

Relationships and paid work toolkit

The EEO Trust's research on personal relationships and paid work showed that there are clear links between workplace productivity and personal relationships.

Paid work can have positive and negative effects on personal relationships, and visa versa. This toolkit offers employers resources to assess their workplace and implement initiatives to maximise staff morale and productivity. Helping employees deal with difficult personal relationships or encouraging practices that enhance good personal relationships at work and at home, will lead to happier staff, more stable relationships in the workplace, and a better workplace culture.

How personal relationships affect workplaces

Types of work and how they affect personal relationships

Personal relationships outside the workplace

Relationships in the workplace

Benefits of good personal relationships

Impact of poor personal relationships

Assessing issues affecting employees' relationships

Using questionnaires to research your workplace

Using discussion checklists to research your workplace

Suggested initiatives for the workplace

[See the full research report](#)

How personal relationships affect workplaces

Positive relationships outside the workplace can be models for good relationships with colleagues. Employers can enhance the benefits of employees' good personal relationships while taking steps to minimise the negative impacts of poor personal relationships on the workplace culture.

Similarly, work problems can cause or influence relationship breakdowns. Employees' wellbeing can be affected by extra stress, depression and anxiety brought on by financial impacts of divorce, childcare responsibilities and loneliness. These can in turn impact on workplace productivity and safety, staff morale and retention.

Types of work and how they affect personal relationships

The establishment and maintenance of relationships and social networks can be affected by the type of work people undertake. Certain types of work can have detrimental affects on family life or networks. Influencing factors include the type of role, the responsibilities of the work, pay structure and time demands.

Higher paid and professional-type roles

These roles may demand long work hours due to workplace culture or to meet specific goals, deadline pressure, travel – either frequent short-term or long-term commuting, relocation through transfer or for career progression, and intrusion of work on personal time through cell phones, email etc.

Lower paid, manual, or blue collar roles

There can be a need for long hours to meet basic income requirements and often through multiple part-time jobs. Other factors include shift work, irregular or unpredictable hours, and inability to plan or keep relationship/social commitments due to casual on-call work. The situation may arise where the employee has to relocate to find work while the partner stays behind.

Shift work

Many low income couples with children often work opposite shifts so one is always available to cover childcare. These employees are often unable to participate in social and family activities, and have a higher divorce rates than regular day workers. People working shifts may also miss out on work social events held in evenings and on weekends.

Casual and part-time roles

Work-life initiatives are often available only to full-time permanent workers. Depending on when work becomes available, casual workers may have to cancel prior social engagements and this may have a negative influence on their relationships.

Personal relationships outside the workplace

The quality of personal relationships depends on time spent together free of work interruptions or preoccupations. A conflict between work and home life can result in tension, stress, separation or divorce. If work demands are a problem for one

partner in the relationship, even if the other partner is happy with the work-life balance, it will affect the relationship.

Gender and work hours

Men who work long hours or whose work intrudes on personal time may be putting their relationships at risk if it affects couple time or the distribution of household labour, even if they don't mind the hours themselves. However, women who spend more time at work are less likely to receive support from a partner prepared to tolerate or support this choice.

Young people and work

Long hours make maintaining a relationship difficult; when one or both partners work long hours they often don't have enough time to spend together. Lack of secure work can make it difficult for young people to maintain a relationship to the point of establishing a family. Young people often combine study and part-time work, which can reduce time available for meeting people and developing friendships.

Gay/lesbian people and work

Workplace policies that exclude gay/lesbian partners from eligibility for benefits available to partners of married employees disadvantage gay/lesbian staff. For example relocation or travel arrangements and provisions, and inclusion in work functions or social events. Such exclusion can limit the career advancement opportunities of these people.

Unemployed people

Lack of work and income affects self esteem and financial status and consequently the ability to form and sustain intimate relationships. There is a correlation between men not being in full-time work and not being married/having children.

Friends and work

Friendships are important networks that support performance at work and contribute to personal wellbeing. Employers should bear this in mind when considering the social context of employees' lives. Friendships are often an important precursor to marital type relationships. For single people, friends can

be an important source of support. Although they may be important facets of employees' lives outside of work, friends are rarely invited to workplace social events or are not recognised in company bereavement leave policies.

Relationships in the workplace

Relationships between workmates can suffer when work pressure creates friction or tension amongst staff. Employers need to be aware of ways to avoid or diffuse these situations or they may impact on staff performance and morale.

In today's society, the workplace has become an important place for meeting people and romantic relationships can often develop. Long work hours mean workmates tend to spend more time together and may find they have more in common with their colleagues than with their marriage partners. This can result in "the office affair", which can have negative outcomes for the organisation and staff, such as: bias, harassment, bullying, confidentiality or mitigation issues. For this reason some workplaces have guidelines on romantic/sexual relationships between workers.

At the other end of the scale, people in non-standard, shift or casual work can find it difficult to develop workplace relationships and may be excluded from workplace social activities and functions. This isolation or exclusion can also occur when employees are on parental, study or extended sick leave.

Benefits of good personal relationships

Good supportive relationships have a positive impact on employees' wellbeing and health and can improve workplace performance. Often important interpersonal skills are learnt from relationships outside the workplace. Couples that have been for relationship counselling may acquire skills that are transferable to the workplace, such as: communication, conflict resolution, negotiation, role modelling, and positive reinforcement skills. Employers that promote family days, social activities and family-friendly work options are more likely to benefit from higher staff morale and retention rates.

Friendships and support networks

Friendships and social support systems contribute to a sense of self-worth and personal wellbeing. Friendships between women are a major source of reciprocal

childcare provision, provide resource and responsibility exchange, and this can have a positive spill-over into the workplace. These networks can offer employees emotional sustenance and can act as a buffer when dealing with workplace stress or relationship problems.

Migrant integration and language development

For New Zealand's new migrants, particularly those with English as a second language, relationships and friendships in the workplace are an important part of the language development process and cultural integration. Migrants' networks within their own communities may generate customers or new employees while communities in their home countries may become important contacts abroad.

Impact of poor personal relationships

Relationship problems can lead to stress, preoccupation, reduced sleep and fatigue. These symptoms can cause a loss of productivity and drop in safety standards in workplaces, and an increase in absenteeism. Employees encountering problems at home may look for work that impacts less on their relationships, leading to increased staff turnover.

Assessing issues affecting employees' relationships

Surveying staff can help identify any relationship issues that may be relevant to, or affected by, work demands. Employers can use the sample questionnaires, and checklists in this toolkit or hold focus groups with staff.

It is important to communicate clearly with your employees from the start of the research procedure to ensure they know what you are doing and why.

Suggested steps to take when you begin the research process

- Determine what research method is appropriate for your organisation.
- Set timelines; tell employees in advance how and when they will hear about the results and make sure you follow up.
- Ask for positive and negative feedback.
- Remind staff what initiatives are available to them and the processes involved.
- Be realistic and do not over-promise; you are not committing to act on every suggestion.

- Communicate; some suggestions may take longer to implement so it is good to have progress reports.
- Be consistent; if you promise confidentiality ensure it happens.
- Monitor the procedures you put in place as a result of the research.

You may decide to use the questionnaire or the checklist tool below to research your organisation. Your decision may be influenced by the size of your organisation or work team, the gender breakdown of employees, the ways you normally communicate with your staff and if you already use a staff survey tool.

Using questionnaires to research your workplace

This survey method may be appropriate where the organisation or work unit is large, confidentiality is important, employees are not comfortable with face to face discussions, or where written literacy is reasonably high.

The questionnaire is designed in modules. You may not need to use them all. Questions can be adapted or added. The language and distribution method; electronic or hard copy may need to be adjusted to suit your organisation.

Using discussion checklists to research your workplace

This research method may be appropriate where the organisation or work unit is small, communication is generally less formal, people prefer to talk rather than write, and there are clear opinion leaders in the organisation.

You can adapt these checklists to use in focus groups, discussions at a staff meeting or tea break, or interviews for key people or opinion leaders.

The prompts under the topics are designed to assist the discussion and are suggestions only; you may need to change the language to suit your organisation's culture.

Suggested initiatives for the workplace

Research shows that positive relationships, both at work and at home, help create a productive and enjoyable work environment.

Workplaces can implement flexible work options, and family-friendly initiatives that are conducive to positive personal relationships and cater to work-life balance. Ensuring senior managers are committed to these initiatives and are good role models is important.

How employers can encourage good relationships at work

- Provide social facilities or a space for informal socialising and relaxation.
- Subsidise social club events, sport/wellness programmes or gym memberships.
- Establish social networks; establish support networks within or outside the workplace for workers of different cultures, or ethnic or minority groups. This may include helping set-up the networks, providing space and time to meet, give money for refreshments etc.
- Provide online networking systems to support specific groups such as women, minorities or gay and bisexual employees who wish to contact others within the organisation. This could be a page on the intranet etc.
- Train all employees on sexual orientation, violence, bullying, harassment etc to help build a culture of understanding and tolerance.
- Establish cultural awareness training/groups/information sharing. One workplace developed an interactive Maori language CD to help people pronounce Maori words correctly.

How employers can encourage positive relationships outside of work

Develop a healthy workplace culture

- Train managers in the importance of healthy personal relationships.
- Ensure managers are role models in maintaining healthy relationships.
- Acknowledge and celebrate non-work related events in employees' personal lives such as citizenship ceremonies, graduations, anniversaries etc.
- Limit long working hours; provide training on managing workloads in order to reduce the number of hours employees spend at work.

- Encourage productivity not “presenteeism”.
- Provide flexible working options including part-time work, working from home, compressed working week and job sharing.
- Ensure all employees have adequate evening and weekend time off.
- Ensure all employees can make and receive personal phone calls during work time. Likewise limit calls to staff in their personal time at home.
- Large workplaces could assess the need to develop a programme to provide support in the workplace for employees who are experiencing domestic violence.

Provide fair relocation and travel arrangements

- Minimise the amount of travel out of town/overseas assignments and travel during personal time.
- If employees travel regularly, pay for their partner to join them on alternate weekends or pay for travel home on weekends.
- When employees are away on business pay for regular phone contact with family/partners.
- Provide for time with partner/family on return from out of town assignments.
- Allow time for jetlag or time zone changes where appropriate before returning to the office.
- Avoid making promotion dependent on relocation.

Offer dual-career policies within the organisation

- Provide dual career relocation policies; find work for an employee’s spouse/partner if an employee is offered relocation options.

Consider shift-work and on-call implications

- Involve staff in rostering decisions and preferences; allow and facilitate shift swapping.
- Subsidise childcare to help shift-workers get more sleep.
- Minimise last minute call-ins requiring staff to rearrange their commitments.
- Ensure that the refusal by call-in staff to work at late notice does not jeopardise future work opportunities.

Offer Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) counselling

- Make confidential counselling services such as EAP available for relationship counselling and subsidise the first few sessions.
- Allow time off to attend counselling without needing to “make up time”.
- Ensure EAP/counselling programmes meet the needs of men, as well as women.
- Offer employees’ partners counselling on work-related problems.

Include partners/friends in social events

- Ensure de facto and gay partners are eligible for the same benefits offered to married couples.
- Ensure de facto and gay partners are welcome to attend work social events.
- Extend invitations to employees’ friends for work social events when appropriate.

Offer flexible leave provisions

- Enable workers to use sick leave to care for family and friends.
- Provide domestic leave to care for dependents and or to cope with personal or domestic crises.
- Include a Diversity Day leave option where a day can be taken off a year to observe a day of special meaning to the employee.

Relationships and work – sample questionnaire

Introduction

(You may want to include some endorsement from your CEO or senior manager to increase confidence that this issue is important to your organisation)

We are keen to assess whether your work impacts on your personal relationships and in what ways. We are also interested in finding out whether your relationships at home or at work impact on your work.

We want to find out what we are doing well to assist people to balance their work and personal relationships, and how we could improve in this area. Your answers will be anonymous and treated confidentially.

Please return this questionnaire to:..... by
.....

Thank you for your help

Section 1: Demographic information

1. How old are you?

- Under 30 years
- 30-49 years
- 50 years an over

2. What is your relationship status?

- Married
- Living with a partner
- Have a partner but not living together
- Do not currently have a partner
- Recently separated/divorced

Balancing work and life commitments

3. Do you generally feel you are able to balance your work and personal relationships (such as marriage, partners, friends)?

Yes No

4. Do you currently use any of the work-life policies or programmes provided by the organisation?

Yes No

Which ones? _____

Working hours

5. Do any of the following help you balance your work and relationship commitments?

	Yes	No	Not available to me	Not applicable to me
Flexible hours				
Time off for relationship emergencies & events				
Part time work hours				
Capped hours as a full-time worker				
Compressed working week/fortnight				
Other (specify)				

6. Do any of the following hinder you in balancing your work and personal relationship commitments?

	Yes	No	Not applicable to me
Long work hours			
Compulsory over time			
Weekend work			
Shift work			
Timing of work meetings/training			
Cell phone interruptions in personal time			
Other (specify)			

Support from others

7. Do any of the following help you balance your work and personal relationship commitments?

	Yes	No	Not available to me	Not applicable to me
Support from manager/supervisor				
Support from colleagues				
Support from team members				
EAP programmes				
Time off for relationship counselling without having to make it up				
Seeing other staff, both men and women, and senior managers, use work-life policies				
Domestic violence policies and programmes				

Consulting staff about work practices that would minimise work related problems affecting personal relationships				
Including friends, as well as partners, in work social events				
My manager's awareness of how work practices impact on relationships				
Other (specify)				

8. Do any of the following hinder you in balancing your work and personal relationship commitments?

	Yes	No	Not applicable to me
Negative attitude of managers			
Negative attitude of colleagues			
Negative attitude of team members			
Long work hours culture as the accepted norm			
Other (specify)			

Working arrangements

9. Do any of the following help you balance your work and personal relationship commitments?

	Yes	No	Not available to me	Not applicable to me
Working from home				
Technology such as laptops or cell phones				
Other (specify)				

10. Do any of the following hinder you in balancing your work and personal relationship commitments?

	Yes	No	Not applicable to me
Technology such as laptops or cell phones			
Frequent travelling away from home			
Shift work that doesn't allow me adequate evening and weekend time for socialising			
Work related travel during personal time e.g. on Sundays in order to start work at destination on Monday			
Career advancement dependent on relocation			
Temporary contract work rather than secure permanent position			
De facto partners (including same sex) not being eligible for married partners' benefits			
Other (specify)			

Workplace relationships

11. Do any of the following help you to form good relationships with your workmates/colleagues?

	Yes	No	Not applicable to me
Social club			
Fun activities			
Team events			
Events that encourage informal interaction between management and staff			
Team based projects			
Tasks that require interaction with other staff members			
Training and support in communication skills			
Other (specify)			

Getting a balance

12. What could this organisation do to help you balance your work and personal relationships?

Comments:

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13. Do you think that if employees have healthy relationships the organisation will be more effective and successful?

Yes

No

If so how?

Thank you for your time.

Work and relationships – sample discussion checklist

1. Is this organisation currently assisting staff to balance their work and personal relationships?

How?

- Support
- Policies – which?
- Being flexible

2. What are the most useful things we do?

- formally
- informally

3. Are there barriers or obstacles in this organisation that prevent staff achieving this balance?

- hours
- shifts
- flexibility for relationship counselling/emergencies/ social events
- attitudes
- behaviours
- subtle messages
- no formal policies – all discretionary
- not taking issues for relationships as seriously as those for parenting

4. What are the three most useful things the organisation could do to help you attain work-life balance? Will this effect your work, if so in what ways?

Thank you