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Workplace friendships and its effects on use of informal communication

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Abstract

Workplace friendships (WF) are an inevitable aspect of communication in most organizations as well as an imminent facet in employee satisfaction and open communication in the workplace (Sias, 2009). Although a plethora of studies have explored the communicative dimensions of workplace communication, very few explore the impact of informality as an aid for open communication. Based on previous research on the effects of informality in the workplace, this study examines the relationship between coworkers and their relation to informal communication in the workplace.

To assess this relationship, results were analyzed from 75 employed young adults ranging from 18 to 25 years of age who completed a 24-question survey on their usage of mild profanity and non-work related topics while in the workplace. Findings indicate that workplace friends utilize profanity as part of organizational communication significantly more than co-workers, and that workplace friends are significantly more likely to talk about non-work related topics than co-workers. In the final analysis, it was established that informal communication, when used appropriately by WF, might be used to enhance communication in organizations.

Keywords: workplace friendships, informal communication, mild profanity, non-work related topics, co-workers, open communication
Introduction

Approximately 280,280,000 people are a part of the labor force in the United States. These workers spend about 8.8 hours a day immersed in their work environment and organically producing friendships with their co-workers. The establishment of these workplace friendships directly alters the lives of everyday Americans. Communication has the potential to positively or negatively influence today’s workers. Upon entering the workforce formal communication is understood to be the most desirable method of communication. In contrast, this study examines the alternative perspective that informal communication may permit the greater passage of information between workplace friendships.

Literature Review

Several studies indicate that over the past decade, workplace relationships have become a topic of interest to researchers. These relationships vary from superior to subordinate and peer-to-peer (Sias, Krone, and Jablin, 2002; Sias & Cahill, 1998; McDonald, Vickers, Mohan, Wilkes & Jackson, 2010). Overall, researchers concluded that workplace relationships help break barriers in communication and foster a more open communication within the organization (Morrison & Nolan, 2009; Bakar & Sheer, 2013).

Although these lines of investigation have achieved great outcomes in workplace communication, informal communication in the workplace and its effects in determining the communicative nature among workplace friendships (WF) is “an area largely ignored by researchers” (Sias & Cahill, 1998 p. 273). By examining the relationship between informal communication and WF, this study will attempt to add evidence in support of the existing perspective that WF are beneficial to the overall communicative dimensions of organizations.
The Communication Accommodation Theory states that people adjust their speech style and speech content to assimilate with others whose approval they seek (Giles, 2011). This theory provides a probable explanation for the creation of WF, and why informal communication (i.e. profanity) may not be a negative element of organizational communication.

In several studies about workplace communication, the median age group of participants was 35, 36.31 and 37.34 (Sias and Cahill 1998; Anderson and Martin 1995; Keyton, Caputo, Ford, Fu, Leibowitz, Liu, Polasik, Ghosh and Wu 2013). Considering the lack of communication research that focuses on college-age individuals, this study will examine participants ranging from 18 to 25 years of age. Focusing on this age group will benefit the study of organizational communication because these individuals are likely to need training in effective communication to be assimilated into organizations as they enter the work force.

The connection individuals feel with one another and the friendships that are formed in an organization strengthens organizational identification. WF cause positive changes in peer related communication such as increased communication frequency, breath of topics, increased cooperation, and greater productivity, suggesting that formal settings inhibit the open exchange of information (Gordon & Hartman, 2009 p. 115, McDonald et al., 2010 p. 241).

Friendships in the workplace are essential to organizational communication because they act as networks within an organization that carry information effortlessly from point A to B. Friendships can meet an individual’s needs for affection, approval, social interaction and security within the workplace, encouraging a more united work environment (Deeter-Schmelz and Ramsey, 1997; Myers and Johnson, 2004; Lincoln and Miller 1979).

Conversely, the presence of WF may impede effective communication within the workplace. An inherent tension is created among peer-to-peer relationships when struggling to
discern between an identity as a coworker and as a friend, creating instability in the relationship (Sias, Gallagher, Kopaneva, & Pedersen, 2011 p. 241). In addition, factors that affect everyday relationships such as inequality, competition, envy, and gossip are magnified in work conditions, and may cause a communication breakdown (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002 p. 219).

According to Bridge and Baxter (1992), the negative aspects of WF can be corrected. When managers effectively manage the relationships among their employees there is a lower level of stress towards fellow co-workers, making the work environment more informal.

Researchers have distinguished WF from other workplace relationships because their initiation and development are voluntary and free from organizational requirements (Sias et al., 2011). WF involve mutual commitment, concern for the other, trust, self-disclosure, and shared values or interests among people at work, in ways that go beyond acquaintanceship but exclude romance (Berman et al., 2002; Gordon & Hartman, 2009). Researchers associate WF with decreasing job-related stress, decreasing turnover, increasing job satisfaction, and positive attitudes toward the organization (Deeter-Schmelz & Ramsey, 1997; Kram & Isabella 1985; McDonald et al., 2010). According to Fay and Kline (2011), informal communication is an important tool for creating positive organizational relationships that benefit the organization.

A direct correlation between a personal relationship with coworkers and open communication was found by many studies where it was concluded that open communication builds trust among peers, which creating cohesion and benefits organization’s outcomes (Meyers et al. 1999; Gordon, Hartman, 2009 p.118; Meyers, Knox, Pawlowski, & Ropog, 1999; Sias et al. 2011 p. 243). Based on previous literature, this study defines informal communication as using mild profanity in the workplace and having conversations about non-work related topics.
A study by Cressman, Callister, Robinson and Near (2009), defined profanity as words that the Federal Communications Commission deems unspeakable for broadcast, sexual words, excretory words, strongly offensive words and mildly offensive words. Mild profanity, for the purpose of this study, includes words that evoke mild offense—such as the words hell, crap, and damn (Ivory, Williams, Martin, Consalvo, 2009 p. 458). Mildly profane words are often used among coworkers to gain acceptance by accommodating to each other’s speech or when they feel at ease with coworkers. Accordingly, this study examines the following research question:

RQ1: Do WF, among individuals ages 18-25, increase the use of mild profanity in organizational communication?

Communication about non-work related topics increased among co-workers in Sias & Cahill’s (1998) study. Some of these non-work related topics included hobbies, current events, and family (Sias & Cahill’s 1998). For this study, non-work related topics are defined as workplace communication that does not pertain to job-oriented tasks. Accordingly, to obtain a deeper understanding of the relationship between informal communication and WF, the following research question was formulated:

RQ2: Do WF, among individuals ages 18-25, increase the discussion of non-work related topics in organizational communication?

Based on existing research, the following hypotheses were formulated and will guide this study.

H1: When individuals consider their coworkers to be workplace friends, the use of mild profanity will increase.

H2: When individuals consider their coworkers to be workplace friends, communication about non-work related topics will occur more often.
Following the formulation of these hypotheses, the methods section will explain the various processes used to collect and analyze data.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample for this study consisted of 83 employed participants. The participation of respondents was limited to those currently employed. Therefore, individuals who were previously employed were excluded from the study because the continual changes in technology have impacted the mediums of communication. Participants worked in several organizations in the southern region of the United States and ranged from 18 to 25 (78.62%) years of age. Of the total 146 participants, 72.81% were employed, and 27.19% were unemployed.

**Procedures**

Three forms of nonprobability sampling were used to acquire participants. Initially, a convenience sample obtained voluntary participation from students in a communication course at The University of Texas at San Antonio. Simultaneously, the use of network sampling garnered participation from specific people who were between the ages of 18-25 and currently employed. Finally, snowball sampling was used in an attempt to increase the number of participants. Criteria for participation in this study required that the participant be employed, had coworkers and was between the ages of 18-25. The participants took an online survey on the website SurveyMonkey, which took approximately seven minutes to complete. This format was chosen because, “online surveys are advantageous to traditional surveys in many aspects: they are faster, cheaper, easier to implement, more interactive, and can be tracked precisely” (Pan, 2009 p. 130). If the participants did not qualify based on the criteria previously stated, the online survey would dismiss them from the survey. Participants were assured confidentiality.
The survey was designed with a total of 24 questions, including four demographic questions that qualified a person to participate in the study. In the event of uncertainty, there were three clarifying questions, leaving 17 data collection questions. Of the total survey questions 16 were nominal data questions, while the remaining eight were continuous data questions. The surveys were delivered through email, Blackboard Learn, and various social media platforms. Data were collected for three days. Of the 146 surveys, 71 could not be used because they did not pass the qualifier questions, thus leaving 75 valid surveys. To analyze the results from this survey, SPSS software was used to run statistical tests.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that the use of mild profanity would increase when individuals considered their coworkers to be workplace friends. The survey defined profanity as words that evoke mild offense (i.e. damn, hell, crap) (Ivory, Williams, Martin, Consalvo, 2009 p. 458). Respondents (n=75) reported that they were more likely to use mild profanity with workplace friends (61.3% n=46) than with coworkers (2.7% n=29). In addition, respondents reported a high usage of mild profanity on a daily basis (73.3%) but a decrease of usage in the workplace (54.7%). Despite this decrease, respondents still reported a usage of profanity in the workplace (45.3 %). Furthermore, those who use profanity in the workplace reported that they use profanity more often with workplace friends than with coworkers. This is denoted by the significant results of two linear regression tests (Table 1), in which the overall findings for the use of profanity with workplace friends are higher than the findings for the use of profanity with coworkers.

The significant results of the linear regression models are further supported by the results of a hierarchal regression, which tested the subsequent effects of two predictor variables on a
dependent variable, “How often do you use profanity with workplace friends?” Predictors
variable 1, “How often do you use profanity on a daily basis?”, explained 43.7% of the variance
($R^2 = .437$, $F(1,73)=7.53$, $p = .000$). Predictor variable 1 with predictor variable 2, “In the
workplace, how often do you use profanity?”, explained 58.8% of the variance ($R^2 = .588$,
$F(1,72)=3.01$, $p = .000$). The results show that using profanity on a daily basis and using
profanity in the workplace did predict the use of profanity with workplace friends $\beta = .52$, $t(72)$
= 5.14, $p = .000$. Additionally, survey question 11 showed the likelihood of individuals using
profanity with workplace friends (61.3%) was greater than the likelihood of individuals using
profanity with coworkers (2.7%) Lastly, a One-Way Anova showed a significant relationship
between the use of profanity on a daily basis and with workplace $F(2, 72) = 67.51$, $p = .000$.

| Table 1  Linear Regression Comparison |
| Test 1* | Use of profanity with workplace friends | Test 2* | Use of profanity with co-workers |
| b = .894, $t(73) = 10.57$, $p < .001$ | $b = .708$, $t(73) = 9.15$, $p < .001$ |
| $R^2 = .61$, $F(1, 73) = 111.65$, $p < .001$ | $R^2 = .53$, $F(1, 73) = 83.72$, $p < .001$ |

*predictor variable: In the workplace, how often do you use profanity?

The second hypothesis stated that when individuals consider their coworkers to be
workplace friends, communication about non-work related topics would occur more often.
Participants (95.9%) reported that they discuss non-work related topics on the workplace.
Pearson’s Chi Square showed a significant relationship between participants discussing non-
work related topics in the workplace and whether participants were more likely to discuss non-
work related topics with workplace friends than with coworkers, $\chi^2(4, N = 75) = 17.86$, $p < .001$.

To expand on the hypothesis that individuals are more likely to discuss non-work related
topics with workplace friends, a comparison was made between two linear regression tests. As
seen in Table 2 below, the overall findings for the variables in Test 1, were greater than the findings for Test 2. Lastly, participants reported that they were more likely to discuss non-work related topics with workplace friends (84.9%) than with coworkers (6.8%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2  Linear Regression Comparison</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test 1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss non-work related topics with workplace friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$b = .815, t(73) = 15.4, p &lt; .001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2 = .765, F(1, 73) = 237.19, p &lt; .001$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*predictor variable: In the workplace, how often do you discuss non-work related topics?

Discussion

Research has largely addressed the dynamics of workplace communication among peers, but ignored the importance of informal communication among WF in organizations. This study, therefore, addresses profanity at work, an aspect of communication frequently believed to be undesirable or harmful to organizational communication. Although differing perspectives have been found regarding the efficacy of informal communication, it is advantageous for organizations to comprehend the impact and implications of informal communication among WF. These findings are of importance because, ordinarily, individuals 18 to 25 years of age are likely to be entering the workforce and should be trained to be competent communicators in their respective organizations. However, very few organizations require that their employees undergo communication training. If organizations happen to provide training to develop communication skills for their employees; most of these teachings will be based on formality as an optimum method of communication.

This study challenges the current perspective that informal communication is an objectionable aspect of WF in organizations by paralleling WF with co-workers and quantifying
their usage of informal communication. Incidentally, both hypotheses and research questions were proven to be socially and statistically significant by the findings in this study. The use of communication concerning non-work related topics increased in cases when individuals considered their co-workers to be their WF, as shown by the Linear Regression Comparison Table 2. Similarly, mild profanity increased in cases when individuals considered their co-workers to be their WF, as shown by the significant results of the hierarchal regression $\beta = .52$, $t(72) = 5.14$, $p = .000$. In essence, informal communication as operationalized by the use of profanity and non-work related topics, was used more often among WF than among co-workers; this suggests that individuals who regard co-workers as WF are in fact, more likely to utilize informal communication in a workplace setting.

On a daily basis, participants reported a high usage of profanity (44%) but reported a decrease of usage in the workplace (30.7%). Survey participants (61.33%) reported that they were likely to use profanity with a WF while only 2.67% were likely to use profanity with co-workers. These findings significantly supported the communication accommodation theory by demonstrating that people will adapt their speech content to fit in with their environment.

All things considered, since communication openness is more likely to occur within a trusting work environment, a greater passage of communication is created among individuals taking part in informal communication (Gordon & Hartman, 2009; Meiners & Miller, 2004).

Limitations and Future Research

This study was hindered by various limitations. First, the lack of time allocated to collect survey samples affected the inclusive outcomes of this research. It is likely that more binding results would have been obtained if time would not have been a limiting factor. Another impeding effect of lacking time is that the original hypotheses could have been tested
longitudinally to account for changes in developing relationships from co-workers to WF and its effects on informal communication over time.

Second, the respondent pool was limited to those associated with the researchers. Three forms of nonprobability sampling were utilized – convenience, network and snowball sampling. It is reasonable to assume that the participants may share specific traits thus making it difficult to generalize the findings. In addition, although the participants were informed of the anonymity of the survey, their association with the researchers might have restrained their true responses.

Third, participants might have been affected by the Hawthorne Effect when answering the questions about the use of profanity in the workplace. It is likely that in response to knowing their answers were to be analyzed and perceiving that the use of profanity in the workplace is objectionable, individuals might feel reluctant to express the true nature of their speech habits. Future researchers could design a qualitative study to observe this phenomena more accurately. Focus groups and interviews could potentially provide a deeper understanding.

This study merely examined the relationship between WF and informal communication in individuals ranging from 18 to 25 years of age, without regard to gender or ethnicity. A direction for future investigation should be to examine the relationship among WF and informal communication as it relates to gender, additional age categories and ethnicity.

In conclusion, although non-work related topics and mild profanity have been traditionally regarded as negative in organizational communication, modern research shows a direct correlation between enhanced communication and the presence of informal communication in workplace friendships. The implications of this study add significant results to the recently emerging acceptance of informal communication and WF in organizations.
References


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