The impact of workplace friendships on organizational commitment and intention to leave

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Abstract- Friendships play a role in different aspects of our life. These friendships within organisations might hinder or facilitate both the organisational and employee functioning. There are various degrees of friendships found in organisations. The different degrees have different roles in functioning of the organisation. Therefore, this paper tries to find out the different degrees of friendship that exist in organisations and their effect on the employee’s job commitment and intention to leave. The different levels of friendships studied in this paper are “work spouse, special peer, collegial peer and information peer”. The study aims to find out the prominent types of friendships that exist in the workplace and to determine the influence of different types of friendships on the employee’s job commitment and intention to leave. A questionnaire was constructed using a friendship scale, commitment scale and intention to leave scale. The samples for the study are professionals who are working in the service industries. Snowballing and convenient sampling technique was used to collect data.

1. Introduction

Friendships are very necessary to bring in a sense of happiness and well-being. Although friendships may mean different things to different people from various cultures and societies, there are some types of friendships that are prevalent only at a workplace. The social, personal and organisational benefits of friendships have been highlighted in research before. Study done by Isabella and Kram in 1985 studies the mentor alternatives of the role of peer relationships, Sias M and Cahill J (2014) examine friendships at work, Markiewicz, Devine and Kausilas (1999) studied the women and men and its impact on job satisfaction and resource implications in friendships. Workplace friendships enhance the job involvement and organisational involvement which in turn enhances the job performance (Ting SC, Ho MH, 2017). According to a study done by Gallup organisation, employees who have good friends at work are seen to be seven times more engaged in their work. There are some characteristics in a relationship like trust, mutual respect, open communication, and mindfulness that make it a healthy and good relationship. Some close workplace friendships may even be destructive or be more sinister than bringing any positive behaviour. These kinds of behaviours are unacceptable as it would lead to degradation of culture, growth and productivity of the organisation. Nevertheless, positive friendships help the employees to buy into the culture emotionally.
There are different degrees of friendships which can be found at workplace. “Work spouse is defined as a platonic, special friendship with a colleague in the work place which is characterized by a close bond, high disclosure, and high levels of support, mutual trust, honesty, loyalty, and respect. A Special friend is a person whom you consider to be a best friend. This person would still remain to be your best friend even if you don’t work together. This person is considered to be much more than just a co-worker to you. A collegial peer is a person whom you consider as a “work buddy”. This person is more than a mere acquaintance but you do not share every detail of your life with this person. You interact with this person fairly regularly on an equal basis as you consider this person a friend or colleague only. An Information peer is one whom you do not know that well or whom you feel is very close to. You would consider this person to only be an acquaintance more than a friend. Though you interact with this person on a regular basis, you would probably not continue your relationship with this person if you did not work here.

Organisational Commitment is the degree of connection an employee has with the organisation. On the whole, employees who are committed to the organisation feel connected with the goals of the organisation as well as have the feeling of fitting in. Therefore, this is one important aspect of which is important for organisational success. The three types of commitment which are distinctive according to the study by Allen and Meyer – “affective commitment” is affection for the job, “continuance commitment” is fear of loss, and “normative commitment” which is the obligation to stay.

Intention to leave a job talks about whether the employee would like to continue his/her job at the organisation or quit and move to another organisation. This may be impacted by many factors such as job stress, burnout, person organisation fit, job satisfaction and so on. The relationships employees have at their workplace may also determine their intention to leave the job. This study tries to study the different degrees of friendship that are found in workplaces and the effect these friendships have on the organisational commitment and their intention to leave.

2. Literature Review

“Social exchange” theory can be considered as a kind of relationship between people that is predominantly transactional in nature (give and take). According to a theory (Rook, 1984), “we choose our social ties on the basis of their capacity to provide rewards relative to costs and as a function of the alternatives available.”

Rawlins (1992) explains, "work affiliations range from patently 'friendly relations' to more involved bonds transcending the work setting (Kurth, 1970)". While some relationships which are "friendly relations" may primarily act to have advancement and growth one’s career (Maines, 1981) and provide outlets for some informal, personalised interaction (Wright, 1978), and those which are closer friendships may be providing self-affirmation, emotional support, interdependence, and so on (Wright, 1985). Looking at the way "friends" grow into "close friends" over a period of time and then they become "best friends" provides a deeper understanding of these phenomena.

The importance of workplace social relationships has been recognized by scholars for nearly a century now. Elton Mayo (1945) brought out the workplace friendships to attention, he was the first to advocate the role of emotional factors that played an important role in determining employee behaviour and also in contending that the most dominant influence on productivity was the extent to which employees received social satisfaction in the workplace (Mayo, 1945).

“The impact of friendships at work”, “Friendship opportunity” was developed by Hackman and Lawler (1971) as a dimension of perceived job characteristics. Its intent was to examine the degree to which a job allowed employees to talk to one another and establish relationships at work.
An essential factor that facilitates interpersonal relations is Self-Disclosure and it is capable of diminishing the likelihood of loneliness when “there is reciprocity of the sharing of information between the people in a relationship” as quoted by Berg & Peplau, 1982.

Covert cognitive and affective responses are both a part of the Friendship processes and overt behavioural events that occur when people interact. (Adams & Blieszner, 1994).

Kram and Isabella (1985) believe that co-worker friendships are very important ways to grow with their support and help. Another organisational relationship that has received research attention is the mentor-protégé relationship. (Kram, 1983). Organizational commitment could be defined as the employees’ state of being committed to assist when it comes to the achievement of the organization’s goals, and it also involves the employees’ levels of identification, loyalty and involvement (Caught & Shadur, 2000). Therefore this commitment might be impacted by the friendships they have at workplace.

Intention to leave is one of the biggest predictors, sign of an employee who is going to leave the organisation Irvine and Evans (1995) have found positive relationship between intention to leave and turnover. This may be seen because they have the choice to leave if they are not satisfied with any aspects about their job or organisation.

3. Conceptual Model

From the above literature review, some of the different types of friendships are taken as variables and its impact on “organisational commitment” (OC) and “intention to leave” (ITL)

![Figure 1. Model depicting workplace relationship](image)

4. Methodology

The respondents for this study were employees from service sector where there would be a lot of team or group work involved. The size of the sample is 51 respondents. The sample consisted of 51.9% female (27) and 47.05% male (24) participants. Questionnaire was used to collect data for the research. Snowballing and convenient sampling technique was used to collect data. Friendship scale which was used in the study was Nielsen (2000) which measures the ability and prevalence of friendship. The friendship scale measures 6 different aspects of friendship – Stimulating Companionship (F1), Help (F2), Intimacy (F3), Reliable Alliance (F4), Self-validation (F5), Emotional Security (F6). To measure the organisational commitment of the employees, Meyer and
Allen (1991) Commitment scale was used. This measures 3 types of commitment – Affective Commitment (AffC), Continuance Commitment (ContC), Normative Commitment (NormC). Intention to leave is measured with Morrison (2004) scale which concentrates in 3 important precursors of turnover.

5. Research Questions

1. What are the prominent types of friendships that exist at workplace?
2. How do different types of friendships influence the employee’s job commitment and intention to leave?

6. Analysis

The obtained responses were quantitatively analysed. The sample had 21 respondents (41.17%) below the age of 25, 26 respondents (50.98%) from 25 to 35 ages, between the ages 36 to 45 there are 2 respondents (3.92%) and greater than 46 has 2 respondents (3.92%). There were 3 respondents (5.88%) who has worked for lesser than 6 months in the organisation, 6 respondents (11.76%) in 6 months to 1 year category, 22 respondent in 1 year to 2 years, 4 respondents (7.84%) with 2 years to 3 years of experience in the organisation, 17 responses (33.33%) who have greater than 3 years of experience. Descriptive statistics was used to know how many respondents out of the whole sample had each type of friendship at their workplace.

| Type of friendship | Number of respondents |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Work Spouse        | 35                    |
| Special Peer       | 50                    |
| Collegial Peer     | 49                    |
| Information Peer   | 50                    |

Table 1. Shows the responses of participants indicating the preferred type of friendship

It was also observed that the respondents on an average have around 1 - 2 work spouses, 2 - 3 special friends, 4 collegial peers and more than 5 information peers. Close to 30% of the respondents have more than 10 information peers at their workplace. This shows that the most predominantly found friendship at workplace is information peer.

The second preferred type of friendship is special peer (SP) as the number of special friend each respondent has is lesser than the information peers.

The average organisational commitment of the sample was found to be 3.04 on scale of 5. The average affective commitment of the sample was found to be 3.07, continuance commitment was 3.06 and normative commitment was 3. All three types of commitment are almost at the same level. However affective commitment seems to be the highest among the three, therefore, that shows that the individuals are involved emotionally with the organisation’s goals and they feel responsible personally for the success of the organisation.

The average score of intention to leave was 2.97 on a scale of 5. So it is observed that the intention to leave is on the lower side of the scale.

There seems to be no significant correlation between “work spouse” type of friendship and organisational commitment. No significant correlation is found between every type of friendship
(special friend, collegial peer and information peer) and organisational commitment. Similarly there appears to be no correlation between intention to leave and every type of friendship (special friend, collegial peer and information peer). As each type of friendship does not affect the organisational commitment or intention to leave, we can come to a conclusion that other factors such as working conditions, job satisfaction, benefits, work stress levels may play a significant role on them. There also seems to be no significant relationship between the “organisational commitment” and the “intention to leave” of the respondent.

There is a significant negative correlation at the 0.01 level between intention to leave (ITL) and reliable alliance variable of collegial peer (-.400). This shows that some aspects of friendships do have a critical role in intention to leave. Therefore if the employees do not have a sense of reliable alliance in their workplace, they might have a drive to leave the organisation. Since this relationship is seen with collegial peers, it proves that the employees do not have the need to feel very close to their peers on a personal level, but as acquaintances.

Similarly there seems to be negative relation (-.310) between “help” variable of collegial peer and intention to leave. This shows that the feeling of being helped by the peers play a role in intention to leave. Collegial peer seems to be more predominant gender wise; that is women seem to prefer this kind of friendship at their workplace. Work spouse type of friendship is found more in respondents who are below the age of 35, whereas it is not prevalent in respondents who are above the age of 45. This shows that the younger generation look towards friendships at work place for emotional bond, support and respect, whereas the older generation look at their colleagues as mere acquaintances.

7. Results and Discussion

From this study we can conclude that the prominent types of friendships that are observed at workplace are information peers and special friend. The least preferred type of friendship is work spouse, although this gives a lot of support both emotionally and growth wise. There seems to be not much impact of different types of friendships on the organisational commitment and intention to leave. Only few aspects in different friendships seem to correlate with “organisational commitment and intention to leave”.

8. Limitations

The limitation of the study is that the sample did not include equal number of employees from the older generation. For further studies researchers could study the impact of friendship in different fields of each industry by taking the employees hierarchy as well in to consideration

9. Conclusion

The different types of friendships do not affect the degree of organisational commitment and intention to leave. They might be individuals who are not relationship focused or their jobs might not pertain to any interdependent nature. Their organisational commitment maybe affected by other variables such as job satisfaction, job stress, person-organisation fit which have not been measured in the study. According to Pillemer, J., & Rothbard, N. (2018) as companies become more socially bound and connected, leaders and employees should be able to manage the tensions and challenges which arise from friendships inside these companies, in order make the best use of the benefits from these personal bonds. Therefore, this can be a scope for further study that can be done in this area.
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