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Friendship & authenticity at work in professional and managerial women in South African organisations

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Abstract

Five days a week, eight to nine hours a day, people spend so much of their time at work. As human beings we all need informal relationships, we need people to talk to, people we can trust and rely on. These informal relationships provide us with companionship as well as emotional and social support. It is therefore important to understand informal relationships in the workplace. These informal relationships can be in the form of friendships, the opportunity to make friends and the prevalence of friendships in the workplace. Friendships help us feel a sense of belonging in our social environment and are therefore an important aspect of our social identities. Belonging is very important in the workplace especially because of how diverse the South African workforce has become. The diversity of the workforce has been mainly due to transformation legislations and policies that have assisted marginalised groups to be part of the workforce. We however, cannot talk about diversity without inclusion because it is through inclusion that this diverse workforce feels valued. It is therefore imperative to deepen our understanding of authenticity at work because inclusivity involves encouraging the diverse workforce to be themselves without having to conform and create false representations of themselves. The current study argues that a possible interconnection between friendship in the workplace and authenticity at work may provide alternative ways of addressing the inclusion of women in the workplace.

The aim of the study is to establish a relationship between friendship and authenticity at work by assessing the extent to which workplace friendships are associated with authenticity at work among women in professional and managerial roles in the South African private sector. A mixed methods (triangulation), cross-sectional and correlational research design was used to assess the association between friendship (opportunity and prevalence) and authenticity (authentic living, self-alienation and external influence). A sample of 132 professional and managerial women in the South African private sector was used and seven women who volunteered from this sample, were interviewed using semi-structured interviews for the qualitative component.

Results of the current study demonstrated that there was a positive association between friendship opportunity and prevalence at work with authentic living at work. Conversely, a negative association was found between friendship opportunity and prevalence at work with self-alienation. These results indicated that an association does exist between friendship and authenticity at work. However, a non-significant result was found between friendship

opportunity and friendship prevalence with external influence. From the thematic analysis, participants conveyed that having friendships in the workplace helped them to be more comfortable with expressing themselves without feeling judged. They also expressed that friendships at work gave them a safe space to be themselves. Furthermore, results also suggested that women create homophilous relationships not only based on socio-demographic characteristics but also on intrapersonal characteristics such as shared values, interests and phases of life. Moreover, the study also found that ethnic differences also exist when it comes to friendship at work (opportunity and prevalence) and accepting external influence. The thematic analysis revealed that organisational role differences exist when it comes to friendship and authenticity at work as women in managerial roles expressed that they could not be themselves because of their seniority in the organisation and had to place boundaries on their friendships because of their managerial roles. Tenure differences were also found with regards to authenticity at work as those with more organisational tenure expressed that they could be themselves at work more than those who had less years in the organisation.

In conclusion, the findings of the current study suggest that the authenticity at work among women in professional and managerial roles in the South African private sector is enhanced when they have friendships and the opportunity of friendships in the workplace. However, friendships at work that are solely based on socio-demographic factors are less likely to promote authenticity at work, it is more about the intrapersonal characteristics of individuals. These findings may suggest that organisations need to look beyond demographic characteristics when implementing strategies that enhance inclusivity in the workplace.