

feature

# Friends in high places

Mixing work with pleasure can be dangerous if you're not careful, writes **Nikki Williamson**.

**Y**ou're starting work in a new office. Is the best approach to keep your own counsel and avoid getting too close to your new colleagues?

Or should you sign up for the social club, make five lunch dates with workmates in your first week in between planning for Friday night drinks?

Experts on the subject say somewhere in the middle will pay the best dividends.

On one hand, human beings are social creatures. We like to form groups and developing positive workplace bonds keeps us happy.

Cris Popp from consultancy Workplace Wellbeing says happy, trusting, sociable workplaces are also among the most productive. "There is no other way to build trust than to give a little of yourself away," he says. "We most often do that when we socialise with each other."

Jane Lowder, a career coach from Max Coaching, says if you're new in a job, a reasonable level of socialising will make adjusting to your new environment and position easier.

"Making friends with co-workers, from the front door security guard through to the chief executive officer, can positively impact on your productivity and the ease with which you can fulfil your role," she says.

On the negative side of the ledger there are risks involved in playing with colleagues. Between 66 per cent and 80 per cent of workers report harassment at some stage of their career and while after-work drinks can encourage bonding, they can also open the way for inappropriate behaviour and language.

Leanne Fink, a human resources consultant with HRIntegration, says you should set



**Socialise smart ... it's important to set boundaries with workmates.**

boundaries when socialising and respect the boundaries of others.

Jackie Waite from human resources consultancy Grey Global Group agrees. "The most common mistake people make is being too personal and forgetting that people have varying comfort levels when talking about their life outside of work," Waite says. "When alcohol flows too freely, there can also be issues around unwanted advances."

Popp says it's best to take your lead from the other person when it comes to what is and isn't appropriate. Be wary of who you're confessing to. "You can open up to some people you work with," says Popp. "But there are other people that will take information and use it against you".

**'The most common mistake people make is being too personal.'**  
Jackie Waite

Lowder agrees: "Do be wary of anyone who tries to become your best friend on your first day," she says. "This is often a giveaway that there's a hidden agenda at hand. No sooner have you been lured into sharing your deepest secrets, or adverse opinions of your new boss, than you find this information hasn't been kept confidential or, worse still, has been used against you."

Fink says it's wise to brush up on legal requirements on how you behave towards colleagues and how they should treat you.

"Employees need to acquaint themselves with their organisation's (equal opportunity), discrimination and harassment policies," she says. "They should also be aware of their obligations

under the corresponding state and federal legislation, too."

Whether you're telling a joke or commenting on news events, you always need to consider your colleagues and be respectful.

"We have a culturally diverse workforce," says Fink. "You need to respect and take into consideration cultural differences."

Lowder says another hazard of workplace sociability is time-wasting. "It's when the five-minute catch-up at the coffee station turns into a daily 40-minute rundown of the previous night's activities that the positives of socialising at work turn into a negative," she says. "This is noticed quickly by managers, not to mention co-workers who have to hear the intricacies of your life, whether they want to or not."

And don't forget to be careful about using technology to socialise at work.

Fink says email, sharing photos and video footage can all cause major problems. "When people use email to socialise they [often] forget about the company logo and signature at the bottom of their message," she says.

Who you send your email to initially is not where it may end up. Emails can be added to, altered and forwarded on to anywhere, she warns.

Also, whether it's in-house socialising over coffee or heading down to the pub for a drink after hours, someone is always watching. "Whether its colleagues or not, your behaviour is always going to be linked to your company and your professionalism," says Fink.

If you go to the pub wearing the company logo on your shirt, it's a good idea to change, cover the logo or simply keep yourself under control.

## first gig



**Michael O'Loughlin, AFL player, Sydney Swans**

"I arrived in Sydney from Adelaide when I was only 17 to play with the Sydney Swans. The player welfare managers were keen to keep the young guys busy outside training and to help plan for life after football, so I chose working as an electrician.

We used to train very early in the morning. I was up at six and training at seven. Then my boss would collect me for work, which went to 4pm.

Afterwards, he'd drop me back at the footy club and we'd train again. For a guy just out of high school, it was a bit of a shock to the system.

It was hard work. Sydney has a lot of old houses, so you'd be crawling under floorboards or up into ceilings to connect wires or install power points. I'd often run into rats and mice.

Put the wrong wire in the wrong place and you'll know about it; fortunately I didn't get zapped but I heard plenty of stories. I had a really good boss, who showed me the right way to go about things.

It was a tough job and you had to make sure the customer was pleased. I learned a lot about focus. If you're not concentrating, you'll do real damage to yourself.

I would have continued the job but footy was turning more professional and I found it pretty difficult to do both.

I have so much respect for electricians, they earn their money. But I'm really grateful football worked out for me."

Sue White

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