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Research

Do co-workers engage or estrange after hours?

By *Bernie DeGroat*
News Service

It's true what they say. Business and pleasure really don't mix — at least not for Americans, according to a U-M study.

"Compared to counterparts in other countries, U.S. co-workers are less likely to extend professional ties into a variety of settings beyond the workplace," says Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, assistant professor of management and organizations at the [Stephen M. Ross School of Business](#). This is so, he continues, "even though factors that typically constrain social interaction with co-workers after hours — marriage, kids, time spent working — have remained constant or weakened."

Sanchez-Burks and colleagues Wayne Baker and Aleksandra Kacperczyk studied data going back to 1985 on American workers and their colleagues with whom they regularly interact on the job. They found that 30 percent of employees have a close confidant at work, down from nearly half in 1985.

"On the one hand, theories on increasing social isolation in the United States suggest a decline in co-worker (interaction and socialization), but on the other hand, studies documenting the increasing importance of organizational life in American society predict (otherwise)," says Baker, professor of management and organizations at the Ross School and professor of sociology.

The researchers examined the connection between emotional energy and co-worker multiplexity, which occurs when employees have both a work and personal relationship with each other. They also conducted a cross-national survey among workers in the United States, Poland and India to explore cultural differences and similarities in work/nonwork relationships.

They looked at four ways in which co-worker ties extend beyond the workplace: socializing with a co-worker after hours, inviting a co-worker to visit his or her home, spending vacations with a co-worker and borrowing money from a co-worker.

On average U.S. workers spend time outside of work with less than half of the co-workers with whom they regularly interact on the job, compared to 74 percent for Polish workers and 78 percent for Indian workers.

American workers invite 32 percent of their "close" colleagues to their home, while the numbers are 66 percent and 71 percent, respectively, for Polish and Indian workers. They go on vacation with 6 percent of the co-workers with whom they have regular contact at work, but for Poles and Indians, the percentages are 25 and 45, respectively.

Finally, U.S. employees would borrow money, if needed, from 18 percent of their

co-workers, as opposed to 46 percent for Polish workers and 58 percent for Indian workers.

The study shows that despite Americans' reluctance to socialize with co-workers after hours, when they do, they derive positive emotional energy from the experience.

"However, sharing a vacation with a co-worker is not significantly related to energy," says Kacperczyk, a Ross School doctoral student. "It may be that vacationing is more demanding of individual attention and commitment than other forms of multiplexity."

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