relationship framework, expressed here as co-worker, colleague and close colleague.

Fostering supportive relationships through shared values and trust

The current research started in mid-June 2019 and continued until January 2020. The findings reported are based on results from some 400 diary entries and 'likes', and analysis of the close colleagues aspects of 25 interviews with volunteers, which took place following the diarying. Already parallels with the UHB study are emerging, particularly with positive comments about working with others and the supportive role of team members ranking highest, while on the negative side, resource-related concerns featured strongly ([Frampton et al 2017](#)).

The workplace relationships research has demonstrated more positive emotional mood responses, reflecting the warmth generated by connecting with others. In contrast, the NHS experience reported equal positive and negative responses, reflecting the operational rather than research emphasis of the study. The issues of leadership, communication, and being heard/valued are reflected in both projects. The importance of relationships, trust, confidentiality and supporting each other comes out strongly in these public sector organisations where shared values underpinning meaningful work may be a key motivator, expressed as caring for patients or public service.

Diary entries demonstrated the importance of feeling connected and belongingness, especially for remote workers. This was reinforced in interviews, as close relationships with colleagues sharing experience and being interested in their perspective contributed to wellbeing in challenging situations. This reflected staff feeling their voice had been heard through management responses to Happy App comments in the original UHB study.

The Henley Forum study demonstrated that supportive relationships appear to be founded in those shared values, trust and being able to be vulnerable in confidence. These relationships develop over time, enable people to see the bigger picture and feel part of something meaningful. They included:

- The diaries, using the Happy App, gave people permission to express emotions, register their discontent and share feelings in confidence in a psychologically safe environment. They encouraged people to reflect on how they felt about interactions and their impact, realise how they valued their colleagues, and feel heard. They were also cathartic – *'to be able to click on an angry face and release some of the frustration in that way'*.

- Relationships contribute to engagement and wellbeing. In particular, psychological safety and safe interactions with others reinforce or change how we feel, which in turn affects our work. Meaningfulness came from the connection with others and the feeling of making a difference together, while feeling available came from being helped and energised by others.
- Before people engaged in tasks, they engaged in relationships, which could be just a quick chat and check-in first, which made sure everyone felt safe, connected, and able. Positive relationships affected teams working well together. They were a major contributor to retaining people, but also not feeling connected to others resulted in employees leaving – *‘it’s not the place for me as I’ve not been able to find a place for myself, that sense of belonging that we all look for and need at work.’*
- The spectrum of relationships was reinforced, ranging from an impersonal transactional relationship through to a more social but relational one culminating at the deepest level in a personal and emotional relationship – one of the few special relationships that sustain us through good and bad times. At the heart of these relationships was the sense of shared values and interests, building over time, which move from professional to personal involving shared experiences, many triggered by deep personal and emotional moments to develop into close friendship.

Close relationships make us feel valued, significant, listened to, respected, and enable us to see the world and ourselves from another’s perspective. Ultimately, they give us feedback to help us make sense of our experiences and understand where we fit. Working with someone we respect allows us to feel safe as they understand our mutual world and, particularly for remote workers, that contact keeps us feeling connected and engaged. This informal workplace brings out the role of chats and catch-ups with friends, enabling us to feel psychologically safe and that we belong, reinforced by humour to diffuse pressure and stress.

Implications for practice: creating a supportive informal organisation

The implications of the findings for the profession as well as individuals and through to wider society are numerous, especially at a time when many people are isolated from personal contact with their work colleagues. If relationships are necessary for people to feel safe and engaged, we, as professionals, need to ensure the informal organisation and culture is appropriate to support them, and that managers and leaders recognise and have the interpersonal skills to create that environment.

For individuals

- Encourage reflection on awareness of feelings, their likely impact on others based on feedback from trusted sources.
- Encourage getting to know and valuing colleagues as people.
- Encourage reflection on interactions, understanding what happened and why, lessons for the future.

For managers and leaders

- Pay attention to team members and how they relate to others.
- Provide opportunities for positive interactions informally and in formal meetings, at individual and team levels.

- Be aware of lack of engagement conditions and mitigate them, check in on how individuals are feeling.

At an organisational level

- Monitor organisational mood and climate regularly, using tools like the SPEaC Happy App, which is ongoing, collecting feedback in real time rather than when the organisation has asked for it.
- Plan relationship-building, for example facilitate opportunities for people to work together through activities such as problem-solving and team development supported by shared values and regular communication.
- Encourage a culture that promotes good relationships by making these a habit.

At a societal level

- Carry out risk assessment for future self-isolation-type events – ensuring access and skills in collaboration technology and understand the impact of multiple roles. Returning to normal will potentially mean different teams and possible restructuring, leaving people not having been able to say goodbye to friends and having a sense of an ending. Encourage events to honour the past teams and successes.
- Reinforce the need for remote and self-employed workers to keep in touch with others at least once or twice in a day. Attend to relationships, especially for those by themselves, with actions such as having a chat, or a virtual coffee before starting work together.
- Rethink the way we work, through environmental awareness, and what that means for where our relational support comes from. Is it from work or our local community, is it a threat to organisations or does it bring in fresh thinking and perspectives?

Conclusion: the role of workplace relationships in uncertain business environments

The study has used experience from three organisations facing major disruption to understand, first, that workplace relationships are important for engagement in uncertainty, especially in providing psychological safety, through providing space where people can express how they are feeling, discuss difficult situations or concerns in confidence. It has also enabled us to understand more about the nature of the different levels of relationship as they evolved from a transactional co-worker to a colleague, and the turning points, often emotional, that transformed a social relationship into personal friendship.

The Happy App demonstrates the potential of technology to provide feedback opportunities to be heard and visibly responded to in rapid time. For UHB, the Happy App represents the care-giving that staff provide to patients by reinforcing feelings of belonging and feeling part of a team performing meaningful work. The Henley Forum study demonstrates similar conclusions on belonging deriving from workplace relationships. However, it is not enough to provide the technology or to focus on the task; relationship work must take place alongside it.

From the research group we can see that the research method has enabled us to provide an answer to what it is about the app that works. This is about feedback. The app enabled people to feel heard, gave permission to express an emotion, provided catharsis by pressing the angry face, allowed reflection about why they felt a certain way and what caused it. In UHB, the app gave feedback to local managers and colleagues and had been designed by people they knew

and trusted with their input. Knowing it was anonymous provided psychological safety. The app provided a proxy relationship – enabling people to express what they were feeling as they might to a friend and, most importantly, knowing they would be heard and receive feedback.

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