

Building up relationships at work



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What does it take to get ahead at work? Of course both strong technical skills and hard work help, but neither guarantees success. After all, I'm sure you can think of colleagues who got promoted despite having only modest technical skills and never seeming to work that hard.

I work as a consulting psychologist in business which means that I get asked to coach individuals, run leadership development programmes for organisations and speak at business conferences all over the world. But rather than base my recommendations only on my personal experience, I prefer to draw upon published research. There are clever studies being done by psychologists, economists and other scientists at top universities and business schools. So what do they tell us about success at work?

Studies conducted in the last few years led by researchers such as Florida State University management professor Gerald Ferris suggest that people with both **more and deeper relationships at work tend to be more successful**. Such individuals understand that good ideas don't always get turned into successful products or projects – it often takes the support or outright sponsorship of colleagues, bosses and people from other departments to get things done.

The implication is that we could all think more consciously about building stronger relationships with business associates, customers and suppliers before needing them. It is no good going to people and asking them for advice or support if that's the first time we're speaking to them. But if we've been chatting, showing our interest and sharing the occasional joke together already, of course they are going to be more likely to help out when we need it.

People matter more than the numbers. So don't focus solely on the day-to-day duties of your work. Think about networking a little more. Invest a couple of hours every week meeting a few people outside of your usual circles. Find out what they do and what would help them to do their jobs better. Get to know colleagues' and customers' opinions and interests outside of work. Try to build friendships where you can.

Be careful of the possibly false promise of online networks though. A few years ago, researchers at Brigham Young University found that the most frequent users of the MySpace social network reported being less involved in real communities than the least frequent users.

If that is true other social media, the finding highlights a risk that online networking could become a solitary substitute for engaging with real people. It's easy to believe that we are well-connected when we have hundreds of online contacts. But how many of them could we truly depend upon if we needed a favour, career advice or an introduction to a dream employer?

I suspect that a dozen real friends or business contacts that we meet occasionally may have much more power than several hundred Facebook or LinkedIn friends and contacts. So get out there and connect. But do it in person, so you can look people in the eye, shake hands, hug, celebrate and commiserate together, and form real relationships.