

# Having a "work wife" or "work husband" is good for your career

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We haven't worked together for almost a decade, but Christina was my first – and best – work wife. She picked me up when I fell backwards off the stage at the office Christmas party, and let me crash on her sofa the following year when I lost all my possessions and couldn't get into my flat. We've travelled from Caracas to Kiev together and still go on holiday when we can, children and partners allowing. When she got married I was her bridesmaid.

But the defining moment when I realised she was my work wife happened eight years ago when I was made redundant from the company we worked at together. It was my first job, and I'd been there almost four years. I kind of knew it was time to leave, and it wasn't the biggest shock in the world but, still, no one really expects that conversation on a Monday afternoon. I wouldn't have bought all my lunches for the week from the supermarket next door an hour earlier if I had.

After being told I was probably losing my job, I went straight to the pub and called Christina, who came straight away with my handbag, which I'd left behind. She stayed all evening, and took me for dinner in an

attempt to sober me up, offering me a space in her bed if I didn't want to go home on my own. She said she'd clear my desk for me, too, so I wouldn't have to go back to the office if I didn't want to.

And that's why a work wife is brilliant: she's somewhere between your colleague, who totally gets why you hate Claire, the office manager, with a passion, and your best friend, who gets you, but rolled into one person.

Having a 'work wife' is good for your career. According to a 2016 study by the guys at CV-library, 47.2 per cent of UK professionals either have or wish they had a 'work spouse'. Respondents cited the benefits as 'offering support and mentorship, providing advice and guidance and offering friendship and companionship'.

Another study shows that 50 per cent of those with a best friend at work feel they have a strong connection with the company, and 70 per cent of employees say having friends at work is the most crucial part of a happy working life.

I keep referring to a 'work wife' – because who doesn't love alliteration? But I am, of course, referring to a work spouse. They are your work 'person', someone who has your back in any situation, will give you proper good advice, and will never stab you in the back just to get in there with Geoff from Procurement. Whether it's actually your work husband who gives you really good dating advice and is also the person who always you get to double check your presentations before they go out to a client, or your work BFF who frequently comes out with you and your mates on a Friday night, but also understands exactly why you

get so angry when someone misunderstands your filing system and puts all of last month's invoices in the last folder. They do both.

She (or he) is the person you make a pact with before the Christmas party to whisk you away when you start to get 'boozy melted face', which means you're about to do something bad, because you know she'll (or he'll) be keeping an eye out and will move heaven and earth to ensure you don't get caught feeling up that new guy from Finance in the disabled toilets. She's (or he's) the person you can complain to about your boss without fear of reprisals. She's (or he's) also the person who will give you proper objective career advice when you're not sure what your next move should be, if you messed up that presentation, or whether you should be going for that promotion. It also means you've always got someone to go to lunch with.

A good work spouse is not the same as a mentor, or a boss who really cares about your personal development, or even that fun colleague with great gossip about the team on the third floor. It's someone who understands you and the job you do better than anyone else in the world. They know why you care because they care too. They aren't going to roll their eyes when you mention for the fourteenth time how annoying you find Claire because they 100 per cent feel your pain. And they can also tell you, better than anyone else in the world, when it's time for you to go. If your work wife or husband tells you you're wasted where you are, or that it's time to move on, that's excellent advice, worth taking into serious consideration. Because no one cuts their work spouse loose – and potentially loses the only person in the office up for a hung-over Nando's at lunchtime – unless they really mean it.

‘I think, when you’re in a very male environment, a lot of it is about having that constant ally,’ explains Sara, who works in the science department of a university. ‘My best friend and I worked together for four years, and having that person who totally had my back was amazing. It meant I was able to relax into the job more than I probably do now we’re not working together.’

But, as with all human interactions, it’s complicated, as Sara explains: ‘I tend to gravitate towards other women when we work together, but some women are really anti that and push you away a bit – I think they see it as a sign of weakness. But everyone’s different, I guess.’

For Cara, forty, who has worked in marketing in London and Canada (so has had to find her feet in new office environments and a new country), work wives have punctuated some of the most important moments of her career.

‘Over the years I’ve had several work wives (and even a work husband!) and I can honestly say these women have helped me get through some of the most challenging moments of my career. It’s just so nice to have someone “human” to connect with at work and look forward to seeing every day. The ability to sneak away for a quick chat and ask for helpful advice from someone you trust is a huge perk of having a work wife. You never have to worry about eating lunch alone, and she is always up for a cheeky coffee run to Starbucks or a little nip outside to get air.’

And, as Cara learnt, a good work wife should enhance the rest of your life: ‘I recently celebrated a milestone birthday and had an afternoon-tea party with a number of friends who didn’t know each other. As the ladies chatted and established how they knew me, it quickly became apparent

that 90 per cent of the guests were women I had worked with over the years. That bit was amazing – my work wives were meeting each other and sharing funny stories about our escapades together. It really made me realise how blessed I've been to have worked with such awesome females and I'm so glad that I've maintained the relationships even after moving on to different roles.'

I totally agree. When I was organising my hen do, I wanted it to be fairly small, so I invited only the women I'm closest to. Two-thirds of the guest list was comprised of women I had worked with in some capacity over the last decade.

In a 2016 study by the University of Pennsylvania and Arizona State University of the relationships between female baboons (stick with me here), they discovered that, although the males leave the group once they've grown up and go to join another group (where they have to fight their way to the top hierarchy), females stay with the same group from birth. They inherit their position within it (Alpha, Beta, Gamma and so on) from their mothers. Scientists also discovered that these hierarchies remained stable with almost no change for fifteen, twenty or thirty years. It was assumed that evolution dictates that those baboons with the most Alpha-like traits are most likely to survive and pass them onto their daughters. In fact, it turns out that the baboons that did best were those that had the strongest relationships with other females in the group – the same females, year after year. This was so for groups thousands of miles apart, and feels strangely reminiscent of numerous studies that have found our relationships with other people are the key to our happiness.

In the case of the baboons, scientists found that those who were the most closely bonded with other females in their group had the lowest levels of stress hormones. This makes sense: they supported each other in disputes, their friendship generated fewer disputes over food, and they'd groom each other a lot, which everyone knows is the best stress-buster there is. They're each other's work wives, and they're happier, less stressed, and thrive as a result.

With good reason, I've banged on at length about the virtues of working with women and having fantastic female working relationships. It's my friendships at work that have made terrible jobs bearable, and great jobs out-of-this-world amazing. I've worked with women far more than I have with men, so it's those relationships that stand out for me. I stay in touch with most of my old female work friends far more than I do with male former colleagues. This means plenty of opportunity to rehash funny or scandalous work stories. Our friendships and our time at work together develop a mythical status with each retelling to a new boyfriend or friend-of-a-friend who joins the group. Even the most dull, banal or depressing jobs take on a rosy glow when revisited with my work wives. Because no (wo)man is an island, and yes, you probably could do your job on your own, but where is the fun in that? We need support, we need mentoring, but we sometimes the exact thing we need to get us through the rest of the day is a Nando's lunch. Enter: your work spouse.

*Rebecca Holman is the author of [Beta: Why Quiet Girls Can Run the World](#) by Rebecca Holman, £18.99 Hardback, Coronet*