How Your Brain Makes Friends with Robin Dunbar Transcript

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Chris Congdon: You are more likely to stay at your job if you have a best friend at work.
You are more likely to learn from a peer at work than your boss.
Relationships in the workplace are really important. But as work changes, our relationships are changing too. Today, we'll explore how with one of the world's experts on friendship.
Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better.
I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer, Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Carbauski: We are so excited to get a chance to talk to Robin Dunbar today. Robin is an anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist who specializes in human behavior at the University of Oxford. His most recent book is called Friends: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships.

CC: Our friend, Dr. Tracy Brower, will join us after we hear from Robin. Tracy is vice president of workplace insights at Steelcase. She will help us understand how the workplace can help support some of the ideas Robin has about building and maintaining relationships.

RC: And If you know anyone who needs to have a better day at work, we would appreciate it if you would share this podcast with them.

CC: Robin joined us from his home in the U.K. Welcome, Robin.

Robin Dunbar: Great pleasure to be here with you.

CC: Robin thanks so much for joining us at work better. So Robin just to get all of us grounded. You're famous for something that's called the Dunbar Number – at least famous in sociologists circles, so I was wondering if you could give us just a quick overview of what is the Dunbar Number.

RD: Okay, that's very easy. It's the number of people that you can maintain meaningful relationships with at any 1 time. So it's not somebody you've known way back when you're at Kindergarten or anything like that. It's the number of meaningful relationships you have right now and that's about 150 people. It varies according to personality and age and various other things. But it's about 150. Perhaps the range is a hundred to maybe 250.

CC: But all those relationships aren't created equal right? I can't imagine maintaining the same depth of relationship with 150 people.

RD: It would be difficult and that's true and so there are 2 major kinds of dimensions that one is family versus friends. So this set of 150 people that you have relationships with consists typically about 50/50 extended family and friends so in a way they're all the people you would make a bit of an effort to catch up with at least once a year is another way of looking at it. So it might be that you know those extended family members. You only see at Christmas or send a card at Christmas or something.

CC: Okay. Right.

RD: The other dimension is really the emotional closeness you have to the individuals and that in turn is dependent on how much time you invest in them as an individual and that creates a series of layers, a bit like the ripples on a pond where you throw stone in. So if you mention yourself as the stone the ripples on the pond created by that look like the layers in your social network and in other words, you have a very small circle very close to you but the the height of the waves the emotional closeness if you like is very high and as you go further and further out it includes more and more people but the height of the waves gets lower and lower until kind of once you're passed 150 they're pretty much died away but there are some further layers out beyond that.

CC: I see. So concentric circles would be a way for us to envision that our closest relationships are those ones in the middle and those are about.…

RD: Yes, they stretch out to include things like acquaintances. Yeah. That's the very innermost of if you like intimate relationships and that is at about one and a half and that's because half the population has 1 intimate relationship and half the population or the other half the population has 2 and those usually the women because they have not only a romantic relationship but a best friend forever which is kind of somewhat foreign territory to the guys.but out beyond that the layers have a very very strict size that there and the layers count cumulatively. So each layer includes the people who are on the layer inside it but there are those layers occur at 5 fifteen fifty hundred and fifty and that inner core layer at 5 seems to be incredibly important both socially and emotionally for you but also to have huge health benefits as well and we refer to that layer as the shoulders to cry on friends because they're the cavalry who are going to come riding over the hill when your world falls apart and they will do it without thinking. They're the only ones who will kind of drop everything and come to your aid again, you know 5 is the average again you know sort of people very perhaps between about 3 and 7 depending on how kind of maybe introverted versus extroverted they might be a 1. A dimension that's important there but you know typically it's about five people half family half friends

CC: I see so then what about those relationships on the outer rings of the circle are those important to us as well or could I just let all of those people go and just focus on the people in the middle?

RD: And abandon them more? Yeah, you would save on Christmas presents there. The answer is no, not really because this is the classic distinction that the sociologist Mark Granavetta drew between strong and weak links or strong and weak ties in your social networks and the strong ties at the center of your social network. The ones that kind of provide you with various kinds of support but the outer layers the weak ties running out to about 150 people or so are the ones that have an important function in terms of providing you with information in the contemporary world at least on sort of where the cheap deals are at the moment or who the interesting upcoming comedians are to go and see what the best films are this week and on Netflix or whatever it may be so that they provide a different each of those layers provides a different kind of benefit really and we seem to invest our time in those the people in those layers. Roughly according to the importance of the benefits they provide so that inner core of 5 people. The shoulders of friends, they get 40% of our total social time and emotional capital. However, you want to measure it. It's a huge investment in those 5 and that amounts to something in the order of I know on average 30 minutes a day probably of your time. Of course you don't necessarily do that every day with them but some you may do whereas the people in the outer circle 150 probably get only about 20 seconds a day from you so you kind of have to pull together a large number of days over time to get a decent enough window to spend the evening with them. You know you'd probably only come up once a year or something.

CC: What I find so interesting about that – when I think about our experience and working during the pandemic, particularly when a lot of us were working from home – primarily is I felt I had my core group that I stayed closely connected with but I really missed those casual conversations with the barista at our little coffee shop at work or the lady who checks us out in the cafeteria – people that I would chat with informally and I really felt like something was missing without having those kinds of interactions. Is it typical that most people kind of feel like you need those weak ties in our lives?

RD: I think so. I think that's probably been most people's experiences during lockdown. This is interesting in the context of conversations as it were where you might have with people via Zoom or social media …is that actually the ones that worked well online with the very close ones, especially if they're a family. It seemed to work better with my family. But if you didn't have those kinds of casual acquaintances you might think of them out in the outer edges and I think people did paradoxically miss those they clearly do contribute something to your working life. They're the equivalent of casual meetings around the water cooler if we still have them in the corridor at work or something like that very often. But, those did seem to die. There's some very nice, very large scale evidence showing that during lockdown it was contacts with those casual people at work that just vanished paradoxically people spent more time on Zoom, largely pointlessly because it wasn't they weren't learning anything but they felt they had to be on Zoom so there's spending much more time in meetings than they would have done than they did in the period leading up to lockdown. But most of those meetings were the people they already knew. Well they're kind of work team work group if you like and it was the casual meetings that they were not getting those casual meetings that came about through having a face-to-face meeting with a bunch of people from another department that you'd never met before and that sort of creates some sort of relationship and that's presumably important afterwards and sort of has a life of its own and those just didn't happen.

CC: Robin, I want to shift into talking a little bit more about work relationships. But before we do that just again I want to help keep everybody kind of grounded. In addition to the Dunbar Number and these 150 relationships, you also have done work about something that you call pillars like these different factors that influence who we become friends with. Could you just talk about those a little bit?

RD: Yes, I mean this is one of the very striking things that was actually I think the first people to notice it was sociologists in fact about fifteen years ago that if you look at who people are friends with, form friendships with, it's very much tends to be people who are very similar to you so this is what's known as the homophily effect or the birds of a feather flock together effect, and it seems that effect is incredibly powerful and overwhelming in processes involved in making relationships. Now some of those homophily effects are what we might think of as endogenous – they're part of you that you can't change as it were. So there's a massively strong tendency for women's social networks. In England, consist predominantly in fact, about 75% of women's social networks are women and 75% of men's social networks are men and that number remains absolutely stable from the age of 5 to the age of 85 doesn't even budge you know.

CC: Interesting.

RD: And of course the other the other 25% who are the opposite sex are predominantly family members whom you have no choice over, you're stuck with them but given a choice we kind of seem to prefer to to make friendships with members of the same gender as, the same ethnicity as us the same age as us the same personality as us these these kind of rumble on in the background but then on lead on top of that is this cultural effect which consists – it's almost like a supermarket barcode of who you are in the community you belong to. So it's something you learn probably during your teenage years where you're learning what it is to be a member of a community and that you never quite lose and one of those features. For example, is your dialect which of course is you know, sort of, you can't get rid of it once you've learned it. Now those make up what seems to be a set of 7 dimensions or as we call them the 7 pillars of friendship. They are having the same language or better still dialect. Having grown up or come from the same geographical area, having the same hobbies and interests, having the same worldview which is a combination of your religious views, your moral views, your political views. In other words, how you think the world works and should work. Your career trajectory, which explains for example, why Lawyers have mostly lawyers as friends.

CC: How you see the world. Interesting.

RD: Because they have something in common to talk about essentially and then the last two are kind of interesting because they're a bit left field. They are having the same musical tastes and having the same sense of humor and of all those – your worldview and your musical taste turn out to be the best predictors of whether a complete stranger would make a good friend. We seem to put a lot of emphasis on it. if you don't both turn out to be led Zeppelin fans, you're away.

CC: I find that so interesting. I was thinking about that as I was getting ready for this conversation, I thought, you know, in the age of Spotify I don't even know what my musical tastes are anymore. It's just whatever playlist is good for Sunday mornings or dinner with friends. I'm like I don't know, it's all kind of jumbled up. So this is really interesting and I know we could spend a lot of time here, but I want to talk a little bit about how long it takes to create relationships or how much time we kind of invest in those but I'm curious how quickly those erode if you're not investing time in those relationships – like do they just kind of fall off or does it take a while?

RD: It rather depends. It really depends on the level of trust involved in the relationship. So basically all these relationships are underpinned by trust and what these things like Homophily effect and the 7 pillars are really doing and the amount of time you invest in somebody. Socially is providing you with a guideline to how much you can trust them. So if it's not a very strong relationship, those relationships tend to just fade away because you just stop seeing the person if they're not near you too often. That's probably characteristic of most relationships. So your kind of lifetime history really consists of little groups of people who are further and further removed from you because they go further and further back into your life history as it were and you can sort of still remember them but you kind of don't really have that we haven't seen them for a long time. You don't have that much in common with them or much interest in them. But they're there somewhere in the nether reaches of the solar system. But the ones that are much more traumatic I think are the inner relationships as we're familiar with that with the breakup of romantic relationships I suppose they tend to end catastrophically. This is true of best friends forever in the case of women. It's true if your inner circle shoulders to cry on friends if you know and it's partly because you're very tolerant of them with words they kind of betray your trust or stand you up or what have you? you're inclined to forgive them. But if they notch up too many of these failures then it just creates this catastrophic breakup where you say that's it. That's too often, I'm not talking to you again. Those relationships are extremely difficult to reconcile that they kind of end up as deathbed reconciliations. If they're going to reconcile at all. They're extremely tough.

CC: I see. Since we're talking about trust I feel like this is a good time. Let's shift and talk about relationships at work a little bit and I know this probably seems like a really obvious question. You have done a lot of research on this topic and so why does building relationships at work matter?

RD: I think the answer very simply is the world of work is a social world. At one important level in the sense that most of us work for large companies with many thousands of employees. But I suppose it's true even if you work for a very very small startup with just half a dozen people that you're spending a lot of time with them. In fact, you spend more time at work probably than you do at home – certainly on the weekdays and so you're building relationships with them. Some of them indeed do become friends outside work as a result of that and perhaps later when you've moved on so those kinds of relationships then affect how efficiently things happen at work in the sense that you're much less likely to stand people up if you know who they are and have some sort of relationship with them and if they ask you to do a favor or do their department a favor. You're much more likely than to say yep, it's maybe not convenient but glad to help you out. So those kinds of very small, casual, everyday social processes dramatically affect how well the system works and of course trust becomes very important in that whole process. If you have a breakdown in trust in a large company, that's when you end up getting trouble because people you know retreat into their departmental ghettos as it were and won't cooperate with each other won't help each other out and and so on, but there is another sense in which the world of work being social is really important and that's the effect that your social life has on your health and wellbeing particularly your mental health and wellbeing. But also even your physical health and wellbeing. So if you're in a friendly environment where it is a socially pleasurable place to be in and indeed you know when you get out of bed in the morning you can't wait to get into work to see your friends then that's going to have a knock on consequences for your mental and physical health and wellbeing in very dramatic ways. And that means less time off work. So Your employer should be excited about that. But also you know you're less likely to be suffering from depression. Depression is a result of things that happen at work. Perhaps the stresses at work or depression created by outside events because you're much less likely to suffer from those things or indeed to succumb to physical illnesses that you otherwise might be quite resistant to, just like a kind of winter flu if you like those kinds of illnesses. You're just not going to be taking so much time off work and you're going to be much more bouncy and excited about what you're doing at work. So there's a double advantage from the employer's point of view if you don't know why they don't invest huge sums of money making sure the world of work works effectively.

CC: I don't know that I get out of bed every morning and I'm so happy to go to work, but I do understand how much of a difference it makes when you're in a very collegial kind of cordial relationship. You care about the people that you work with so you make an extra effort because you don't want to hurt their work, cause them to be in a difficult situation. So that makes a lot of sense. The other thing I wanted to ask you about, we've obviously gone through a massive change in how work happens for a number of us. Not the entire workforce. But the adoption of remote work, fully remote work or hybrid work with people. Working sometimes in person in the office and sometimes from home has been a major shift in how we work. It accelerated dramatically in the course of the pandemic and so I'm curious what you think about how that phenomenon has impacted or changed our relationships?

RD: I think like everything else there've been costs and benefits or at least there are costs and benefits that we probably need to take into account both as employees and as employers. If you're running a business clearly you know not having to commute into work five days a week on the crowded subway and being jostled and hassled and so on and not having to get up so early is a great boon and you can take the kids to school and you can go to the gym at lunchtime and all these kinds of things without necessarily impacting on your work out. But in fact you might actually be more productive because you're happier and in yourself. But there are disadvantages and it's very clear that we tend to risk beginning to feel left out if we're not there when something happens. That's the great risk you run as an individual as it were, so there is a personal cost potentially that you might just get overlooked because when the managers are kind of desperately looking around for somebody to ask to take on some major new project, you know it's the person they so happen to see walking down in the corridor. Ah, that kind of jogs their mind as it were as to who might be available so there is always that risk I think much more of a risk is that it's very difficult to have creative teams if they're not working face to face with each other something about that face-to-face engagement which really seems to spark creativity and you might say okay well what about Zoom, sort of will allow us to do that and the answer is it just doesn't seem to work so well, certainly the work we've done and I think other people have done in fact, looking at how satisfied folks are with interactions they've had with their friends that you know we did their 5 best friends? Different media are very different. Face-to-face interactions come out head and shoulders above pretty much anything else. Video embedded conference type environments like Zoom do quite well, but they have lots of problems in the sense that there is a limit on the number of people we can have in a conversation together at the same time. With 4 people you get more than that 2 things happen in everyday life, it either breaks up into lots of small conversations or it becomes a lecture and so the great danger with Zoom because you can't retreat to a corner of the room and have a separate conversation is the whole event gets dominated by the 4 people with the loudest voices.

CC: Right, which isn't necessarily great for creativity.

RD: And everybody else sort of disappears off into their posts and their email – what's going on outside the window. So it is kind of good. There are clearly lots of advantages to it but there are these penalties and I think it has to be managed very clearly and I think the other big downside is simply that some of us can do it and some of us can't just by the nature of our jobs and the people that have to be there day in day out – the people that work security at the door.

CC: That's right – manufacturing.

RD: Or the receptionist at the desk; nurses; teachers, all these sorts of people – the person who makes the sandwiches in the cafeteria, they have to be there. You're in danger of creating a two-class society and of those who have and those who have not as it were, and can go and sit at home and work and I think that's a big risk. It flags up alarm bells for me about jealousy – is that the right word – within the organization.

CC: Yeah, well, equity right?

RD: About equity. Exactly about equity.

CC: So, Robin, I want to go back. We've talked about the time that it takes to build relationships. So what would you say that we've learned overall about how often we need to be together? How it's more than just a need to be together, but making sure you've got some quality time. What advice would you give us on that one?

RD: At the end of the day, the problem is that relationships are very expensive to build. They're also very serendipitous. You can't make people be friends. The best you can do is provide the opportunity, provide the environment in which they do it. It's interesting if you reflect back on what a lot of the big employers in the early part of the twentieth century how they thought about this so you know we're talking about the unilevers and the marshes and you know the railways and they all had clubs on the factory site for their people – tennis clubs, social clubs – where the workforce could gather and just socialize with each other after work because – and sometimes they actually said this – an efficient workforce is a happy workforce. You've got to provide the facilities which make your workforce socially engaged with each other not completely sort of going off outside the factory estate as it were for their social. We've lost that. It kind of all disappeared in the 50's for various reasons which we needn't detain us. But that's kind of all gone and probably people wouldn't want to work tennis clubs anymore these days, but I think what we have to ask is are there other ways of doing this that would have the same function? Would providing this context in which people could meet up on a kind of casual basis and build unexpected serendipitous friendships with each other across the various departments of the building? Some organizations have made big efforts and in this case, I know in Silicon Valley some of the big IT companies there have regular Wednesday after work beer and hamburger events just to allow people to meet. We talk about in our book because one of my co-authors was there and part of it was what SABMiller – the big brewing giant SABMiller – what they did was at the entrance of every single factory of theirs and administrative building as it were there was a pub (they made beer after all) so they had a microbrewery there and a little nice social environment.

CC: And that was the thing – you'd stop and have a drink with your …

RD: Yes! Yeah, people sometimes sit for a half an hour or so and now you stop by and have a drink and the Facebook groups that were set up out of these after hour work beers or lemonades or whatever people chose – some of those Facebook groups are still going 20 years later it's just amazing how you know the friendships that were built up out of them.

CC: Interesting.

RD: Here's some ways in which it can be done which are probably more suitable to the kind of modern environment. But I think we should take a note of how the old guys worked and how they got their companies as big as they became and figure out how we might do it in today's world.

CC: I think that's a helpful thing for leaders of organizations to be thinking about – making those – as you said – you can't make somebody be a friend but you could at least create the conditions in which somebody is more likely to be able to interact and inform those kinds of relationships. It's interesting Robin because in the UK in your country and here in the U.S. and my colleagues in Canada – we're the ones that are most leading in this remote hybrid work. The situation in other parts of the world, it's not being adopted at the same rate at all. I just find that interesting, culturally; the differences in these English speaking countries – Australia is another one that has this strong tendency to adopt remote or hybrid work. I'm just curious what you think about that?

RD: Yeah, that is interesting. Actually, to some extent, all of us English speaking ones and maybe particularly the north, in addition the North Europeans, in a way, we're a bit more individualistic than some of these other Southern Hemisphere countries who are a bit more community oriented if you like – collectivist? Yeah, maybe that's a part and parcel of the story. Maybe, but you worry a little bit about the effect that that might have. I'm always reminded of the Japanese habit of having collective workforce gymnastics every morning, which they did nationally. The state radio played 15 minutes of move and groove music and everybody stood between their desks – and of course we used to laugh over in the west. We used to laugh at this and say it was typical of the Japanese. You know, maybe they could do an extra 15 minutes of work every day. I'm afraid my answer to that is why do you think they were so successful building radios and building cars because their workforce just had this engagement with each other and felt enormous loyalty to the companies they worked for. Now the great test of course is they stopped doing this about ten years ago, and what's happened to the Japanese economy since?

CC: It's an interesting point that maybe we all need to – whether we sing together or dance and exercise together – but the more that we do some things together the better that is.Robin I know I could talk to you for hours, and I'm just so grateful that you were able to take the time because I know you're very busy between writing and teaching and everything, but thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you.

RD: Oh, it's a great pleasure to be with you.

CC: I am very excited to have my friend Tracy Brower, who is the Vice president of workplace insights at steelcase join me again. Tracy is the author of "The Secrets to Happiness at Work" as well as regular contributor to Forbes and fast company and tracy also helped hook us up with this interview with Robin Dunbar and I got to say she's a little bit of a geek when it comes to talking about sociologists like Robin, so I know that she was absolutely the right person to talk about this and also because she wrote an article for forbes called "new study, making friends is hard but work can help." Thanks for talking about this with me tracy.

Tracy Brower: Thanks for having me. Really appreciate it.

CC: I've been dying to talk to you about this because I know how much you respect and admire Robin, and how much you value his work. One of the things he talks about that just makes sense to me is that relationships are expensive to build. Not monetarily, but they take time to cultivate a relationship. You can't make people be friends, it just kind of has to happen. You wrote about research that says making friends at work is one of the most important places where as adults we make friends compared to school or college, why do you think that is?

TB: I've been really thinking deeply about this because the role of work is so important to us now. I think there are 3 reasons work is especially important in making friends. One is the continuity factor. You work with people over time even if we switch jobs more frequently, you still get to work with people over time. Number two, you get to share both tasks and relationships – we roll up our sleeves, we do the thing together, we solve the problem or accomplish the project, but we also run into each other and have coffee and talk about our weekends– so you have both the task and relationship. Another thing about work is you get that ebb and flow, you get the ups and downs with people. Maybe one day we're at the top of our game but then tomorrow you seem a little bit down, or I do, and you get to check in on each other with those variations. Those are three reasons work is a really great nexus for making friends or at least being friendly with colleagues.

CC: And I still have to thank you for those great restaurant recommendations in Madison. This is the advantage of having work friends, right, but we're also doing work together as well. I wonder if we want to try to help people in our organization build those kinds of relationships, if we're leaders in an organization, how can we help curate that for people?

TB: This was a great part of your conversation with Robin – creating the condition for those things to happen. There are lots, but I'll point to two. Leaders can really help emphasize shared and common goals across departments and team goals. That shared sense of goals tends to drive relationships because now we have something in common– that common ground we're seaking. Another thing, I think we focus on social stuff – and that can be great – but actually research shows even more significant bonding happens over tasks. So what leaders can do is put people together on a task or a project where we have to put our skills together, and combine our perspectives and think together to solve a problem. Those shared tasks are another really great leverage point and we develop relationships through those because we learn about each other, have side conversations and appreciate each others' strengths we're bringing to the table.

CC: Right and we feel a sense of bonding when we're going through something difficult together.

TB: Yeah, absolutely, that's a primary source of bonding. We don't necessarily want to manufacture tough times. I mean, work can be stressful and it's pretty normal to have ups and downs and when we go through those together it's actually a really big deal.

CC: Well, this makes me feel better because I'm really bad at party planning and those social things, so at least I'm helping my team if we're creating circumstances where we all have to work together on something.

TB: I love it. You're so right.

CC: Thanks for that. So, another thing I was really intrigued with Robin, in this conversation, is with creativity and whether we can achieve that better face to face interaction and how we deal with the hybrid world we're living in and people in different locations. I'm wondering what you think about those face to face interactions that still are tough to replicate online.

TB: Part of it is neurologically. We tend to want to sync up with people. We do postural echoing, mirroring – you lean forward and so do I. I nod my head and so do you. That syncing up is harder to do virtually even on camera together – that's part of it. We have this instinct to sync up, and that's powerful in building relationships. The other thing is we get validated through non verbals even to a greater extent than we think. So, if we're in a meeting together and you move forward when I'm speaking, or I give a nod when you're speaking – and that tends to validate and give us a sense of recognition and value in terms of our own sense of ourselves and accomplishments and contributions. The other thing I think is a really big deal is the unexpected. You and Robin talked about this. Like, we ran into each other and you mentioned something that triggered something in me that we could have never planned for, and that made me think of another thing over here, and that not only adds energy to our day, but adds value to our thinking and perspectives. That unexpected is part of the face to face as well. Because you can't necessarily plan for it and put a meeting on a calendar for a video call.

CC: I get that. I think we could talk about Robin for a lot more time, but I'm grateful that you came and joined me. We can pick up this conversation later.

TB: Thanks! Great for having me.

CC: Thank you for being here with us. If you enjoyed this conversation – share this podcast with a friend or colleague and visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox. Rebecca, who do we have next week?

RC: Join us next week for our conversation with Jenn Lim. Jenn is founder and author of Beyond Happiness. She is also CEO of Delivering Happiness which is a company she founded with Tony Hsieh, the late CEO of Zappos. She shares her "Greenhouse Model" for the workplace – it's an idea she says leads to growth, purpose and business success. It's a great way to think about the workplace. We hope you join us.

Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.

CREDITS

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