



# **Exploring peer co-worker interpersonal relationships among employees within selected South African organisations**

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Mini-dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree *Masters of Commerce in Industrial Psychology* at the North West University

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## FOR THE READER'S ATTENTION

The reader is reminded of the following:

- The study on which this mini-dissertation reports, followed the prescribed format of the Publication Manual (6th edition) of the American Psychological Association (APA) as a framework for the editorial style and references. This practice corresponds with the policy requiring that all scientific documents must employ the APA style as from January 1999, as stipulated by the Programme in Industrial Psychology of the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus).
- The study is submitted by using the structure of a research article. The specified editorial style is used as set out by the *South African Journal of Industrial Psychology* (which is mainly in agreement with the APA style), but the constructing tables were designed following the APA framework and guidelines.
- Each chapter of this mini-dissertation has its own reference list.

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## **DECLARATION BY RESEARCHER**

I, Ewald Rossouw, hereby declare that “Exploring peer co-worker interpersonal relationships among employees in selected South African organisations” is my own work and that the views and opinions expressed in this study are those of the author and relevant literature references as shown in the references.

I further declare that the content of this research will not be submitted for any other qualification at any other tertiary institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Rossouw', with a large, stylized initial 'R'.

**EWALD ROSSOUW**

**NOVEMBER 2017**

## DECLARATION BY LANGUAGE EDITOR



17 November 2017

I, **Ms Cecilia van der Walt**, hereby confirm that I took care of the editing of the mini-dissertation of **Mr Ewald Rossouw** titled *Exploring peer co-worker interpersonal relationships among employees within selected South African organisations.*

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## SUMMARY

**Title:** Exploring peer co-worker interpersonal relationships among employees within selected South African organisations.

**Keywords:** Peer co-worker; interpersonal relationships; positive relationships; negative relationships; organisational outcomes; selected South African organisations

These last few years have seen numerous changes occurring in South African organisations. Never before was the importance of working together emphasised such as it is today. As jobs became more interconnected and teamwork has become non-negotiable, the demand for functional, effective relationships in the workplace has increased. Employees are spending copious amounts of time in the workplace and with fellow co-workers. These interactions have many important implications for individuals as well as for the organisation. The absence of healthy, positive co-worker relationships has many negative consequences for organisations and prohibits employees and organisations to reach their ultimate objectives and successes. It therefore seems that peer co-worker interpersonal relationships are an important topic to research.

The objective of this study was to explore how peer co-worker interpersonal relationships in the workplace influence organisational outcomes. This research study was of a qualitative nature, within the social constructivism paradigm. A phenomenological approach was further employed to achieve the objectives of this research study. Purposive sampling was used in this research study, together with a multiple-case study strategy. Employees who were involved in this study ( $N=18$ ) were from selected South African organisations. These organisations formed part of the Food & Beverages industry, as well as the Information Technology and Services industry. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to collect data while data analysis was accomplished by utilising thematic analysis.

The results of this research study indicated that employees within selected South African organisations experience relationships differently and that different meanings are attached to peer co-worker interpersonal relationships. Results indicated that employees experience both negative and positive relationships with their peers. Participants provided detailed

descriptions of their peer co-worker relationships and also why they would describe a certain relationship as positive or negative. Employees also provided insightful answers to those aspects they find crucial in any positive relationship. Results indicated that aspects such as attentive listening, instrumental support, friendliness, honesty, respect and trust are imperative for any relationship that hopes to function optimally.

The results of this study also indicated that peer co-worker relationships have a definite influence on employees' personal work performance. When employees struggle to develop positive and uplifting relationships with their peers, their work performance seems to decrease. However, when meaningful relationships are evident in the workplace, employees find it easier to perform their work and the desire to grow and move forward is prevalent. The organisation is a social platform and collaboration is therefore needed in order to reach certain objectives. This research study therefore provides results that specify the influence peer co-worker relationships have on organisational outcomes and the ultimate success of the organisation. Participants agreed that the influence their co-worker relationships have on the organisation is major. Poor relationships can have a negative influence on important outcomes such as turnover intentions, employee engagement and morale. On the other hand, employees feel that healthy workplace relationships result in positive organisational outcomes.

Recommendations were also made with regard to future research and practice. Managers employed in organisations should raise awareness concerning the influence co-worker relationships have on the organisation. Organisational cultures should be developed that invite healthy connections and managers should incorporate productive interventions that will foster meaningful relationships between employees. Employees should be trained on the important aspects necessary for relationships to function. Organisations should also provide co-workers with more opportunities to interact informally with one another and interactions outside of the workplace should also be promoted.

## OPSOMMING

**Titel:** Onderzoek na eweknie-medewerker interpersoonlike verhoudings tussen werknemers binne geselekteerde Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies

**Sleutelwoorde:** Eweknie medewerkers; interpersoonlike verhoudings, positiewe verhoudings, negatiewe verhoudings, organisatoriese uitkomst; geselekteerde Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies

Die afgelope paar jaar het talle veranderinge in Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies voorgekom. Nog nooit vantevore is die belangrikheid daarvan om saam te werk so beklemtoon soos dit tans die geval is nie. Namate poste meer inter-verwant en spanwerk nie-onderhandelbaar geword het, het die vraag na funksionele, effektiewe verhoudings in die werkplek toegeneem. Werknemers bestee omvangryke hoeveelhede tyd in die werkplek en met medewerkers. Hierdie interaksies hou belangrike implikasies in vir individue asook vir die organisasie. Die afwesigheid van gesonde, positiewe medewerker-verhoudings hou vir die organisasie talle negatiewe gevolge in en verhoed werknemers en organisasies om hul eind-doelwitte en suksesse te behaal. Dit blyk dus dat eweknie-medewerker interpersoonlike verhoudings 'n belangrike onderwerp is om na te vors.

Die doel van hierdie studie was om ondersoek in te stel na hoe eweknie-medewerkers se interpersoonlike verhoudings in die werkplek organisasieuitkomst beïnvloed. Hierdie navorsingstudie was van 'n kwalitatiewe aard, binne die sosiale konstruktivisme-paradigma. 'n Fenomenologiese benadering is verder gevolg om die doelwitte van hierdie navorsingstudie te bereik. Doelbewuste steekproefneming is in hierdie navorsing gebruik, gepaard met 'n multi-gevalliestudie-strategie. Werknemers wat by hierdie studie betrokke was ( $N=8$ ) was van geselekteerde Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies. Hierdie organisasies het deel uitgemaak van die Voedsel- en Dranknywerheid, asook die Inligtingstegnologie- en Dienstenywerheid. Semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude is gevoer om data in te samel terwyl data-analise uitgevoer is deur gebruik te maak van tematiese analise.

Die resultate van hierdie navorsingstudie het aangedui dat werknemers binne geselekteerde Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies verhoudings verskillend ervaar en verskillende betekenis aan

eweknie-medewerker interpersoonlike verhoudings geheg word. Resultate toon aan dat werknemers beide negatiewe en positiewe verhoudings met hul eweknieë ervaar. Deelnemers het detail-beskrywings van hul eweknie- medewerker-verhoudings gegee en ook waarom hulle 'n bepaalde verhouding as positief of negatief sou beskou. Werknemers het ook insiggewende antwoorde op hierdie aspekte gegee wat hulle as van kritieke belang in enige positiewe verhouding vind. Resultate het ook aangedui dat aspekte soos aandagtige luister, instrumentele ondersteuning, vriendelikheid, eerlikheid, respek en vertroue gebiedend noodsaaklik is vir enige verhouding wat hoop om optimaal te funksioneer

Die resultate van hierdie studie het ook aangedui dat eweknie-medewerker-verhoudings 'n definitiewe invloed op werknemers se persoonlike werkprestasie uitoefen. Wanneer werknemers spartel om positiewe en opheffende verhoudings met hul eweknieë op te bou, blyk hul werkspresnasie af te neem. Wanneer betekenisvolle verhoudings egter in die werkplek heers, vind werknemers dit maklik om hul werk te verrig en die begeerte om te groei en vorentoe te werk heers dan. Die organisasie is 'n sosiale platform en samewerking is dus nodig om bepaalde doelwitte te bereik. Hierdie navorsingstudie lewer dus resultate wat die invloed wat eweknie-medewerker verhoudings op organisatoriese uitkomst en die uiteindelijke sukses van die organisasie het, spesifiseer. Deelnemers het saamgestem dat die invloed wat hul medewerker-verhoudings op die organisasie uitoefen ernstig is. Swak verhoudings kan 'n negatiewe invloed op belangrike uitkomst soos omkeervoornemens, werknemer, werknemer-betrokkenheid en moreel uitoefen. Aan die ander kant voel werknemers dat gesonde werkplek-verhouding uitloop op positiewe organisatoriese uitkomst.

Aanbevelings is ook gemaak met betrekking tot toekomstige navorsing en praktyk. Bestuurders wat in organisasies werksaam is, behoort bewustheid op te skerp rakende die invloed wat medewerker-verhouding op die organisasie het. Organisatoriese kulture behoort ontwikkel te word wat gesonde verbintenisse aanmoedig en bestuurders behoort produktiewe intervensies te inkorporeer wat betekenisvolle verhoudings tussen werknemers kweek. Werknemers behoort in die belangrike aspekte opgelei te word wat benodig word vir verhoudings om te funksioneer. Organisasies behoort ook medewerkers met meer geleenthede te voorsien om informeel interaktief met mekaar te verkeer en interaksies buite die werkplek behoort ook bevorder te word.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

# INTRODUCTION

This mini-dissertation focused on exploring peer co-worker interpersonal relationships among employees within selected South African organisations. The following chapter (Chapter 1) discusses the problem statement, research objectives, research approach and research design. A chapter summary is also included.

## 1.1 Problem statement

“Relationships are a key part of the fabric of organizational life” (De Tormes Eby & Allen, 2012, p. 3). Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) state that relationships are embedded in the nature of work itself and it plays a significant role in the development of a worthwhile and significant work life. For people to understand working as a relational act, they have to realise that every decision, experience and interaction with the world of work is understood, affected and designed by relationships (Blustein, 2011). Reis, Collins, and Berscheid (2000) agree that interpersonal relationships form the foundation as well as the theme of life, and these aspects apply to both in and outside the workplace (De Tormes Eby & Allen 2012). The need to belong and form an attachment to others does not disappear upon entrance into an organisation. Indeed, it is said that the need for interpersonal associations seems to be necessary for upholding physical and psychological well-being across a person’s lifespan, including life at work (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009).

Employee relationships have become increasingly important in today’s organisations where a collaborative association exists between service and knowledge-based work (Dumas, Phillips, & Rothbard, 2013). Griffin, Stoverink, and Gardner (2012) contemplate that organisations have, ever since their origin, encompassed a social nature. However, during these last few decades, drastic changes have occurred in the structures of organisations. These changes caused an increase in the interconnectedness of jobs within organisations, strengthening the social fabric of organisations. It is also true that organisations are structuring work increasingly more around teams and this further puts co-workers in a position where interconnectivity is essential for optimal functioning (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010) For this reason, workplace relationships are very important. Griffin et al. (2012) mention that due to this movement towards interaction a growing body of research on co-worker social exchanges has emerged. Researchers indicated that co-worker relationships do influence essential organisational outcomes such as workgroup performance, organisational citizenship behaviour, attendance and turnover rates (Iverson & Roy, 1994;

Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000; Price, Harrison, Gavin, & Florey, 2002; Sanders & Nauta 2004).

Sias (2009) also examined relationships in the workplace and states that an individual with a full-time job will most likely spend an equal amount of time, or even more, with co-workers than with family and friends. Even after normal working hours, people talk and think about work. What we do for a living, the people we work with and the relationships we build in the workplace define us to a large extent (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Grant and Parker (2009) elaborate by saying that it makes sense to investigate and study workplace relationships because they are strong drivers of the attitudes and behaviours employees maintain.

The term *workplace relationship* is defined by Sias (2009) as all the interpersonal relationships individuals engage in when they perform their work, including supervisor-subordinate relationships, peer-co-worker relationships, colleagues that become friends, romantic relationships, and client relationships. For purposes of this research, only co-worker relationships or else known as employee or peer relationships will be investigated. However, Sias (2009) argues that the term *co-worker* may refer to any individual a person is working with, although it is generally assumed to refer to relationships among peer employees. Hence, in this study, the researcher will use the terms *co-worker relationships* and *peer relationships* interchangeably as it is most often regarded as being similar, referring to employees on the same hierarchical level in an organisation. Sias, Krone, and Jablin (2002) argue that interpersonal relationships are formed by repeated, patterned interaction over a period of time, unlike acquaintances that do not have that much interaction with one another. Sias (2009) further supports the idea that relationships are lasting, which is not always the case with acquaintances. Interpersonal relationships are also unique in contrast to a mere acquaintance, since those involved experience feelings of connectedness.

The mainstream bulk of work done, happens to fall within the context of co-worker relationships (Sias, 2009). Peer co-worker relationships indicate the existing relationships between employees at the same hierarchical level who possess no formal authority over one another other (Sias, 2009). The compilation and structure of organisations have undergone many changes. Several recent trends in organisations and the job, for instance, flatter organisational structures, more and more work that is being done in teams and recurring lateral interactions have only amplified the importance of co-workers (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) continue by arguing that co-workers have a significant influence on employees above and beyond the influence supervisors exert. It is therefore not strange that Khan (2007) remarked that co-workers shape the way in which



people think, the way they experience emotions, and their actions. It thus comes as no surprise that the quality and efficiency of these relationships impact the quality and efficiency of employees' experiences and the organisation at large (Sias, 2009). Therefore, the importance of focusing on co-worker relationships is evident.

Authors such as Ferris et al. (2009) indicated that workplace relationships in general refer to patterns of interactions between two members, occasionally referred to as parties, ranging from individuals or groups to organisations with the objective to reach some common goal. Past researchers used the term mutuality, when referring to a reciprocal relationship between two parties (Xerri, 2013). Dabos and Rousseau (2004) explain that in an organisational context, reciprocity indicates the existence of cooperation and exchange between employees or between employees and the organisation. Xerri (2013) gives a more detailed description when he contemplates that the theory of reciprocity is based on the hypothesis that if a good deed is done by one party to another, at some point the beneficiary of the good deed will return a good deed. These mutually dependent interactions have the ability to produce high-quality relationships in the workplace if they are performed under the correct circumstances (Xerri, 2013).

A well-known theory that exists to describe or better understand the nature and essence of relationships is the Social Exchange Theory (SET). Social behaviour is defined as “an exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons” (Homans, 1961, p. 13). Blau (1964) continues to state that exchanges in the same organisation “serve sometimes to cement peer relations” (p. 89), and at other occasions it can bring about distinction in status. Furthermore, social exchange refers to the actions individuals perform voluntarily, which are motivated by the returns these actions are expected to bring about, and in essence do bring from others (Blau, 1964). Emerson (1976) critiqued the SET by stating that it is not at all a theory but a frame of reference within which multiple theories can speak to one another – either by supporting or contradicting. Modern scholars, for instance Colquitt et al. (2013), agree with the importance of SET by explaining how it can be regarded as a multidisciplinary paradigm that explains how different resources can be exchanged by following certain rules and how these exchanges have the ability to create quality relationships.

Ragins and Dutton (2007) mention that quality is inherently part of workplace relationships, similar to any other type of relationship. When workplace relationships are optimal, it can create a sense of enrichment, vitality and learning that assists individuals, groups and organisations in their need to grow and flourish. On the other hand, when workplace relationships are functioning at their worst, it

can cause a toxic environment, filled with pain, depletion and dysfunctional dynamics (Ragins & Dutton, 2007). Adding to what these researchers said, Carmeli, Brueller, and Dutton (2009) argue that within the changing environment of the workplace, quality relationships are becoming invaluable, but also more challenging to form.

Negative workplace relationships have many implications for organisations and the people within organisations. Venkataramani, Labianca, and Grosser (2013) state that if a situation occurs in which co-workers dislike and/or avoid a certain employee, they might act rudely towards that employee; spread gossip, interrupt their workflow and withhold a helping hand. Negative exchanges between co-workers are generally characterised by adverse, insolent and harmful behaviour (Griffin et al., 2012). Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) found that antagonistic co-worker interactions relate negatively to job satisfaction, organisational commitment and job performance. On the other hand, it was found that it is positively related to higher absenteeism rates, intention to quit the organisation, turnover rates and counterproductive behaviours related to individuals' work. Griffen et al. (2012) highlights the idea that a negative co-worker relationship ends in an injury to one or more of the parties. Evidently, research done by Marshall, Michaels, and Mulki (2007) showed that employees who experienced problems in their relationships with their co-workers with whom they share locations are more prone to experience job stress, burnout and less job satisfaction and commitment. Sadly, it was noted in a research study that despite the buffering effect positive relationships and networks have, many employees reported that they do not have a strong bond with fellow workers (Dahlin, Kelly, & Moen, 2008). It is interesting to see that Fay and Kline (2011) also refer to co-worker relationships as having a buffering effect.

Colbert, Bono, and Purvanova (2016) found that relationships at work serve many functions. These functions include support with various tasks, growth in career paths, emotional support, personal development and friendships. The afore-said researchers further support the idea that workplace relationships fulfil a critical role in the improvement of employee flourishing. A study done by Venkataramani et al. (2013) indicated that employees who are content with the quality of the relationships in the workplace show higher attachment levels to the organisation. Employee relationships are regarded as important by many researchers. Lee and Kim (2016) found in their study that firms with positive employee relationships tend to demonstrate considerably higher levels of firm value than organisations whose employees demonstrated a poor fit with one another. Their study focused on a specific area of Corporate Social Responsibility, within the framework of stakeholder relationships, namely employee relationships, since such relationships hold the potential of influencing firm value. Lee and Kim (2016) further powerfully indicated that good employee

relationships in an organisation indisputably lead to a more attractive organisation – not only for its existing workforce but almost more importantly for prospective candidates who will be more willing to commit themselves to the performance of the organisation.

Embedded in further research, lies the notion that social interaction with co-workers is a job aspect that carries much weight (Dur & Sol, 2010). Multiple studies proved that receiving affective support from co-workers and having satisfying interpersonal relationships at work are positively related to job satisfaction, job involvement and organisational commitment and are negatively associated with employee stress and absenteeism (Ducharme & Martin, 2000; Wagner & Harter, 2006). It is due to these reasons that Dur and Sol (2010) argue that managers bear a responsibility of ensuring that high-quality co-worker relationships are created and maintained. In a study done by Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) they found that co-worker support predicted job involvement more than leader support. They also indicated that support from one's co-workers can lead to reduced levels of role ambiguity – clarity and conflict. These researchers further found a positive connection between co-worker support and job satisfaction, job involvement and organisational commitment. Concluding their article, Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) state that co-workers in essence make the workplace by providing a rich source of assistance and information which is then related to various individual and organisational outcomes such as were mentioned above.

The extent to which workplace relationships impact and influence the workplace was already emphasised in earlier research. Schneider (1987) commented in his research that it is the people working in the organisation that are responsible for defining the look and the feel of the organisation. He continues to state that if the people act in such a manner that conflict is an inevitable outcome of workplace relationships, it constitutes a hostile and stressful work climate. Many years later, in a more recent study, Nolan and Küpers (2009) made the insightful remark that the organisational climate can act as either a facilitator or an inhibitor of work relationships. These researchers are of the opinion that the climate in the organisation is one of the main influencing forces, affecting workplace relationships, since an interplay exists between these two constructs. This interplay is beautifully illuminated when they argue that the climate is a force that influences employees' perceptions of one another as well as the relationships that exist between them, coupled with the fact that the climate is, in turn, to some extent created by the depth and quality of the peer relationships within the organisation. In conclusion, they state that the nature of the prevailing workplace relationships establishes the mood of the climate in the organisation (Nolan & Küpers, 2009).

In conclusion it is evident throughout literature, as can be seen above, that the concept *workplace relationships* as a phenomenon is crucial for understanding and evaluating organisations. It is important to understand the depth and different viewpoints of workplace relationships. As Fritz and Omdahl (2006) noted, research on negative workplace relationships and their detrimental effect on organisational outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment and cynicism would lead to a better understanding of the interpersonal dynamics of the workplace and propose solutions on how to create healthier organisations and in turn, more productive organisations. It is no less important, as was seen in the literature, to investigate positive workplace relationships, as the impact it has on the organisation is stronger than one might think. Therefore, the aim of this study is to further explore the nature and depth of peer relationships qualitatively, in a South African context, in which many diverse workforces exist, not only to establish what is constituted as negative or positive relationships, but also what individuals regard as antecedents of positive and negative relationships and which aspects in a workplace relationship is necessary to nurture and sustain good connections with co-workers. Exploring how these aspects and realities link with and inevitably lead to certain essential organisational outcomes is important.

Fritz (2014) remarked that most research on workplace relationships has been of a quantitative nature and that there are areas still in need of further qualitative investigation. She continues by stating that qualitative studies on workplace relationships can provide insight into how the meaning of work and workplace relationships is informally co-constructed with others. Manning and Kunkel (2014) point out that it is possible for qualitative research to change the way people think about their experiences. These researchers have extended the argument of Tracy and Craig (2010) which states that through qualitative research, we reflect more readily on our behaviour. Fritz (2014) emphasises the need for future studies by saying that what we already know and what knowledge we are yet to embrace concerning qualitative studies regarding workplace relationships can open the door to thriving in workplace settings. She concludes by stating that these qualitative studies of workplace relationships provide us and the larger public with resources to think and act wisely at work. For these reasons, and for purposes of reaching these above-mentioned objectives, the researcher conducted a qualitative research study on workplace relationships.

## **1.2 Research questions**

- How are peer co-worker interpersonal relationships conceptualised according to literature?
- How do employees within selected South African organisations experience peer co-worker interpersonal relationships?

- What aspects contribute to effective peer co-worker interpersonal relationships according to employees within selected South African organisations?
- What is the influence of peer co-worker interpersonal relationships on work performance according to employees within selected South African organisations?
- What is the influence of peer co-worker interpersonal relationships on organisational outcomes according to employees within selected South African organisations?
- What further recommendations can be made for future research and practice?

### **1.3 Expected contribution of the study**

#### **For the organisation**

The organisation was made aware of the rigorous influence of relationships in the workplace and how it has the ability to steer the direction in which the organisation is heading. Insight was provided into how interpersonal workplace relationships link with the most important organisational outcomes. Organisations were provided with information that might help them set the scene and develop a climate in which positive workplace relationships can be nurtured and negative relationships can be demolished so as to enable organisations to function optimally and reach their objectives.

#### **For the individual**

This study created awareness among South African employees regarding the rich dynamics of interpersonal relationships in the workplace and it also gave employees a better understanding of the functions of relationships in the workplace. It also encouraged individuals to reflect on the essential aspects necessary for constructive workplace relationships and the influence thereof on their employing organisation.

#### **For literature**

This research study provided qualitative answers regarding interpersonal peer co-worker workplace relationships in a South African context. It provided Industrial Psychology literature with insight from the personal viewpoint of South African employees. Literature was broadened by answers such as how individual employees describe and experience their peer co-worker relationships and how those relationships influence their work life and what aspects build or break down relationships

linked to employees' ability to reach organisational outcomes. It also provided the literature with another stepping stone in understanding the rich vastness of workplace relationships.

## **1.4 Research objectives**

The research objectives were divided into a general objective and specific objectives.

### **1.4.1 General objective**

The general objective of this study was to explore peer co-worker relationships from a qualitative viewpoint and to gain personal, subjective experiences and opinions from employees within selected South African organisations on how these relationships influence organisational outcomes.

### **1.4.2 Specific objectives**

The specific objectives of this research were:

- To conceptualise peer co-worker interpersonal relationships according to literature.
- To explore the experiences of peer co-worker interpersonal relationships according to employees within selected South African organisations.
- To explore what aspects contribute to effective peer co-worker interpersonal relationships according to employees within selected South African organisations.
- To explore what the influence of peer co-worker interpersonal relationships is on work performance according to employees within selected South African organisations.
- To explore what the influence of peer co-worker interpersonal relationships is on organisational outcomes according to employees within selected South African organisations.
- To make further recommendations for future research and practice.

## **1.5 Research design**

### **1.5.1 Research approach**

This research study was defined by an explorative and descriptive nature. Hence a qualitative research method was utilised. Maxwell (2013) defines qualitative research as a study, intended to aid the researcher in understanding the meanings and subjective perspectives of the research participants; also to comprehend how the participants' perspectives are shaped by the physical, social and cultural contexts within which they operate and finally the process of maintaining or adapting these phenomena and relationships. Qualitative studies usually aim for depth rather than the quantity of understanding (Henning, Smit, & Van Rensburg, 2004). Taking into consideration

the personal and interpersonal nature of this study, a qualitative research approach is most effective. Leedy and Ormrod (2013) describe the intensity of qualitative research in their book when they state that qualitative research focuses on phenomena that occur in the natural, real-world setting. Secondly, the objective is to capture and observe the complex nature of those phenomena. They continue to discuss how qualitative researchers are aware of the many layers and facets regarding their topics and how it should be represented in all its splendour. Workplace relationships fall within this sphere due to its complex nature and various elements.

The social constructivism paradigm was also utilised in this research study. In social constructivism the assumption exists that reality should be interpreted by taking into consideration the meaning participants attach to their own life world (Fouché & Schurink, 2011). Individuals want to understand the world they live and work in and they attach subjective meanings to their experiences (Creswell, 2009). People experience relationships in many different ways and the meaning attached to each relationship also differs. In the work context, every employee will focus on a unique part in their relationship with others and different relational factors and ingredients might be more important for some than for others – thus the reason for social constructivism to be appropriate for this study. Tubey, Rotich, and Bengat (2015) conclude by saying that researchers within this paradigm study real-world situations as they unfold naturally.

A phenomenological approach was found to be relevant to this research study. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to studying human experiences and is based on the assumption that humans view experiences inherently as subjective and that these experiences are influenced and determined by the environment in which individuals find themselves (Quinlan, Babin, Carr, Griffin, & Zikmund, 2015). Relationships are, for that matter, subjective experiences. Each individual employee will experience positive and negative relationships differently from the next person. These workplace relationships are also determined to a great extent by the organisational context in which employees fulfil their duties. For these reasons a phenomenological approach was found to be exceptionally relevant.

### **1.5.2 Research strategy**

The research strategy employed in this study was a multiple-case study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define a case study as an in-depth explanation of, and investigation into a bounded system. The closeness of the case study strategy is aimed at generating a deep comprehension of and appreciation for the case under study with the purpose of gaining a new perspective on real-world behaviour and the meaning thereof (Yin, 2012). Yin (2012) also states that a case usually refers to a

bounded entity, for instance a person or an organisation. In this research study the multiple cases refer to multiple organisations. Multiple-case design is thought of to be slightly more complex than a single-case design but greater assurance can be achieved from the data (Yin, 2012). In this research study potential organisations that could be accessed included a large manufacturing organisation within the Food & Beverages industry and an organisation in the Information Technology and Services industry, which develops Human Capital Management Software Solutions.

When researchers focus on social processes they are mostly interested in people's thoughts, values, expectations, motives, opinions, experiences, attitudes and behaviours. Most important are the differences that occur between these constructs for each individual. The case study was highly relevant, seeing that the researcher's aim was to discover the world as it is viewed by the participants within the system and to search for answers to why these views differ. Another focal point of every case study is the attention that all participants' stories receive. For the researcher in this study, the story (also known as account) of every individual was regarded as important and useful for obtaining a better understanding (Swanborn, 2010).

By studying workplace relationships, the experiences, values, attitudes, opinions and behaviours of employees were the main aspects being researched; therefore, making the case study strategy a perfect match.

## **1.6 Research method**

### **1.6.1 Literature review**

A thorough literature overview was conducted in order to extensively explore and research the different constructs of this study. The key constructs utilised in this study include relationships, workplace relationships, co-worker relationships, interpersonal relationships and organisational outcomes. The sources used include library resources such as databases, scientific and peer-reviewed articles and textbooks. Specific databases used in this study included EBSCO host, GoogleScholar and SAePublications. Journals that were consulted to a great extent included the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research* and the *Journal of Management*.

### **1.6.2 Research setting**

In this research study, possible organisations that were accessed included a large manufacturing organisation within the Food & Beverages industry and an organisation in the Information



Technology and Services industry which develops Human Capital Management Software Solutions. Manufacturing and production are very important for any country's economy, especially within the Food & Beverages industry. It is a highly competitive industry in South Africa and it contributes towards the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is therefore extremely critical for these organisations to achieve optimal organisational outcomes and nurture positive workplace relationships. These organisations are responsible for putting in place various structures across the organisation that enable collaboration between workers in order to produce desired products, creating the need for well-structured constructive relationships among co-workers. The organisation which develops and implements Human Capital Management Software Solutions plays a very important role in the Human Resource realm of South Africa. The core of their solution is the Human Resource Information System, which is an electronic platform from where the company's HR can be run and organised. This is contributing heavily towards productivity and efficiency, especially in South Africa, where a large amount of manual HR admin needs to be done. It was therefore insightful to investigate how co-worker relationships affect these complex interdependent systems.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on the premises of the respective organisations to increase easy access and to ensure the convenience of all participants. The interviews were conducted in a private training room and a private office. The location was private, quiet and peaceful. The researcher provided water that was easily available to participants. Everything possible was done to create a calm and relaxed, open and informal setting so that participants were completely at ease and in no way harmed during the process.

#### **1.6.3 Entrée and establishing researcher roles**

The researcher firstly submitted the research proposal to the Ethics Committee of the specific higher education institution. Once the proposal had been admitted, clarified and accepted the researcher commenced by contacting the potential organisations so as to find a gatekeeper. The aim was to find a manager, or someone senior in the organisation, that had the authority to negotiate and assist where necessary concerning the interviews. The researcher communicated the purpose and the scope of the study in detail to the gatekeeper. The researcher provided, in writing, what was expected of the participants and also provided the manager/senior employee with a comprehensive, informed consent form. Once the researcher had been provided with potential participants, they were contacted and informed again of their responsibilities with regard to participation. The researcher then scheduled the interviews well in advance on dates that suited the participants.

The researcher fulfilled various roles during the study. The researcher at first fulfilled the role of planner. The study was organised and planned in detail – from writing the research proposal and managing the deadlines, to planning the actual collection of data. The researcher identified potential organisations within which the data collection could take place. It was the researcher's responsibility to contact a manager at each organisation and set up a meeting with him/her to briefly discuss what the research would entail and what the procedures would be that needed to be followed to successfully gather the data. The researcher also conducted the interviews; thus fulfilling the role of data collector. While fulfilling this role the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews that consisted of a framework of pre-determined questions but which also allowed for follow-up and probing questions to ensure rich and quality data. The researcher also took on the role of data transcriber by means of which the recorded interviews were captured onto an Excel spread sheet.

The researcher also fulfilled the role of data analyser. The researcher analysed the data in detail with the help of a co-coder in his field of study, who was an expert in the field. Lastly, the researcher was also the report writer – compiling the final report; providing and explaining the results of the study in a clear and reasonable manner. Throughout the entire process and while fulfilling each role, the researcher did his utmost best to remain objective.

#### **1.6.4 Research participants and sampling**

Purposive sampling was used in this research study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique, which means the odds of selecting a particular individual are unknown due to the researcher not knowing the population size or the members of the population (Strydom & Delport, 2011). Quinlan et al. (2015) state that by using purposive (also called judgemental) sampling, the researcher decides, or makes a judgement call, on the people he/she wishes to include in the sample. The sample consisted of elements that possess definite characteristics or attributes that make it possible for the researcher to explore deep meanings and really unravel the puzzles of what he/she intends to study (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003).

Potential organisations accessed for data collection included a large manufacturing organisation within the Food & Beverages industry and an organisation in the Information Technology and Services industry which develops Human Capital Management Software Solutions. Manufacturing in the Food & Beverages industry is a very important aspect in any country's economy and is a contributing factor to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is therefore extremely critical for these organisations to achieve optimal organisational outcomes and nurture positive workplace relationships. The nature of the work being done in production-oriented organisations also requires

co-workers to work together in many ways. This can include planning, designing, manufacturing, overseeing, marketing and distributing the products, which cannot be obtained without employees working together with and alongside one another. The organisation which develops and implements Human Capital Management Software Solutions plays a very important role in the Human Resource realm of South Africa. The core of their solution is the Human Resource Information System, which is an electronic platform from where the company's HR can be run and organised. This contributes heavily to productivity and efficiency, especially in South Africa where a large amount of manual HR admin needs to be done. Valuable data can be obtained due to the intriguing nature of the processes and the interconnectedness of employees designing these systems.

Participants for this research study were white-collar employees working within the selected South African organisations mentioned above. Participants interacted with peer co-workers within their working environment. White-collar workers refer to professionals whose work is knowledge intensive, non-routine and unstructured. White-collar workers were therefore more appropriate since they interact in more complex tasks, often in teams or groups. Their work is usually more connected and these workers need various inputs and contributions from co-workers. Furthermore, more complex aspects might form part of their relationships with peers and they might experience more pressure and influences due to the need for performance and important organisational outcomes. Participants were capable of participating in the interviews in either English or Afrikaans and of giving written consent for their interviews to be recorded. Participants that were willing to be interviewed and fulfilled the above-mentioned criteria were used in this study. The sample comprised ( $N=18$ ) employees working in selected South African organisations. The sample consisted of diverse employees. Sampling was governed by data saturation.

#### **1.6.5 Data collection method**

Leedy and Ormrod (2014) refer to the fact that qualitative studies rely profoundly on observations and interviews or occasionally both, as a means to collect data. Qualitative interviewing is known for being flexible and possessing the power to fully capture the voices of the participants and to extract the meaning people attach to personal experiences (Rabionet, 2011). Data was collected by conducting one-on-one interviews. A face-to-face interview lends itself to the opportunity of establishing a real sense of rapport between the researcher (in this case also the interviewer) and the interviewee. A comfortable communication channel can be established by means of which the interviewee can easily engage in the process. This process has the ability to lead to confidential, formal, open and honest conversation which is very helpful to the researcher (Quinlan et al., 2015).

The interview is referred to as a social relationship (Greeff, 2011) that provides a platform for information exchange.

For purposes of this research study, the researcher conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Semi-structured interviews are excellent for gaining a comprehensive, detail-oriented image of the beliefs and perceptions of the participants regarding a certain topic (Greeff, 2011). Rabionet (2011) maintains that by using semi-structured interviews, the researcher can narrow down some topic or specific area but still hear the participant's story. Workplace relationships is the area or topic the researcher intends to explore and the researcher is genuinely interested in the stories of each of the individuals concerning their experiences with workplace relationships and the influence it elicits on the workplace. Greeff (2011) continues by stating that with semi-structured interviews the researcher will have a set of predetermined questions as part of the agenda but that the interview will be guided rather than restrained by these questions. The researcher underwent extensive training in the art of conducting ethical, competent and safe interviews before conducting interviews during the current research study.

Qualitative researchers often base the efficiency of their sample on the principle of data saturation. Many decisions are made related to this aspect (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Fusch and Ness (2015) report that no generic recipe exists for data saturation, seeing that every study is unique. However, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) agree on some principles such as receiving no new data or themes, no more unique codes and the ability to replicate the study, while Fusch and Ness (2015) readily contemplate that the researcher cannot assume data saturation has been reached only because his/her resources are depleted, since data saturation is more about the depth of the data, than a large number of participants. Dibley (2011) also states that data needs to be rich and thick. The researcher thus took the necessary steps to ensure rich and thick data or at least to adhere to the principles concerning data saturation as discussed in literature.

The researcher briefly explained to the interviewees what the term *peer co-worker* entails, so as to ensure that interviewees experienced no ambiguity regarding the concept being researched. The definition that was provided is as follows. A peer co-worker is anyone you work with, either on similar tasks or different tasks, and has no formal authority over you.

The interview questions that were posed were the following:

- In general, how would you describe the relationships you have with your co-workers?

- What aspects would you consider important for relationships to work between co-workers?
- How do the relationships you have with your co-workers influence your work performance?
- How do the relationships you have with your co-workers influence the organisation?

These above-mentioned questions were regarded as the framework for the interview. Further questions posed were of a probing nature with the aim to explore the depth behind the participants' answers. Biographical information was obtained during the interview to be able to describe the sample population – the reason being to enable the researcher to describe the participating sample to future readers of the dissertation or future publications. The following data were obtained from the participants: gender, ethnicity, language, education level and sector employed.

#### **1.6.6 Recording of data**

As will be touched on under ethical considerations, the researcher distributed a well-constructed informed consent and confidentiality form prior to conducting the interviews. In the consent form each participant's permission was obtained to record the interview with an electronic recording device for interpretation purposes afterwards. The electronic recording device was placed in such a manner on the table that it picked up the sound perfectly but by no means distracted the participant or caused any discomfort or resistance.

Afterwards, the recordings were captured onto a Microsoft Excel spread sheet for theme extraction. No names were connected to the participant – a coding system was utilised by the researcher instead to ensure that the recording and the correct participant matched. The recordings were kept safe and not where it can be openly detected by anyone else. After the recordings had been captured onto the Excel spread sheet it was deleted from the electronic recording device. The Excel sheet with the transcribed data was protected by a password and after transcription only the researcher and the researcher's supervisor had any access to the data.

#### **1.6.7 Data analysis**

Qualitative research is a complex approach with intriguing nuances (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Braun and Clarke (2006) mention that thematic analysis needs to be considered as a foundational method for qualitative analysis. These ground-breaking researchers contemplate that thematic analysis should be on top of researchers' priority lists as a qualitative method of analysis since it provides researchers with essential abilities that will be of assistance to them in the future. Thematic

analysis is described as a method that identifies, analyses and reports patterns (or themes) in a data set. It involves searching across a data set, be it a couple of interviews, a certain number of focus groups or a range of texts, in order to trace recurring patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) add their insight by stipulating that although thematic analysis does not represent a complete research design, it is truly flexible and well-suited with many qualitative research approaches, as a data analysis process. For purposes of this study thematic analysis was found to be compatible and meaningful. The phases followed by the researcher in thematic analysis are described as follows by Braun and Clarke (2006):

*Phase 1: Familiarising oneself with the data* – reaching a full and rich understanding of the depth and breadth of the data by reading and re-reading it actively and making notes regarding insightful observations. It was important to fully understand the content of the data. Reading through the data at least once, before coding was done, already assisted the researcher in conceptualising possible codes.

*Phase 2: Generating initial codes* – this phase commences after the researcher has identified interesting notions in the data and is acquainted with the general ideas formed while reading through the data. This phase included the development of initial codes. Coding can be done by either making notes in the text or by highlighting or colouring certain possible patterns. Furthermore, it included identifying interesting, meaningful patterns in the data that might form the foundation for themes. It was important for the researcher not to be troubled by inconsistencies in the data set but to rather embrace those accounts that differ from the dominant story.

*Phase 3: Searching for themes* – once all the data had been coded the researcher started analysing the codes to determine how different codes might be combined to form overarching themes. The researcher must find suitable ways that will assist him/her in sorting the different codes into useful themes. The researcher started thinking about the relationship between codes and themes.

*Phase 4: Reviewing themes* – the researcher refined the selected themes and considered whether certain themes needed to be removed due to insufficient supporting data or whether some could be combined into one theme. It might be necessary to break down certain themes into separate themes during this phase. The researcher must ensure that themes are distinct from one another.

*Phase 5: Defining and naming themes* – during this phase the researcher defined each theme by identifying the core content of each theme and what aspects of the data had been captured by the

themes. In other words, the data within each theme were analysed. The researcher has to indicate how the theme fits in with the overall story that is being told by the data.

*Phase 6: Producing the report* – This involved the final analysis and the writing of the research report. It is during this phase that the researcher conveyed the story that is intertwined in the data to his/her audience in such a way that it resembles and ensures validity and reliability.

#### **1.6.8 Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity**

Running through every research study, like a silver chord, is the question regarding the quality of the data presented. These quality-assuring constructs such as validity, reliability and generalisability cannot be overlooked (Loh, 2013). Scholars, for instance Kitto, Chesters, and Grbich (2008), Loh (2013) and Anney (2014) accentuate the importance of the quality and trustworthiness of data in qualitative research studies. The researcher at all times adhered to the four criteria proposed by Guba (1981) with the aim of ensuring data quality and integrity:

*Transferability* – The findings of this study should be applicable to and able to be transferred to another research case (Schurink, Fouché, & De Vos, 2011). Tracy (2010) explains that transferability is achieved when readers get the feeling that the content of the research study relates to their own stories and transfer the study onto their own actions. The researcher accomplished transferability by obtaining the direct testimonies from the participants during the interviews and by providing a rich description of the data and the research setting to help the reader feel that the situations described in the study are similar to those they are experiencing. This makes the transfer much more realistic (Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010).

*Dependability* – Schurink, Fouché, and De Vos (2011) contemplate that the researcher needs to ask the question whether the research process is logical, well-documented and audited. This refers to the reliability of the research study. Shenton (2004) explains that it is important for the same results to be obtained in a repeat-study done by another researcher in a similar context with similar participants and applying the same method. The researcher thus made sure that the research process was recorded well so that it could be possible for another researcher to replicate the study. The researcher also made use of peer reviews and put effort into coding and re-coding the data to ensure dependable results (Anney, 2014).

*Conformability* – This construct captures the original concept of objectivity (Schurink, Fouché, & De Vos, 2011). This strategy is concerned with the idea that it should be made clear that the data

and interpretations of the data are clearly captured from the data and do not originate from the imagination of the researcher (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Important steps the researcher took in this regard was to leave an audit trail of his practical doings that can be traced and the keeping of a reflective journal in which writings can be made of all the events that happened during the research study (Anney, 2014).

*Credibility* – Also referred to as the internal validity of the qualitative study, assures that the study actually measures what it intends to measure (Shenton, 2004). The researcher achieved credibility by adopting well-established research methods, by becoming acquainted with the culture of the participating organisations before data collection took place, through processes ensuring the honesty and motivation of participants – granting participants the opportunity of declining participation with a view to ensure that those that participate are motivated to do so in order to achieve truthful answers (Shenton, 2004). Anney (2014) also emphasises the importance of peer examination throughout the entire process. The researcher thus consulted with a study leader and expert in the field to receive feedback and structure and leadership to present a quality research study.

#### **1.6.9 Reporting**

The report of a qualitative study should not be bound by inflexible rules. Instead, it should present the main analytical findings. It is important though, although there is some room to vary, for the researcher to provide substantive evidence to support his/her findings. This evidence can be in the form of quotes or extracts from the text (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014). The researcher reported on the data in table form, providing the themes and sub-themes that were compiled during the data analysis stage. The researcher also made use of direct quotes to substantiate the themes and sub-themes that were extracted from the data set.

#### **1.6.10 Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations are of utmost importance in research. Birch, Miller, Mauthner, and Jessop (2002) comment that we all are confronted with ethical and moral questions as boundaries in society keep on shifting. According to these researchers, many debates exist regarding what is right and wrong in the actions of people.

The researcher only commenced with the study after the research proposal had been approved by the Ethics in Commerce Research Committee (ECRC). The researcher discussed possible access to the organisations with various gatekeepers, which in this instance was CEO's or senior managers. The researcher provided these gatekeepers with a brief summary of what the study entails as well as with an informed consent form. The researcher discussed any questions these gatekeepers had and



outlined the information that the gatekeepers needed to provide. The researcher informed the gatekeepers of what was necessary in order to conduct the research within their organisation. Any other relevant ethical information required was provided by the researcher. The researcher took the necessary steps, should it become necessary, to enable him to assist a participant, who would in an unlikely event feel uncomfortable to answer certain questions or a question that had elicited an emotional response due to personal reasons, in dealing with these emotions. The researcher would have contacted the EAP of the employing organisation in order to refer the participant to the relevant health care professional. If no EAP services were available within the organisation, the researcher would have provided the participant with the contact details of a registered health care professional. The consultation fee with the health care professional would have been covered by the researcher.

The relationship between all parties involved in the research process should be based on mutual trust, acceptance, cooperation, promises and accepted expectations (Strydom, 2011). The researcher in essence ensured that a healthy, trustworthy relationship was built in order to ensure the well-being of all participants. The dignity and worth of each participant were respected and a top priority of the researcher was to treat each individual with care, no matter what differences might have surfaced. Therefore, the researcher also practised in his area of competence in order to protect the well-being of the participants (Ivanoff, Blythe, & Walters, 2008). The researcher informed all potential participants of the absolute voluntary nature of participation. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the research process. Hence it was very important to provide the participants with an informed consent and confidentiality form. This consent form provided participants with the objective of the research, the expected duration of the participant's involvement, the procedure that was to be followed during the interview session, the possible advantages, disadvantages and even dangers that might have been involved in participating in this study (Strydom, 2011). All the data that were collected were kept confidential and no names were disclosed at any point in time. Even if it should happen that the research paper is published, information will be conveyed in general format without mentioning any particular organisation or individual's name. The names of the various organisations used for data collection were not mentioned. Also, the information provided in the interviews by the participants was not disclosed to the particular organisation by which the individual is employed. The researcher took the necessary action to ensure that none of the participants were deceived in the research process and did not withhold any information that could have caused a participant to withdraw (Strydom, 2011). Above all else, the researcher, as someone operating in the field of psychology, ensured that all reasonable precautions were taken to avoid any harm; thus holding to the basic ethical principles of

benevolence and non-maleficence (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010; DHRSA, 2015).

## **1.7 Chapter division**

This mini-dissertation consists of three chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Research article

Chapter 3: Conclusions, limitations and recommendations

## **1.8 Chapter summary**

Chapter 1 raised awareness of the importance of workplace relationships, specifically the interpersonal relationships between peer co-workers and reported on the influence these relationships have on people and on organisational outcomes. The full spectrum, including positive and negative workplace relationships, was discussed, allowing the reader to gain better insight into the rich dynamics of these relationships within the working environment. This chapter furthermore discussed the proposed research questions, objectives, approach and method pertaining to this current research. This chapter thus gives a brief overview of the expected structure of this mini-dissertation.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# EXPLORING PEER CO-WORKER INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG EMPLOYEES WITHIN SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN ORGANISATIONS

**Orientation:** Employees are constantly interacting with peer co-workers in today's organisations that are more streamlined than ever. Co-worker relationships are drivers of individual and organisational performance; therefore, the importance of fostering positive relationships has become increasingly important.

**Research purpose:** The general objective of this research study is to explore how peer co-worker interpersonal relationships in the workplace influence organisational outcomes.

**Motivation for the study:** Employees within South African organisations are constantly interacting and working with peer co-workers. These interactions have rich, underlying dimensions. Co-worker relationships also hold many important outcomes for employees as well as the organisations they work for. The researcher therefore aimed to discover the subjective perceptions of employees regarding their relationships to come up with meaningful, personal descriptions and contributions. This study might help organisations comprehend the importance that employees attach to co-worker relationships and the effort it takes to create quality workplace connections.

**Research approach, design and method:** A qualitative research method was utilised in this research study, along with a phenomenological approach and a multiple case study research strategy. Purposive sampling was utilised in this research study. The sample consisted of employees working within selected South African organisations ( $N=18$ ). These organisations formed part of the Food & Beverages industry as well as the Information Technology and Services industry. Data collection took place through means of semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was utilised as the data analysis method.

**Main findings:** Participants of this research study indicated that they experience both negative and positive peer co-worker relationships in the workplace. They indicated that the reasons for a relationship to be experienced as negative or positive are widespread. Participants provided further insight regarding aspects that should form part of a relationship, in order for it to be labelled positive. The findings also proved that negative and positive co-worker relationships have different influences on employees' work performance. The negative relationships tend to decrease performance, while the positive and meaningful relationships increased employees' work performance. It was furthermore confirmed that organisations struggle to function optimally when the relationships between co-workers are not looked after. On the other hand, peer co-worker

relationships can act as a powerful source of organisational success and a contributor to the general quality of organisational life.

**Practical/managerial implications:** When managers realise the major role relationships play in the workplace and the influence it has on organisational outcomes they might pursue organisational cultures where the development of high quality, positive relationships are a top priority. By implementing plans to sustain positive workplace relationships they will retain positive, committed employees who care for each other and the organisation.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study will provide qualitative answers and insights into co-worker relationships within the unique and challenging South African context. The interview questions covered a wide spectrum, starting with the employees themselves, and moving towards an organisational view, meaning that an in-depth overview was secured. By doing this study, individuals may increase their willingness to create and sustain positive; meaningful relationships with peers in the workplace to improve satisfaction and performance in the organisation.

**Keywords:** Peer co-worker; interpersonal relationships; positive relationships; negative relationships; organisational outcomes; selected South African organisations

## INTRODUCTION

“When people are at work, connections with others compose the fabric of daily life.” (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003, p. 264.) Relationships vastly impact the level of success an individual obtains in his/her work as well as the personal accomplishment that is found in completing work related tasks (Wall, 2008). Reina and Reina (2006) state that because the business landscape is continuously changing, it has become much more important for people to work in relationship with one another to ensure optimisation in the deliverance of results. The structure of organisations has undergone numerous changes. Several recent trends in organisations such as leaner organisational structures, increasing teamwork, and recurring lateral interactions have only amplified the importance of working with other people (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Clydesdale (2013) draws a beautiful picture by noting that relationships are important because they serve as mechanisms through which people work. Organisations are built on the skills and resources of people, while relationships serve as a link between those people. Inevitably, the efficiency of those links can influence the productivity of an organisation dramatically.

Ragins and Dutton (2007) go as far as to say that for most people relationships are what makes life worth living. Because people spend most of their time at work, work relationships are central to how the work gets done as well as to the quality of people’s lives. These authors further state that

workplace relationships can be a source of enrichment, vitality and learning, which help organisations to increase their growth rates, and to flourish. On the other hand, when workplace relationships are functioning at their worst, it can create a toxic environment, serving as a source for dysfunction.

Campbell and Campbell (2012) argue that several types of relationships exist in the workplace. These include formal and informal mentoring relationships, leader-follower relationships, supervisor-subordinate relationships and co-worker relationships. The researcher of this study in particular, focused exclusively on co-worker relationships. Co-worker relationships are often assumed to specifically indicate the relationships among peer employees. However, in some cases it might include anyone with whom an individual is working (Sias, 2009). In this research study, however, the term co-worker and peer employee will be used interchangeably; hence the mention of peer co-workers to avoid any uncertainty.

Relationships developed with co-workers are often cited as the reason why people continue to work even when they no longer need to (Halbesleben, 2012). Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) noted that empirical research has suggested that co-workers have an important influence on employees that reach further than that of supervisors. They continue by noting that due to changing job-related trends and flatter organisational structures, the importance of co-workers and team work is amplified. Furthermore, Nanda and Sørensen (2010) are of opinion that co-workers possess numerous characteristics that have an influence on the attitudes and decisions of individuals.

Clay and Olitt (2012) write that working with other people is the most challenging part of the job. Employees' ability to co-operate and to finish their work can be hindered by difficult co-workers. Labianca and Brass (2006) mention that negative relationships with others in the workplace may impair employees' chances of getting promoted, since information is being withheld from them or bad references are provided. In their study, Vaughn, Drake, and Haydock (2016) found that if workplace relationships were to be mostly negative, people will try to find employment elsewhere. Furthermore, research has shown that employees who experience higher levels of social support in the workplace tend to produce better output and they reported lower symptoms of burnout than those who do not have the necessary support systems (Snyder, 2009). Linked to this is evidence that a lack of social support can be linked to emotional exhaustion and yet again, higher turnover rates. This is firmly supported by data that show that the amount of negative and hostile relationship ties is a strong predictor of turnover intention and burnout (Vaughn et al., 2016).

Labianca and Brass (2006) mention that negative relationships differ in terms of the extent to which it results in liabilities for employees in organisations. They found that when mild levels of dislike among workers exist, they might still be able to ignore the friction in the relationship and act in a professional manner by focusing on the tasks at hand. It may be that mild discomfort and somewhat lower job satisfaction can result. However, if employees find it very difficult to like each other they might find it to be increasingly and more strenuous to collaborate on interdependent goals.

According to Sias (2009), most of the research done on workplace relationships has been of a quantitative nature. The researcher of this study also found most of the studies to be quantitative. Fritz (2014), however, notes that qualitative studies of workplace relationships are now beginning to generate meaning-centred theories of communication. She further explains that the workplace serves as a wonderful context for comprehending personal and social relationships and that it provides large amounts of potential for qualitative scholars. Tracy (2009) notes that we are in need of in-depth descriptions regarding individual causes, organisational factors, buffering variables and consequences that are connected to models of stress and burnout as well as the feelings and processes involved in these aspects through employees' narratives of their experiences. Fritz (2014) adds to the chorus of qualitative support by stating how qualitative research on workplace relationships has the ability to cast light on how meanings of work and relationships at work are co-constructed with others, both similar to and different from oneself. She proudly argues that what is currently known about workplace relationships and what is yet to come in terms of qualitative studies can invite human thriving in workplaces. This is supported by Tracy (2013) when she reminds us that qualitative researchers offer what they learn to the world. Qualitative research has the power to influence the way people think about their experience (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Thus, qualitative studies of workplace relationships offer us and the larger public resources to think wisely and act in accordance with that at work (Fritz, 2014). The researcher therefore found it imperative to investigate this truly rich and dynamic concept of workplace relationships from a qualitative platform. The research study was also done against the backdrop of the unique South African context which provided the rich dynamics the researcher was looking for.

### **Research purpose and objectives**

The objective of this study was to explore peer co-worker relationships from a qualitative viewpoint and to gain personal, subjective experiences and opinions from employees within selected South African organisations. The main objective was to gain a deeper understanding of how peer co-worker interpersonal relationships in the workplace influence organisational outcomes. Against this

background the following research questions were posed to address the research purpose and objective:

- How are peer co-worker interpersonal relationships conceptualised according to literature?
- How do employees within selected South African organisations experience peer co-worker interpersonal relationships?
- What aspects contribute to effective peer co-worker interpersonal relationships according to employees within selected South African organisations?
- What is the influence of peer co-worker interpersonal relationships on work performance according to employees within selected South African organisations?
- What is the influence of peer co-worker interpersonal relationships on organisational outcomes according to employees within selected South African organisations?
- What further recommendations can be made for future research and practice?

Following are a literature study, empirical study, discussion, and limitations and recommendations.

## **Literature review**

### **Workplace relationships**

It is true that workplace relationships can be seen as a special category of relationships. In some ways, workplace relationships exhibit unique characteristics, but they also share many similarities with the broader scope of relationships in general. Many different types of relationships exist within an organisational context, including formal and informal mentoring relationships, leader-follower relationships, supervisor-subordinate relationships as well as relationships between co-workers (Campbell & Campbell, 2012). Sias (2009) states that, in general, the term workplace relationship can refer to any interpersonal relationship in which an individual engages as they perform their work, including many of the different types mentioned by Campbell and Campbell (2012) with the addition of workplace friendships, romantic connections and customer relationships. Ragins and Dutton (2007) draw the conclusion that our knowledge regarding workplace relationships is in need of expansion as the landscape of work and careers are changing. The workplace has become very interdependent; causing people to lean more heavily on their connections with others. It is now the truth that if organisations wish to establish sustainable performance and effective individual

development, they need to take a thorough look at the quality of the relationships among their workers (Ragins & Dutton, 2007).

Reina and Reina (2006) note that organisations depend on relationships in order to achieve task completion. Relationships depend on trust to succeed. Furthermore, it is also important to adopt a learning approach in a work relationship. Learning about the other person in the relationship is an important component, necessary, to build strong and sustainable positive relationships regardless of individual differences (Davidson & James, 2007). In addition, past research that focused on the overall quality of interpersonal relationships argue that the degree of trust, respect, loyalty, and perceived mutuality are characteristics of positive workplace relationships (Ferris et al., 2009; Ragins & Dutton, 2007; Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2011).

### **Peer co-worker relationships**

Peer co-worker relationships can be defined as the existing relationships between employees who function at the same hierarchical level. Therefore, these employees cannot exercise any formal authority over one another (Sias, 2009). Raabe and Beehr (2003) consequently refer to co-workers as “hierarchical peers” (p. 276). However, Sias (2009) states that co-workers can refer to any individual a person works with; hence the term peer co-worker to dissolve any ambiguity. Kram and Isabella (1985) divide peer relationships into three distinct categories, based on various characteristics. The three types are:

- The information peer - these peers mostly exchange information relating to the organisation and to their work.
- The collegial peer - This relationship goes further than only sharing information. It is characterised by deeper conversations, emotional support and feedback.
- The special peer - This reflects the most intimate relationship between peer co-workers, consisting of high levels of self-disclosure and self-expression.

In addition, the functions of peer relationships, outlined by Sias (2009), are complementary to the different types of peer relationships. According to her these functions include mentoring, information exchange and social support.

*Mentoring:* Mentoring from fellow peers is important to an individual’s career experience and the progress the individual wishes to make (Sias, 2009). Unlike most mentors, co-workers function on

the same hierarchical level as their peers. Developing and improving the careers and skill sets of their peers are also not part of their formal job description. Nevertheless, the effect peers have on each other can be very strong. Peer co-workers are able to inform one another of possible promotions, provide feasible advice on how to accomplish objectives and affect behaviours in either positive or negative ways. All of which is enhanced due to the fact that co-workers have more frequent interaction with one another (Raabe & Beehr, 2003).

*Information exchange:* Here, Sias (2009) contemplates that peer relationships are extremely relevant sites of information exchange. Especially in the case of new employees, peers are found to be the most knowledgeable about the tasks themselves. Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) elaborate on this function by arguing that one way peers actually make the workplace is by serving as a rich source of help and information. In light of these findings, Mas and Moretti (2009) comment that knowledge spill-overs occur between co-workers as information is conveyed from one worker to another.

*Social support:* Sias (2009) writes that organisational life can be demanding and stressful and that these circumstances drive employees to seek social support from others. Social support is described as the verbal and non-verbal communication between people which ultimately reduces the uncertainty in many situations and give individuals a sense of control over their life (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). House (1971) argues that individuals tend to accept three primary types of social support. These are *instrumental support* – tangible forms of assistance, *informational support* – seeking advice and *emotional support* – providing a peer the opportunity of venting; calming one another in difficult times. Eisenberg and Goodall (2004) echo these findings by mentioning that if a person wishes to deal with work-related stress effectively, access to a well-developed support system is imperative. Finally, Cahill and Sias (1997) argue that peers are among the most effective support systems for organisational members. They state that employees often prefer the supporting hand of a peer when faced with work-related difficulties.

### **Social Exchange Theory (SET)**

Social Exchange Theory (SET) takes an economic approach to the understanding of relationships. The basis of this theory is built on the notion that people are motivated to maximise rewards and minimise costs in relationships and their decisions are made based on that motivation. Therefore, relationships that consist of more benefits than costs will be deemed more satisfying (Collins, 2005). In fact, one of the founders of the SET defines social exchange as the voluntary actions that



people take, that are motivated by the expected returns for which they long, and usually receive from others (Blau, 1964). Modern scholars, for instance Colquitt et al. (2013) agree with the importance of SET by explaining how it can be regarded as a multidisciplinary paradigm that explains how different resources can be exchanged by following certain rules and how these exchanges have the ability to create quality relationships. For instance, one of the major concepts of SET is the expectation of reciprocity. Reciprocity, or what can also be called repayment in equal terms, is probably one of the best-known rules of exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Reciprocity was described by Gouldner (1960) as a universal norm that demands action from people. People should help those who provide them with help. This notion might be able to explain, for instance, why beneficial actions, from example the organisation, might result in beneficial actions on the part of the employees involved in the relationship (Colquitt et al., 2013).

#### **Negative peer co-worker relationships and consequences thereof**

Griffin, Stoverink, and Gardner (2012) define negative co-worker exchanges as a social interaction, existing between employees that function on a similar hierarchical level, which causes one or more of the parties to be injured. Morrison and Nolan (2007) add to this definition by stating that a negative relationship is characterised by frequent occurrences of concealment, manipulation, friction, disrespect, discrepancies and/or hostility. Morrison (2008) also notes that disrespectful behaviour and a lack of civility are associated with negative relationships.

Many factors are found in the workplace responsible for causing negative workplace relationships. Jealousy and competition can be drivers that eventually cause people to obstruct others. Another factor is of course people's personalities. This can also be called an antecedent for negative workplace relationships (Morrison & Nolan, 2007). Labianca and Brass (2006) are of opinion that negative relationships are known for their on-going negative feelings, judgements and behaviours towards another person. It is also true that at least one person has formed a consistent pattern where he/she potentially tries to disrupt the outcomes of another, as a consequence of disliking that individual.

Negative relationships between co-workers have many influences on the working environment and the workers themselves. Moerbeek and Need (2003) indicate that social networks in a working environment can lead to negative effects. They found for instance that a refusal of employees to help another has led to these negative effects. According to these authors, enemies in the workplace can prevent someone from climbing the social ladder. Furthermore, behaviours such as bullying and

rudeness have been found to have negative impacts on job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Salin, 2001). Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) also found that various forms of behaviour could be identified as results of co-worker antagonism. Examples include absenteeism, the intention to leave, performance issues and a decrease in individual effort.

Additionally, Morrison and Nolan (2007) note that negative relationships can be distracting, making it difficult for employees to focus on their work. The result is a decline in the quality and quantity of work being produced and finally, a less motivated and committed employee. The fact that organisational performance depends heavily on employees' performance makes this an alarming issue to deal with (Morrison & Nolan, 2007).

### **Positive peer co-worker relationships and consequences thereof**

According to Roopa and Velumani (2017), the need for interpersonal workplace relationships cannot be overemphasised. As jobs have evolved into broader definitions and employees are relying increasingly more on collaboration with co-workers in order to achieve optimal outcomes, the relationships between co-workers have become critical to manage successfully (Forret & Love, 2008). Interpersonal relationships that are seen to be valuable have the ability to influence organisational outcomes by increasing participation in the organisation and establishing work climates that are known for its support, innovation and productivity. This then, has an indirect effect on organisational turnover (Roopa & Velumani, 2017). Ragins and Dutton (2007) define a positive work relationship as a reoccurring connection between two employees that exists in a working environment. This connection is experienced to be mutually valuable, meaning that it includes any form of positive states, processes and/or outcomes in the working relationship. Roopa and Velumani (2017) add that these interpersonal relationships naturally form part of the working environment. Bauer and Green (1994) point out that employees rely heavily on social acceptance from peer co-workers in order to optimise performance, given that these connections act as a form of social capital.

The implications of positive workplace relationships are widely spread. Venkataramani, Labianca, and Grosser (2013) found that employees who were satisfied with the overall quality of the relationships they have in the workplace displayed higher levels of attachment to the organisation. This can be linked to Quinn's (2007) argument that the quality of a connection has an affirmative impact on the energy participants experience. Because connections enable people to exchange

resources, create new ideas, maintain identity and aid in growing and learning it leads participants to feel energetic due to the fulfilment of needs. Interestingly enough, Sloan (2017) further indicated that co-worker support is linked to emotional commitment and the fact that a large amount of co-worker support exists within the relationships between women may explain their higher levels of organisational commitment. Research shows that if organisations want to set in motion positive, uplifting change among their work force, they should incorporate actions that will lead to supportive and positive relations between co-workers (Love & Dustin, 2014). Research furthermore indicates that receiving emotional support and the existence of positive interpersonal relationships at work are positively associated with aspects such as organisational commitment, job satisfaction and involvement. On the other hand, it is negatively connected to higher levels of employee stress, and absenteeism (Nielsen, Jex, & Adams, 2000; Wagner & Harter, 2006). Other researchers such as Ferris et al. (2009) agree by saying the development of high-quality connections in the workplace has substantial implications with regard to personal and organisational outcomes.

It is true that a vital aspect, when attending work, is connecting with other people in the workplace (Blatt & Camden, 2007). Workplace relationships have become the underpinning, essential ingredient of organisational life and the way most work gets accomplished. This is why social interaction with co-workers has become such an important aspect for many employees. Thus, in order to attract and retain quality workers, it is the manager's responsibility to create an environment where high-quality co-worker relationships prevail and are maintained (Dur & Sol, 2009; Ferris et al., 2009).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research design consists of the research approach, research strategy and research method.

### **Research approach**

A qualitative research design with an explorative nature was utilised to describe the experiences and perceptions of South African employees regarding peer co-worker workplace relationships. A qualitative research approach was beneficial because the researcher was interested in comprehending how individuals interpret their experiences of interpersonal workplace relationships, how they construct their world as well as the meaning they attach to the interpersonal relationships they have in the workplace (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The social constructivism paradigm was also implemented in this research study. Maxwell (2013) illustrates the appropriateness of social constructivism for this research study when he states that people's understanding of the world is inevitably their construction. It is not some objective perception of what reality should be. The perceptions that people hold and the beliefs they nurture are shaped by assumptions and previous experiences. Tuli (2010) further provides insight by saying that people provide their own sense of social realities, which is true regarding workplace relationships. The researcher wanted to explore each individual's own experience and the factors that contributed to their respective world views. Therefore, multiple realities regarding the phenomenon of peer co-worker relationships may exist.

A phenomenological approach was further followed to explore the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experiences of interpersonal workplace relationships of individuals in the work environment (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, Patton (2002) states that phenomenology digs deep to provide a description of how people perceive, describe and remember experiences in order to make sense of it. The advantage is that it is experienced first-hand, which makes it much more authentic. Workplace relationships are experienced in many ways by different people. The meaning one employee might attach to a relationship may differ from his or her peer co-worker's meaning. The researcher was interested in the personal experiences of each employee and in gaining more insight into the strategies employees employ to make sense of their relationships. The phenomenological approach was followed as the framework to gain this authentic information and complimented the process of exploration and meaningful investigation into the experiences of South African employees.

## **Research strategy**

A multiple-case study strategy has been followed in this research study. The case study refers to the examination and analysis of a single phenomenon. The phenomenon may be a person, a group, an institution, a country, an event or even a period in time (Thomas & Myers, 2015). Rule and John (2011) indicate that a case study has the ability to generate insight into a definite case by providing a thorough and deep description thereof. It is also possible to gain an understanding of the relationships the case have with other broader contexts. Thomas and Myers (2015) further emphasises how the case study allows researchers to look at a subject from many different viewpoints to get closer to the why and the how. In this research study, although a single subject was investigated, namely workplace relationships, the multiple case refers to the multiple organisations within which workplace relationships were explored.

## **Research method**

The research method comprises the literature review, research setting, entrée and establishing researcher roles, research participants and sampling, data collection method, recording of data, data analysis, strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity, reporting and ethical considerations.

### **Research setting**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at two different organisations. Organisations that formed part of the study (both situated in the Gauteng province of South Africa) were a large manufacturing organisation within the Food & Beverages industry and an organisation in the Information Technology and Services industry. The main objectives of these two organisations are: 1) to be known as a leader in the branded foods and beverages industry, providing accessible nutrition to a widespread customer platform; and 2), to enable business success, while developing and implementing comprehensive, state of the art Human Capital Management Software Solutions,

Participants that were interviewed were white-collar workers. Some of the participants were middle managers, while others functioned on different hierarchical levels. Interviews were conducted on the premises of the respective organisations in either a board room or a private office. This was to ensure convenience for the participant, as well as a quiet, peaceful environment. The researcher made sure that every participant had a glass of water for comfort. A “do not disturb, interviews in progress” sign was put up against the door to avoid any disturbances.

### **Entrée and establishing researcher roles**

During this research study, the researcher fulfilled various roles. The researcher firstly acted as planner and organiser. The study was organised and planned in detail – from writing the research proposal and planning in accordance with the deadlines, to planning and organising the data collection phase. Possible organisations within which the data collection could take place were identified by the researcher. The research study was firstly approved by the research committee. Thereafter, it was accepted by the Ethics in Commerce Research Committee (ECRC). After approval for the research study had been provided by the ECRC, it was the researcher's responsibility to contact a manager at each organisation and set up a meeting with him to briefly discuss what the research process would entail and what the procedures would be that needed to be followed to successfully gather the data. The researcher provided them, in writing, with a summary

of the research objective as well as with an informed consent form. . Once participants had been selected on a voluntary basis the researcher contacted the participants to make arrangements regarding suitable meeting times and venues. The researcher also fulfilled the role of data collector. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and the researcher made sure to ask probing questions in order to ensure that rich and thick data could be collected. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed onto an Excel spreadsheet to enable data analysis. The researcher also acted as data analyser together with a co-coder which is known as an expert in the field of Industrial Psychology. Lastly, the researcher was also the report writer, providing detailed descriptions of the findings of this research study. The researcher did his utmost best to stay objective while fulfilling the various roles as described above, by conversing with the co-coder, other experts in the field and by becoming aware of his own assumptions and values; ensuring, in the process, that it would not influence the research process (Creswell, 2009).

### **Research participants and sampling**

Purposive sampling was utilised in this research study. As Leedy and Ormrod (2014) rightfully note, qualitative researchers are quite often intentionally non-random when they select a research sample. Therefore, qualitative researchers purposefully select those participants that will provide the most information about the topic being investigated. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) mention that for purposive sampling, the researcher has something in mind and therefore includes participants that best suit the purpose of the study. Purposive sampling is thus the deliberate selection of participants, due to their characteristics and qualities that meet the researcher's purpose (Etikan et al., 2016).

Participants for this research study were sampled from two organisations from different industries. The one organisation is from the Information Technology and Services industry and the other from the Food & Beverages industry. Participants differed regarding ethnicity, gender, language, highest level of education and employing sector

Participants needed to meet the following criteria for them to participate in the research study: 1) they had to be white-collar employees working in the selected South African organisations, 2) interact on a regular basis with peer co-workers, 3) be able to participate in the interviews in either Afrikaans or English, 4) be willing to voluntarily participate in the research, and 5) be recorded during the interview.

Table 1

*Characteristics of participants (N=18)*

Item	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	African	5	27.78
	Coloured	2	11.11
	White	11	61.11
<b>Gender</b>	Female	9	50.00
	Male	9	50.00
<b>Language</b>	Afrikaans	10	55.56
	English	5	27.78
	Setswana	1	5.56
	Tshivenda	1	5.56
	Xitsonga	1	5.56
<b>Employing sector</b>	Food & Beverages	13	72.22
	Information Technology & Services	5	27.78
<b>Highest level of education</b>	Bachelor's degree	7	38.89
	Higher certificate	1	5.56
	Higher diploma	1	5.56
	Honours degree	3	16.67
	Master of Business Administration	1	5.56
	Matric	5	27.78

The sample from this data comprised 18 participants from two organisations in different industries. Table 1 illustrates that the majority of participants (61%) were white, while 28% of them were African and 11% Coloured. There were 50% males and 50% females that participated in this research study. The majority (56%) of participants were Afrikaans-speaking, 28% speak English, 6% Tshivenda and 6% Xitsonga and 6% were Setswana-speaking. The majority of participants (72%) were employed in the Food & Beverages industry while the rest (28%) were working in the Information Technology and Services sector. Of all the participants, 39% held a Bachelor's degree, while 28% claim to have Matric as their highest level of education.

## **Data collection method**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher to obtain the data for this research study. During each semi-structured interview, participants were asked a number of pre-determined questions. However, participants were allowed to provide information and insights beyond the questions' parameters. The semi-structured interview thus creates the opportunity to provide various detailed responses (Berg, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this research study for the purpose of gaining detailed descriptions of participants' subjective experiences and understanding of workplace relationships. Individuals were requested to describe their relationships with peer co-workers and the core aspects that keep these relationships in good practice, as well as the influences these relationships have on their organisational life. When necessary, or provided with the opportunity, the researcher posed further probing questions to elicit the deeper meanings behind participants' answers.

All the participants were asked the following questions:

- In general, how would you describe your relationships that you have with your co-workers?
- What aspects would you consider important for relationships to work between co-workers?
- How do the relationships you have with your co-workers influence your work performance?
- How do the relationships you have with your co-workers influence the organisation?

Participants were also provided with a brief biographical questionnaire in order to comprehensively describe the sample. The questionnaire included aspects such as (gender, ethnicity, language etc.) Participants were also expected to complete an informed consent form prior to commencement of the interview.

The researcher also utilised a pilot study. Three participants were interviewed as part of the pilot study. The objective was to ensure participants understood the interview questions and it gave the researcher exposure to practise his interviewing skills, prior to the actual data collection process commenced. Participants that formed part of the pilot study did indicate a good understanding of the questions and for that reason the questions were kept the same for actual interview purposes. Interviews in the pilot study did not form part of the ( $N=18$ ) sample that was interviewed as part of the final study.



## **Recording of data**

The researcher reassured the participants prior to commencement of the interview, concerning the reasons for recording the interview. The main reason was so that the researcher could transcribe the interview to analyse the data, in order to successfully represent the findings in a research report format. The researcher also provided the participants with the reassurance that the safekeeping of the data is a top priority for the researcher. The participants were also afforded the opportunity of asking any questions relating to the informed consent form if they experienced anything to be unclear to them.

The data were recorded on an electronic recording device and afterwards captured on a password-protected laptop for transcription purposes. The recordings were deleted from the recording device once successful transcription had taken place. The researcher therefore ensured that all the necessary precautions were taken against accidental disclosure (Berg, 2007).

## **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was utilised at this stage to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is seen as a method that categorises information, where after comparisons are drawn with regard to the frequency of occurrence of different categories, followed by the main themes as well as sub-themes (Robson, 2011). The phases of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), are described in detail as follows:

### *Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with your data*

The researcher's aim was to understand the full depth of the data. At first, the researcher listened to the recorded interviews while capturing the data onto an Excel spreadsheet. Afterwards, the researcher once again read through the transcribed interviews as it was compiled in one final document, trying to really grasp the fullness and thickness of the data set. As the researcher read through the data, the aim was to already start pondering over possible codes in the data set.

### *Phase 2: Generating initial codes*

After carefully reading through the transcribed data set the researcher read through the transcribed data once again with precision. The aim was to identify possible patterns in the data set that could

form the foundation for themes. The researcher constantly bore in mind the research questions and objectives to be able to link it to the generated codes. Coding includes the organising of data into meaningful groups. It resembles that part of the data that the researcher finds extremely interesting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Categories that the researcher found within the data set were: *Description of peer co-worker relationships*, *Aspects that are important for a peer co-worker relationship to work*, *Influence of co-worker relationships on work performance* and *Influence of co-worker relationships on the organisation*.

### *Phase 3: Searching for themes*

The long list of codes, as it was generated, was presented from where the researcher started searching for themes. This was done with the assistance of a co-coder to ensure that objectivity and quality remain intact. The co-coder was an experienced person in the field of Industrial Psychology. The researcher also accepted the possibility that new codes and themes could present themselves during the process. For instance, initial themes such as *acceptance of diversity* and *knowledge of own work* were changed to *acceptance of differences* and *competent co-workers*.

### *Phase 4: Reviewing themes*

Themes were refined and finalised. Themes were reviewed to make absolutely sure that they resemble the data and where necessary, themes were merged or separated. Care was taken by the researcher to ensure that no theme was duplicated. Examples where themes were merged included: *active listening* and *attentive listening* – which became *attentive listening*; *shared organisational goals* and *working towards shared goals* – which were kept, working towards shared goals.

### *Phase 5: Defining and naming themes*

During this phase the researcher took great care to ensure the precise naming of themes. Attention was given to the content each theme resembles and what part of the data forms part of each theme. A detailed, analysed description was given to each theme, ensuring the meaning was visible and in line with findings. Meanings were also attached to the identified themes to prevent themes from overlapping.

### *Phase 6: Producing the report*

The final findings were produced in the form of a mini-dissertation under Chapter 2. The final themes and sub-themes produced were indicated by means of tables. The definitions of the themes, as well as the interpretation and discussion thereof were provided in paragraph format by the researcher. These findings were compared to relevant theory and existing literature, thus ensuring that it was conducted scientifically. The report was produced in accordance with scientific guidelines; hence aligning itself with an appropriate scholarly style.

#### **Strategies employed to ensure quality data**

No matter what the content represents, the nature of the research study or the method, questions regarding quality, validity and generalisability always come to the fore (Loh, 2013). The researcher took great care to ensure that various criteria were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings represented in this research study. The researcher applied the following criteria to sustain valid and reliable qualitative results: transferability, dependability, conformability and credibility. These are the four criteria proposed by Guba (1981) to ensure data quality and integrity:

*Transferability:* Also known as generalisation, this criterion refers to whether the findings from this particular study can be relevant beyond the sample and context of this specific research study. In other words, can the findings of this study be applied to other populations and settings as well? (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003) The researcher ensured that the data set was described in detail and rich descriptions and explanations were provided throughout the study. All the steps taken in the research study were explained thoroughly to enable the research study to be transferred to a different context in the future. Although generalisation was not the goal of this qualitative study (seeing that the sample size was so small), the researcher still described the entire research process in much detail.

*Dependability:* Dependability is concerned with the issue of reliability. The notion exists that if the study was to be repeated, the same results should be obtained, given that similar methods were employed and similar participants were used (Shenton, 2004). The researcher thus made sure to describe the research design and processes in detail to provide the reader with a thorough view on the study. The researcher also made use of a co-coder to ensure that the necessary effort was exerted to obtain dependable results (Anney, 2014).

*Conformability:* To achieve confirmability, researchers have to prove that the findings were developed from the data and not through their own predispositions (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1999) indicate that it should be possible for someone else to confirm the findings of the study. By ensuring this, evaluation is placed ultimately on the data and not on some unique characteristic of the researcher. The researcher's aim was to stay impartial throughout the study and also while analysing the data to truly withdraw the richness of participants' experiences. Therefore, the help of co-coders was also embraced to ensure proper reviewing of themes and sub-themes, inevitably leading to high quality and conformability. By making use of co-coders, the researcher also guaranteed objectivity throughout the entire process. The researcher was aware not to let his own values and biased perceptions influence the findings in any way.

*Credibility:* Schurink, Fouché, and De Vos (2011) refer to this criterion as an alternative to the term internal validity. Credibility refers to the trustworthiness and plausibility of the research findings (Tracy, 2010). She continues by stating that one of the main enhancers of credibility in qualitative research is a thick description. The researcher put in a copious amount of effort in order to provide a detailed description of the research method and qualitative approach. Participants were also obtained strictly by means of voluntary participation to increase the chances of higher motivation to co-operate and hence, achieving truthful and reliable responses.

### **Reporting**

The results of the interviews were captured in an Excel spreadsheet. Following that, themes and sub-themes were compiled from the data set with corresponding direct quotations substantiating the data. Due to the fact that some of the interviews were conducted in Afrikaans, the direct quotes were translated into English whenever it was found to be a substantial quote. Care was taken to capture the inherent meaning of the quotation. The themes, sub-themes and direct responses were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. The themes were captured in the first column, adjacent to the sub-themes in the second column with the direct responses of participants following the sequence.

### **Ethical considerations**

It is imperative for research to be based on principles of mutual trust, acceptance, co-operation, promises and well-accepted conventions and expectations between the respective parties that claim involvement in a research study. Researchers in the field of social sciences face ethical issues that

are inescapable and intricate, due to the fact that data should never be obtained at the expense of the human being participating in the research study (Strydom, 2011).

This is why the researcher did everything in his power to perform this research study as ethically as possible by following the principles listed below:

- *Ethics in Commerce Research Committee* – The researcher only commenced with this study after ethical clearance had been given by the committee accompanied by an ethics number.
- *Gatekeepers* – Access to the organisations was negotiated with the identified gatekeepers in an orderly fashion. The gatekeepers were thoroughly informed of the research study, the process and their responsibilities
- *Respect for participants* – The researcher respected the right to privacy and confidentiality of participants. The researcher applied various tactics so as to protect the identity of participants (Department of Health Republic South Africa [DHRSA], 2015). Examples included a code name allocated to each participant as well as the fact that results were provided in general group format so that information could not be traced to a single individual, should the organisation request some feedback.
- *Researcher competence and expertise* – The researcher took great care to stay within his competency boundaries and only conducted research within his area of expertise (DHRSA, 2015).
- *Voluntary participation* – No participant was forced to participate in this study. Participants were informed of the study and the procedures and those who were asked to participate did so voluntarily (Rubin & Babbie, 2005). Participants could withdraw from the research study at any moment. It was also communicated to them in this manner, prior to commencement of the interview.
- *Informed consent* - This consent form provided participants with the objective of the research, the expected duration of the participant's involvement, the procedure that was to be followed during the interview session, the possible advantages and disadvantages that might have been involved in the participation of this study (Strydom, 2011).
- *Beneficence and non-maleficence* – In conclusion, the researcher, as someone operating in the field of Industrial Psychology, made certain that all reasonable precautions were taken to avoid any harm; thus holding to the basic ethical principles of benevolence and non-maleficence (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010; DHRSA, 2015).

## FINDINGS

The findings of this research study were structured according to categories, themes and sub-themes (where data was rich and in detail). The findings are reported in table format. Within the tables themes and sub-themes are reported as was extracted from transcribed interviews. Themes and sub-themes are substantiated by direct quotes from the participants.

### Category 1: Description of peer co-worker relationships

In this category participants were requested to provide a detailed description of the relationships they have with peer co-workers in the workplace. Participants were also provided with a descriptive explanation of what a peer co-worker relationship is. The definition that was provided is as follows: A peer co-worker is anyone you work with, either on similar tasks or different tasks, and has no formal authority over you. Participants explained that the relationships they have with their peer co-workers can be either positive or negative in nature. Below is a description of peer co-worker relationships as experienced by the participants in this study.

Table 2

#### *Description of peer co-worker relationships*

Theme	Sub-theme	Response
<b>Negative relationships</b>	Different personalities	<p><i>"...I understand that people are not the same so what I say to you, you might not understand or get easily frustrated as to what I say to the next person but you are meaning well."</i></p> <p><i>"...Their personalities are very different from mine and it still feels as if they are looking down upon us."</i></p>
	Gossiping among co-workers	<i>"There is a fine line because you might reveal too much about your personal life and having to be that vulnerable is not good at all because whatever happens they might gossip."</i>
	High workload	<p><i>"It basically depends on the type of work that is coming in, like if there is a ton of work that comes in at the same time then obviously there is a little bit of friction, coz everyone is just trying to get as much work done and you are waiting for someone and they are busy with something else..."</i></p> <p><i>"Like when there is a lot of work, then you need something urgently but they are busy with something else and then they can't get back to</i></p>

		<i>you as quickly as you need and then you are going back and forth just trying to get the information and data, so then it creates like a backlog and people fight with you; so that can create a bit of friction sometimes...”</i>
Lack of personal knowledge regarding co-workers		<p><i>“...It’s not that good because at a personal level we do not know each other...”</i></p> <p><i>“I think because I do not know some of them, I get very annoyed at the way some of them speak...”</i></p> <p><i>“Not knowing these people personally gets on my nerves sometimes because I have not built a relationship with them to understand them. I do not know what their norms are and if it is aligned with my norms. So sometimes they might do something and I take easily offence of it because I do not know them.”</i></p>
Lack of recognition		<i>“For instance the things that you do are also not recognised...”</i>
Misunderstanding between co-workers		<i>“So based on our, like in our group, it’s like most of the time we misunderstand each other and end up not doing what we have to do as a group so it causes us to have that bad energy. So that’s why I say it’s fair it’s not that good it’s just okay.”</i>
Non-direct communication		<i>“I always say that an email is a very dangerous thing. It sometimes gets across as very arrogant, even when it really is not.”</i>
Non-hardworking co-workers		<i>“...It’s kind of making me cross, such mistakes and stuff, if you do not do your work, if you do not do your part.”</i>
Not working towards shared goals		<i>“Individuals are not focussing on the group goals, they are focussing on their own individual goals so we need to be on the same page as a group as to what we want to achieve and where we want to go.”</i>
Superiority		<i>“...There sometimes is friction. Sometimes it happens that you get the feeling another guy thinks you know he is pretending to be superior to you</i>
Uncertainty regarding work content		<i>“I think sometimes you ask for something and they might not know what you are asking for or it’s not something which they have done before, so when they are not too sure of something they are supposed to be sure of, that can sometimes irritate you.”</i>
Unequal distribution of work		<i>“...They leave all the work for the younger people, so for me it’s not a good relationship...”</i>

Positive relationships	Addressing problems immediately		<i>"...if there is a matter that occurs that comes up that one of us have a problem with, we address it immediately."</i>
	Competent workers	co-	<i>"...we all think that we are capable of doing our work, so that helps a lot."</i>  <i>"...Working with peers and stuff they are all clued up and stuff so most of the time when you ask for something and within half an hour they have already got all the information you need and everything so it's a very good relationship..."</i>
	Co-worker support (advice)		<i>"...so it's easy to ask someone for advice..."</i>  <i>"It is a comfortable environment and if you do not know something it is so easy to say "Help me quickly" or "What do I do again, here."</i>
	Co-worker support (availability)		<i>"...help me with this. I am still unsure, telephone call, email, everyone is always available. Even after hours."</i>  <i>"...so I can walk in and say, listen do you maybe have 5 minutes for me, just want to quickly talk about a problem or we quickly schedule a meeting and we discuss it, so it's fairly open."</i>
	Co-worker support (caring)		<i>"...they pay attention to each other, look out for each other, that caring, so someone can see when you are a bit stressed or, you are worried when you put down the receiver, then they are, listen what's going on, how can I help?"</i>
	Co-worker support (Instrumental)		<i>"...we are able to deliver our work and we can help each other when one can't complete whatever task they've been assigned to."</i>  <i>"...when I have too much work I can ask; I can speak to one of my co-workers that can help me..."</i>  <i>"...We do not ignore each other you know, when there's; when I have too much work I can ask, I can speak to one of my co-workers that can help me..."</i>
	Co-worker support (understanding)		<i>"Yes we understand what the other persons are going through and in that way you also support each other."</i>  <i>"And it's also nice because it's someone that also understands when, let's say, you have a rough day..."</i>
	Equality among co-workers		<i>"I think at this stage, nobody feels they are better than someone else, but rather we approach the things together..."</i>  <i>"...nobody will think they know more for that matter..."</i>



	<i>"...In general, I think we can work well together because we are really on the same level of doing things."</i>
Friendships	<i>"...you also build friendships, so it's not only work. Outside of work also, we like to spend time with each other."</i>  <i>"...it's very relaxed and it's more of a friendship type of relationship that we have, rather than only the co-worker/colleague relationship..."</i>
Good communication	<i>"In terms of our department specifically I think it works very well because there is good communication, like work-related communication. That is great. We are able to deliver our work..."</i>  <i>"...the communication is great between the co-workers."</i>
Honesty	<i>"...I think the relationships are very good, I think we are open and honest with each other..."</i>  <i>"...The area for which I am responsible has open relationships to any side."</i>
Interaction outside of work	<i>"...We do have good relationships at work because when we go outside of work, when we go for team building, I do not regret going out with them because I really enjoy them..."</i>
Mutual learning among co-workers	<i>"I learn a lot from them and I also sometimes get the chance to teach others by saying ok but I know how this works, so I will say it's a very healthy, open relationship."</i>  <i>"...We learn from each other..."</i>  <i>"...So when you build relationships with people it's then easier for them to teach you what the company has, what the company gives, what the company offers and in that sense you are growing."</i>
Openness	<i>"...I can be open with anyone that works with me and I think that is why we work so well together."</i>  <i>"...We all have ultimately common objectives so I would say in general very healthy relationships; very open relationships."</i>
Regular interaction	<i>"...Those that are very good I would say is those where we interact a lot more based on perhaps similar disciplines..."</i>  <i>"...So although they're peers and we have, it's probably more superficial communication and a more superficial relationship, whereas certain other disciplines, where I spend most of my time, it's a far deeper relationship."</i>

Relaxed/informal working environment	<p><i>"It is a nice and relaxed environment..."</i></p> <p><i>"...It is very relaxed; the open plan concept works well because it's, how can I put it, it's informal but still professional."</i></p> <p><i>"...With an open plan, you are more comfortable to discuss personal matters."</i></p>
Shared work experiences	<p><i>"...They go through the same things as you do, they have similar processes that they have to follow..."</i></p> <p><i>"We are all in the same boat. So we know what the workload is like..."</i></p>
Similar personalities	<p><i>"Very similar personalities; we like cracking jokes."</i></p>
Supportive working environment	<p><i>"...Nobody will just tell you no; everybody tries to help you."</i></p> <p><i>"Yes, this is a very supportive environment."</i></p>
Working towards shared goals	<p><i>"...everybody works together towards one goal."</i></p> <p><i>"...But in general; I think once one operates at this level of management, there's an understanding that we're all in this together, we all have the best interest of the organisation at heart, we all have ultimately common objectives..."</i></p>

Table 2 provides a description of themes and sub-themes as extracted from the analysed data. Examples of original responses by participants were also provided in order to substantiate the findings of this category. It is evident that participants experienced different types of peer co-worker relationships in the workplace. Participants mentioned that they experience relationships as either negative or positive. Below are the descriptions of the peer co-worker relationships as provided by the different participants.

*Negative relationships:* Participants were of opinion that there are various reasons for negative peer co-worker relationships in the workplace. They indicated that due to different personalities, misunderstandings can occur and people get frustrated with one another. Employees further mentioned that they feel vulnerable if they share too much personal information because people might gossip which causes negative relationships. Participants indicated that when the workload is especially high, it may lead to friction and fighting. A negative relationship is further described as a relationship in which both parties have little personal knowledge regarding each other. This may be because of less frequent interaction among co-workers. It then happens that people easily get

annoyed or offended because they do not know each other's preferences and norms. When the work a person does is not recognised it also leads to poor co-worker relationships.

Participants also indicated that when misunderstandings between co-workers occur, the relationship turns sour. Another source of negative relationships seems to be non-direct communication. An email can easily be misinterpreted. In addition, participants mentioned that they get angry when co-workers do not carry their weight. It also seems that employees who do not work towards shared goals have difficulty maintaining positive relationships. Employees further mentioned that negativity sets in when a co-worker thinks himself or herself to be superior to the others. Uncertainty regarding work content was also mentioned as a source of irritation, for example when a co-worker doesn't know what another employee is talking about. Finally, employees regard co-worker relationships as negative when work is distributed unequally.

*Positive relationships:* Participants also mentioned that relationships in the workplace can be positive in nature. Relationships are described as positive when problems experienced between co-workers are addressed immediately and co-workers are seen as competent workers. Employees also held that support from their co-workers are a contributing factor towards positive relationships. These support systems include making time for each other's needs and the ability to ask co-workers for advice. In addition, caring for and looking out for each other by assisting with work and tasks also lead to positive relationships. Lastly, participants argued that it helps when co-workers understand what everyone is going through in the workplace.

Equality among co-workers further contributes towards a positive relationship. Employees mentioned that because they all seem to be operating on the same level and no one thinks himself/herself to be better, it creates positivity between co-workers. Co-workers that develop friendships with each other tend to have positive relationships. Employees also mentioned that positive co-worker relationships entail good communication and honesty. Interactions outside of work, for instance team building, forms part of positive co-worker relationships. Additionally, mutual learning among co-workers was also mentioned as positive drivers. Employees also raised the fact that co-workers need to be open and honest with each other and engage in regular interaction for the relationship to be described as positive.

Participants moreover indicated that a relaxed and informal working environment plays a huge role in the level of positivity experienced in co-worker relationships along with shared work

experiences. It seems that going through the same processes adds value to the relationship. Co-workers with similar personalities also seem to form positive relationships more easily. Working in a supportive environment where understanding among co-workers exists, furthermore leads to positive relationships. Lastly, a positive co-worker relationship has been described as one in which employees work together towards shared goals.

## Category 2: Aspects important for a peer co-worker relationship to work

In this category, participants were requested to provide aspects they regard as important for a peer co-worker relationship to work optimally. It is evident from the findings that participants have a very strong opinion on what these aspects are. A large number of participants provided similar descriptions of the most important aspects.

Table 3

*Aspects important for a peer co-worker relationship to work*

Theme	Response
<b>Acceptance of differences</b>	<i>"It's understanding who they are firstly and accepting that we all come from different backgrounds."</i>
<b>Attentive listening</b>	<i>"...Not only listening but actually comprehending what it is the person is saying." "And then, also to listen and to pay attention and trying to understand the other person..."</i>
<b>Commitment to work</b>	<i>"...The person actually being dedicated to their work so they are here every day unless there is obviously a proper emergency. That they do their work every day; you do not need to try and help them coz they can't cope with what they have. Then that will create a good relationship between you and them..."</i>
<b>Competent co-workers</b>	<i>"If they have knowledge of what they are doing, then it tends to work out very good."</i>
<b>Conflict management</b>	<i>"...How to manage conflict, because there is always a viewpoint from one person about how it should be done and another thinks it should be done differently; to be professional then and talk it through, rather than getting angry..." "...The way in which you handle it can impact your own performance as well as the organisation's performance."</i>
<b>Consideration for co-workers</b>	<i>"...They start to open up a little bit more and start to be more accommodating and start to see you as a colleague or partner..."</i>

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*"You have to take everyone's responsibilities into consideration..."*

**Co-worker support  
(instrumental)**

*"If you know there is one that is slow in the team you need to understand them, if you are the faster one at least try to help them out to reach that goal..."*

*"...If they feel that you are assisting them in getting their own work done and achieving the organisation's objectives then you find that the relationships are a lot easier."*

*"...Then the support is there and you can depend on people to help you, and it goes around; on another day then you can help them. And you know you are never alone."*

**Direct verbal communication**

*"When you have a problem with someone, to rather call them than to send an email. To have that personal contact helps."*

*"...When you answer someone by means of an email or letter and you insert the comma in the wrong place, the other person might interpret it incorrectly, but you can of course, language-wise, transmit your statement far more easily by doing it verbally, provided that you are able to talk."*

**Friendliness**

*"I feel friendliness, as well. Friendliness for me is very important because it provides an indication of how you convey yourself and it has a major impact on relationships."*

**Friendships**

*"Well, I think like a friendship, and not only a work relationship."*

*"...And we got to know each other that whenever something happens it's easy to identify that person is not having a great day, let me help by doing this..."*

*"...If you have a personal relationship with some of your colleagues it can be a benefit because now you understand each other at a more personal relationship level..."*

**Honesty**

*"To be honest with each other..."*

*"...Obviously honest, open communication; one doesn't want to have any undertones of things being kept from me or from the other person."*

**Knowledge regarding co-worker's work**

*"...Understand each other's duties."*

*"I think having knowledge of each other's work. Not like in depth knowledge but the basics of what they are doing..."*

**Mutual solving problem**

*"...Let's discuss the problem; everybody admits that there is a problem; let us work together in order to solve it..."*

**Mutual value between co-workers**

*"I think value comes to mind as most critical. If they see my name on an email; are they even going to read it, do they see value in what I have to say?"*

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<b>Open communication channels</b>	<p><i>"Communication. A very, very big aspect. Communication. Everybody should communicate with everybody..."</i></p> <p><i>"There must not be any silo's. You have to be able to communicate between the different departments..."</i></p> <p><i>"...Perhaps the answer is to, is to, not force but ensure there's regular communication..."</i></p>
<b>Recognition</b>	<i>"...Recognition..."</i>
<b>Regular communication</b>	<i>I think regular communication. You know, the fact that the business doesn't require you to interact with certain others; perhaps the answer is to, is to, not force but ensure there's regular communication..."</i>
<b>Regular presence at work</b>	<i>"And then of course when they are at work a lot. Coz I mean, sometimes you'll get someone who is off today; tomorrow they're here and then when it comes like a Friday then they're off because they're sick from this and that so then you get piled on with their work and that can also be like annoying sometimes..."</i>
<b>Relating with co-workers</b>	<i>"...If you can relate with a person, then it will naturally create a better relationship."</i>
<b>Respect</b>	<p><i>"You must have respect for each other. You have to take into consideration each and everyone's responsibilities..."</i></p> <p><i>"Respect, and respect being that we are all here to work and we do not work in silo's..."</i></p>
<b>Sense of belonging</b>	<i>"...one doesn't want to be a number only."</i>
<b>Shared goals</b>	<p><i>"We're here for the company so we must make sure that we fulfil all that the company needs to fulfil..."</i></p> <p><i>"...If we have the same understanding and the same goals; but sometimes we forget what we are working towards you see, so we have to remind each other this is the goals we should meet, then maybe that will help us as a group."</i></p>
<b>Showing humanity towards co-workers</b>	<p><i>"...You have to show humanity towards the next person, you know, recognise that this is a human being."</i></p> <p><i>"...For me it's to be human. To be able to greet the next person and say good morning."</i></p>
<b>The ability to handle critique</b>	<i>"...You have to be willing to handle critique in communication..."</i>
<b>Trust</b>	<p><i>"...we have to trust each other."</i></p> <p><i>"Definitely trust, that is the biggest thing for me..."</i></p>

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<b>Understanding other</b>	<b>each</b>	<p><i>“...Trying to understand the person because at the end of the day we are all very different.”</i></p> <p><i>“I would say a good understanding...”</i></p>
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Table 3 provides a detailed overview of the themes extracted from the data. Findings were substantiated with direct quotes from participants. When requested to provide an account of the aspects that are regarded as important for a peer co-worker relationship to work, the following emerged:

Participants indicated that acceptance of differences is an important aspect which is necessary for a peer co-worker relationship to work. Furthermore, the need to attentively listen to each other was mentioned as well as being committed to one's work. Other aspects that are regarded as important are competent co-workers that have knowledge of the work they do; the ability to manage conflict, consideration for co-workers, as well as instrumental co-worker support. Direct verbal communication is also required for a positive relationship. Participants also mentioned aspects such as friendliness, the development of friendships and honesty as important ingredients in a positive co-worker relationship.

Participants feel that knowledge regarding a co-worker's work is needed and mutual problem-solving is beneficial. Mutual value between co-workers, and open communication channels were all important themes that came up. Participants furthermore indicated that they seek recognition in a relationship, regular communication and for co-workers to be at work most of the time to avoid having to do each other's work. Relating with a co-worker was mentioned as an advantage. Respect is also needed for a co-worker relationship to function optimally. Participants also mentioned that they do not want to simply be a number but experience a sense of belonging in the relationship. When co-workers work towards shared goals and they show humanity towards each other, the relationship will most probably work. Lastly, the ability to handle critique as well as trusting and understanding each other are regarded as important.

### **Category 3: Influence of co-worker relationships on work performance**

In this category, participants were requested to explain how their peer co-worker relationships, influence their work performance.

Table 4

*Influence of peer co-worker relationships on work performance*

Theme	Sub-theme	Response
Decreased work performance	Conflict between co-workers	<p><i>“Obviously when you have got friction with someone and you need to ask that person something you will rather ask someone else and that slows down the process...”</i></p> <p><i>“...If you are in a constantly negative environment, and everybody is fighting and shouting and not getting along; that will most definitely affect your performance because your brain will focus on that issues...”</i></p> <p><i>“...People will notice the friction and it will definitely influence performance among us because everybody is aware of what is going on in the other projects.”</i></p>
	Demotivated to meet deadlines	<i>“...I can immediately feel that my drive to do things are gone. My drive to meet deadlines is not quite there...”</i>
	Distrust	<i>“...If one can't work together and trust your department, you're going to take more time to finish things or do not finish them at all.”</i>
	Gossip among co-workers	<i>“...When I am in a certain environment where people are talking about me it is going to make me uncomfortable and that does not make me productive in anything I do.”</i>
	Impairs performance of specific work day	<i>“...It could ruin my day and intrinsically it could have an impact on how I deliver my work for that day.</i>
	Lack of concentration	<p><i>“...So if this person talks about that person; you hear it and your concentration is impaired.”</i></p> <p><i>“...The moment you're negative, you're concentrating on negative stuff and then you aren't as productive as you should be”</i></p>
	Lack of co-operation between co-workers	<p><i>“...If you do not have that relationship you're not going to get the same level of co-operation so it certainly impacts your efficiency.”</i></p> <p><i>“...Where there isn't a healthy relationship between individuals; peers; where there should be and certainly, you know you get a kind of a silo effect at times...”</i></p>
	Lack of co-worker support (advice)	<i>“If you struggle with something and you are uncertain, and you do not get along with your colleague that much, and you're not open</i>



			<i>with them to ask for help, you're going to do your own thing and maybe even the wrong thing..."</i>
		Lack of co-worker support (instrumental)	<i>"...If you do not get assistance, you yourself can't perform ..."</i>
<b>Increased work performance</b>	Commitment towards work		<i>"It will encourage you to come to work and then you will also give your everything at work."</i>
			<i>"It makes you want to come to work."</i>
		Co-worker support (advice)	<i>"It's because the relationships are good and sometimes if I have an issue or a problem it is much simpler to ask a colleague; listen I am facing this issue can you please assist."</i>
			<i>"...It makes it easier when I've got a question, to come and ask you, you know, open-door type of relationship..."</i>
			<i>"...If I am not sure about something I can ask them and they can show me..."</i>
		Co-worker support (instrumental)	<i>"...I have good relationships with the people I work with so when I need something they are quick to jump and are quick to help me out..."</i>
			<i>"...The moment you have that positivity, and the opportunity to easily talk to people and ask favours; that immediately causes you to feel more productive..."</i>
		Desire to grow	<i>"It makes that you want to go forward and grow also..."</i>
	Faster work processes		<i>"...If you got good relationships everything goes a lot quicker from start to finish, and then you can get everything done on time..."</i>
		Good teamwork	<i>"...There's nobody that will act selfish and say my work is the most important. Everything here is teamwork."</i>
			<i>"So basically, the efficiency, it increases a lot when you can work together with your other colleagues to get all the work done on time."</i>
	Higher self-confidence		<i>"...When I go to work I will feel welcome and then I will regain my confidence."</i>
			<i>"...every day you experience what's happening and it definitely lifts your performance and you push yourself to be better..."</i>
		Information sharing among co-workers	<i>"...At this stage there is one guy with a few more years' experience than I have and I try to learn from him as much as possible. He is</i>

	<p><i>also willing to convey his knowledge to me...</i></p> <p><i>"...And the information you receive is correct, it would automatically affect your own performance. You can trust, that the information you receive is correct..."</i></p>
Lack of conflict	<p><i>"...When you are relaxed within the environment and there's no personal conflict, then you will most definitely perform better from a work perspective."</i></p> <p><i>"It makes it easier when you do not have issues with anybody so it makes it easier for you to do your work..."</i></p>
Positivity	<p><i>"...The moment you have that positivity and the opportunity to talk with people and ask favours; that causes you to feel more productive..."</i></p> <p><i>"...If I feel good and I feel happy, happy to be around certain people, the productivity is ultimately going to go up from my side."</i></p>
Regular interaction with co-workers	<p><i>"...Work performance was impaired, due to less frequent interaction, because you're not always sure of what's going on. Here, on the other hand, you see what's happening every day and it definitely increases your performance..."</i></p>
Understanding each other	<p><i>"...I think when you communicate properly with people and you understand them, and you try to understand their view and you accommodate each other; then you're not only increasing your own performance but that of the other person as well..."</i></p>

Table 4 provides a description of themes and sub-themes as extracted from the analysed data. Examples of original responses by participants were also provided in order to substantiate the findings of this category. It is evident that positive and negative peer co-worker relationships have different influences on employees' work performance. Participants indicated that positive co-worker relationships effect in an increase of performance, while negative co-worker relationships lead to a decrease in work performance due to various reasons and aspects.

*Decreased work performance:* Participants mentioned that when they need to work in an environment that is constantly negative and where a lot of fighting occurs, they tend to focus on the negative issues, which then drags down their work performance. Negative co-worker relationships further result in demotivating employees to meet deadlines. Negative relationships can also produce distrust in a department and slows down the speed of getting work done. It might also lead to gossiping among employees which impairs productivity. Poor co-worker relationships can have a

direct influence on how an individual's day goes and the amount of work the person gets done. Employees further specified that it is difficult to focus on work when people talk about each other in a negative way, resulting in a lack of concentration. Participants also indicated that the absence of healthy relationships between peers may result in silo effects, where the level of co-operation is definitely impaired. If co-workers do not see eye to eye, they might not ask for help and follow their own mind in doing something even though it might be wrong, slowing down performance. Employees need assistance to perform. When the relationships struggle, the assistance is lacking, increasing the time it takes to complete a task.

*Increased work performance:* Participants indicated that positive co-worker relationships have a positive influence on one's commitment and desire towards work. In a positive co-worker relationship, employees can ask advice when they find a specific work-related task to be difficult. Furthermore, physical assistance is close by. Positive relationships are also linked to a desire to grow and faster work processes. Employees further cited that good teamwork, higher self-confidence, information sharing, a lack of conflict and positivity all are outcomes of positive relationships, resulting in higher work performance. Due to the regular interaction between co-workers that results from positive relationships, work performance also increases. Work performance also seems to be higher when co-workers understand one another.

#### **Category 4: Influence of co-worker relationships on the organisation**

In this category, participants were requested to explain how peer co-worker relationships, especially the relationships they have with peers in the workplace, influence the organisation and the collective organisational outcomes.

Table 5

##### *Influence of peer co-worker relationships on the organisation*

Theme	Sub-theme	Response
<b>Influence organisation relationships negative</b>	<b>on when are</b> Decreased employee morale	<i>"...If there are a few weak links in the chain it can start impacting morale because of the whole team are not achieving what they should..."</i>
		<i>"...Because of the lack of co-operation between certain others; then general morale can be impacted as well..."</i>
		<i>"...Because the relationships between co-workers are not the greatest. It then means you have got like one bad apple in your</i>

	<i>bag and soon it affects morale..."</i>
Decreased organisational success	<i>"So if your guys are not speaking on the same level type of a thing and not helping each other, the company is going to suffer. Not just your work is going to suffer but the whole company in all because together you can do better."</i>
Increased turnover intention	<p><i>"...It effects even employee retention because somebody might get frustrated because they're not getting the results from a co-worker, purely because the relationship isn't great and then you could potentially lose good people."</i></p> <p><i>"Poor relationships can cause people to resign and yet again you lose quality employees..."</i></p> <p><i>"...If I'm in an environment where I am not getting co-operation from a peer who has a direct impact on my work performance, then I might consider going you know, in extreme cases..."</i></p>
Monetary losses for organisation	<p><i>"...I would say the organisation is going to lose money..."</i></p> <p><i>"...staff turnover will be higher and they will have to replace you, which is going to cost money..."</i></p>
Negative organisational image	<i>"...for a company, it does not send a good image, especially those that we want to impress and practically carry because they only signed on as a client now..."</i>
Not achieving organisational goals	<p><i>"...If you do not get that positivity inside the group; inside the relationships that you have with your colleagues, then I feel like it affects the organisation in a bad way because we are not making sales, we are not achieving goals..."</i></p> <p><i>"...Now you are not collaborating or co-operating to achieve a common goal..."</i></p>
Not meeting organisational deadlines	<p><i>"...If the performance is below par then it has a direct influence on the product and the deadlines. If it's not going well in our groups, the deadlines will be missed."</i></p> <p><i>"...when relationships are bad you need to postpone the deadlines again and again."</i></p>
Poor communication between departments	<i>"...if we do not collaborate effectively or have good relationships, we then might find ourselves operating as silo's and the information flow between different departments might be strained or might not happen at all..."</i>

<b>Influence organisation relationships positive</b>	<b>on when are</b>	Poor employee-client relationships	<i>"...when you are dealing with consumers they get annoyed coz nobody knows what's going on in their company. So they do not want to do business with us anymore."</i>
		Slower decision making	<i>"It then means you have got like one bad apple in your bag and soon it effects morale, it effects the speed with which decisions can be made..."</i>  <i>"It slows down the whole process and that slows down the whole business."</i>
		Unhappy employees	<i>"...You're going to be miserable..."</i>
		Better employee-client relationships	<i>"So it just shows we are working together the whole time and that improves the customers view of the company as a whole and that obviously increase and expands business and customer relationships"</i>
		Employees experience a strong sense of belonging towards organisation	<i>"...how we fit.; to be part of something bigger..."</i> <i>"...one doesn't want to be a number only."</i>
		Increased flow of information	<i>"I think there is a much better flow in terms of ideas; faster decision making as well..."</i>
		Increased employee engagement	<i>"...Engagement, and then again retention is actually facilitated because you have created a conducive environment for learning; for people working together and growing together and ultimately what that does is to ensure the organisation's objectives are met."</i>  <i>"If the relationships are good then I think you feel excited; you feel happy. I mean after all we do spend a lot of time at work and you feel energised to give more and give more support to those you have a good relationship with..."</i>
		Increased employee morale	<i>"...employee morale..."</i>
		Increased employee retention	<i>"...and then again retention is actually facilitated..."</i>
		Increased organisational success	<i>"I think that what's happening is positive and it has a positive influence on the individual and the organisation as well to move forward."</i>  <i>"...Then we build people, and I think it contributes to people's</i>

		<i>growth, not only yours but your organisational grows as well...</i>
	Innovative employees	<i>"...I believe people are more innovative when they're positive and they are in a nice working environment..."</i>
	Loyal employees	<i>"...If you are happy at your workplace, you start respecting the organisation...you will fly your flag</i>  <i>"...You're not going to drop the organisation; you're going to be the positive one..."</i>
	Defines organisational culture	<i>"...The culture that's created; why people build positive relationships and have open relationships that's not only strictly business, it adds value to the organisational culture itself..."</i>  <i>"The relationships result in our culture. You'll see we're very relaxed..."</i>  <i>"You will realise that we're very relaxed; but it's also a stress relieve."</i>
	Organisational objectives are achieved	<i>"So I think relationships are absolutely the most critical thing within an organisation if you want the organisation to achieve its objectives."</i>  <i>"...working as a team makes the whole company to reach their goals..."</i>
	Positive organisational image	<i>"So it just shows we are working together the whole time and that improves the customer's view of the company..."</i>

Table 5 provides a description of themes and sub-themes as extracted from the analysed data. Examples of original responses by participants were also provided in order to substantiate the findings of this category. It is evident that positive and negative peer co-worker relationships have different influences on the organisation and organisational outcomes. Various responses emerged as participants indicated to what extent peer co-worker relationships influence organisations:

*Influence on organisation when relationships are negative:* Participants mentioned that decreased employee morale and decreased organisational success are also consequences of negative relationships. Employees mentioned that such negative relationships will lead to an increased intention to leave; resulting in higher recruitment and selection costs. Employees added that negative relationships can result in a negative organisational image. Another influence is the fact

that common, organisational goals will not be met, including a failure to meet deadlines. Poor communication between departments is another outcome of negative relationships. Participants also indicated that it can lead to poor client relationships and slower decision making which ultimately result in work processes being slowed down. Finally, negative peer co-worker relationships influence the organisation by causing employees to be unhappy.

*Influence on organisation when relationships are positive:* Findings suggested that positive co-worker relationships will benefit employee-client relationships due to the fact that everybody works well together. Furthermore, employees seem to experience a sense of belonging towards the organisation when they perceive to fit in with everyone. An increase in the flow of information also occurs if the relationships are positive, along with increased employee engagement and morale. Participants mentioned that retention is facilitated by positive relationships and that overall organisational success will be positively affected. Positive working environments also create more innovative employees and it spurs loyalty towards the organisation. In addition, these relationships were mentioned to define the organisational culture in a positive or constructive manner. Employees were of opinion that positive co-worker relationships result in the achievement of organisational objectives. They also said that it creates a positive organisational image.

## DISCUSSION

### Outline of the findings

The first objective of this study was to conceptualise peer co-worker interpersonal workplace relationships according to literature. For a detailed conceptualisation of peer co-worker relationships please refer to the literature review, as part of the research article.

The second objective of this study was to explore the experiences of peer co-worker interpersonal workplace relationships according to employees within selected South African organisations. After a detailed analysis of the findings of this study it became evident that participants experienced relationships differently, indicating the subjectivity of these experiences as they occur. This is in line with the social constructivism paradigm which holds that experiences are subjective and multiple realities of the same phenomenon exist (Fouché & Schurink, 2011). Participants indicated that they experience both negative and positive peer co-worker relationships in the workplace. When participants were asked to describe the peer co-worker relationships they have in the workplace, the following themes emerged: *negative relationships* and *positive relationships*. Sub-

themes that emerged included: *co-worker support, different personalities, equality among co-workers, friendships, high workload, lack of personal knowledge regarding co-workers, and supportive working environment.*

Negative co-worker relationships are identified through certain behavioural traits such as undesirable, disrespectful and harmful behaviour towards employees (Griffin et al., 2012). Employees felt that they have negative relationships with co-workers who do not work hard and when they can't seem to be working towards shared goals. Research, however, argues that employees who display lower levels of conscientiousness will have more negative ties at work due to generally lower performance as a result of their laziness and/or being disorganised. This can impair goal attainment (Labianca & Brass, 2006; Labianca, 2014). Misunderstandings between co-workers also seem to be a reason for negative relationships. When the group doesn't end up doing what it has to do it causes bad energy within the group. In relation to this, researchers found that negative relationships reduce cohesion in teams, which inevitably hinders the performance of the work team (de Jong, Curşeu & Leenders, 2014).

Participants indicated that a positive co-worker relationship can be described as a supporting relationship in various ways. According to research findings, support includes providing advice, being available for co-workers, caring for and understanding one another as well as instrumental support. Instrumental support is characterised as support that may help employees to perform their work tasks successfully (Poortvliet, Anseel & Theuwis, 2015). Wang and Walumbwa (2007) for example say that supportive co-workers are more inclined to assist their co-workers with extra work and in personal matters. The concept of support is emphasised by Marshal, Michaels, and Mulki (2007) as they state that the availability or lack of support in the workplace is a crucial factor, resulting in employees' perceptions of isolation in today's organisational circumstances. According to their research, a lack of a good support system, recognition and informal interactions with co-workers create the perception of workplace isolation among workers. This substantiates findings of this study which states that co-workers deem friendships and interaction outside of work as part of the reasons for their positive co-worker relationships. Participants further indicated how similar personalities also contribute to the positivity of a relationship. This is in accordance with literature, which describes how the personality of co-workers can play an important role in the development of a positive peer co-worker relationship (Halbesleben, 2012). Researchers such as Sias and Cahill (1998) add by saying co-workers with similar personalities have the ability to form closer relationships.



The third objective of this study was to explore what aspects contribute to effective peer co-worker interpersonal workplace relationships according to employees within selected South African organisations. When participants were requested to explain what aspects contribute towards an effective peer co-worker relationship, the following themes emerged: *acceptance of differences, attentive listening, commitment to work, competent co-workers, conflict management, consideration for co-workers, co-worker support (instrumental), direct verbal communication, friendliness, friendships, honesty, knowledge regarding co-worker's work, mutual problem solving, mutual value between co-workers, open communication channels, recognition, regular communication, regular presence at work, relating with co-workers, respect, shared goals, showing humanity towards co-workers, the ability to handle critique, trust and understanding each other.*

Various literature sources confirm the findings of this study. Wall (2008) elaborates on some of these aspects by stating that it takes a lot of effort to get things done when there is conflict and problems within teams. He mentions that a lack of co-ordinated effort has a significant effect on efficiency it lessens the quality of outcomes and leads to extra costs. I believe this can be linked to participants who mentioned the importance of shared goals. Employees need to work together towards the same goal. Wall (2008) continues to state that conflict at work can cause major disruptions. When it is not managed well it can cause damage to teams and undermine trust between co-workers. This corroborates the findings of this study which indicated that conflict management is an important aspect in a peer relationship. Trust was furthermore mentioned as important within the boundaries of co-worker relationships. Reina and Reina (2006) also mention that today, a business and a human need for trust to exist. They argue that business is conducted through relationships and that the basis of every successful relationship is trust. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) further make the statement that one of the beliefs of SET is really that relationships evolve over time into mutual commitments where trust and loyalty are both exercised. These findings further support the research of Pratt and Dirks (2007) who believe that trust is a fundamental aspect of positive relationships.

Many participants also hold the opinion that friendship between co-workers is a good thing and that it complements the workplace relationship. Workplace friendships are described as unique and interpersonal relationships which employees create from a place of freedom that goes beyond the formal roles they possess. These relationships in essence consist of some form of interdependence, mutual concern for each other as well as interest in each other (Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery, & Pilkington, 1995). This can be linked to findings that state that consideration for co-workers is regarded as a contributor to positive relationships. One can make the assumption that employees who experience a deeper, meaningful friendship with their co-workers also experience higher levels

of consideration for one another. Sias (2009) furthermore suggests that friendships among peer co-workers can be linked to employees' job satisfaction and commitment to their work, creativity, information-sharing, decision-making and career development. Participants furthermore mentioned that mutual value between co-workers and relating with one's peers are also important for a relationship. Roberts (2007) adds to the discussion by emphasising the impact a positive relationship has on one's identity. According to her definition, a positive relationship consists of a true sense of relating to one another as well as mutuality.

The fourth objective of this study was to explore what the influence is of peer co-worker interpersonal workplace relationships on work performance according to employees within selected South African organisations. Participants mentioned many influences. They also differentiated between the influences a positive relationship has and those of the negative co-worker relationships. Participants indicated that positive co-worker relationships lead to an increase of performance, while negative co-worker relationships result in a decrease in work performance due to various reasons and aspects. Under the theme, *decreased work performance*, the following prominent sub-themes emerged: *conflict between co-workers*, *demotivated to meet deadlines*, *distrust*, *gossip among co-workers*, *impairs performance of specific work day*, and *lack of concentration*. The second theme *increased work performance* also had many sub-themes that provided more information. Sub-themes that were very prominent include: *commitment towards work*, *co-worker support*, *good teamwork*, *information sharing among co-workers*, and *positivity*.

Participants mentioned that the occurrence of gossip has the ability to impair concentration, which in the end results in decreased work performance. Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca, and Ellwardt (2012), however, are of opinion that gossip can also be positive and serve various functions such as information sharing, fostering interpersonal intimacy and upholding group norms. However, the assumption can be made that when there are conversations about other employees going around the office it can influence employees adversely.

Irrespective of what is believed to cause the negative relationship, the effect it has on individuals' performance and ultimately the organisation's performance is the same. Negative relationships distract employees from their work, eventually lowering the quality and quantity of outputs. In the end, employees' motivation and commitment towards their work fades (Morrison & Nolan, 2007). These research results are very much in line with the findings of this current study, since participants indicated how negative relationships cause them to lack concentration, demotivate them to meet deadlines and result in work that is void of excellence. Furthermore, findings indicated how

negative relationships decrease work performance through a lack of co-operation between co-workers. Labianca and Brass (2006) contemplate the fact that negative relationships generate social liabilities because it has an opposing effect on aspects such as co-operation between co-workers to complete tasks and reach organisational goals.

Brunetto et al. (2013) indicated in a study among nurses in Australia and the United States of America that workplace relationships, including co-worker support, are critical. These relationships were found to be important as a link to engagement, both emotional and intellectual. It is said by these researchers that engaged nurses embrace their work. Many participants have indicated how a positive co-worker relationship can increase work performance due to support in the form of advice and instrumental acts. Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) contemplate that co-workers make the place by acting as a rich source of help and shared information. These forms of co-worker support reduce co-workers' role ambiguity, conflict, and overload. Inevitably, co-worker support can be associated with increased satisfaction and immersion in one's job. These insights link up with participants who said that positive relationships result in higher levels of commitment and when there is a positive relationship it spills over into a co-operative and supportive relationship which makes them perform much better. Further contributions from participants indicated that they also experience a desire to come to work, a desire to grow, plus higher self-confidence due to positive co-worker relationships. Colbert, Bono, and Purvanova (2016) indicate in their study that workplace relationships are central to what they call employee flourishing. Their study proves that positive workplace relationships promote not only functions such as personal growth but also positive emotions and life satisfaction. They conclude by arguing that these aspects benefit not only the employee but the organisation as a whole.

The fifth objective of this study was to explore what the influence of peer co-worker workplace relationships is on the organisation according to employees within selected South African organisations. Participants mentioned various organisational influences. It is also evident from the findings that negative and positive relationships have different influences on the organisation and its outcomes. When participants were asked to describe what influences peer co-worker relationships have on their work performance, the following themes emerged: *influence on organisation when relationships are negative* and *influence on organisation when relationships are positive*. Recurring sub-themes that emerged under *influence on organisation when relationships are negative* include: *decreased employee morale, decreased organisational success, increased turnover intention, not achieving organisational goals, poor communication between departments and slower decision making*. Sub-themes that further described the theme *influence on organisation when relationships*

*are positive* include the following: *increased flow of information, increased employee engagement, increased employee morale, loyal employees and positive organisational image.*

Employees for instance mentioned that positive relationships will increase employee engagement. May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) interestingly enough also found that positive co-worker relationships are a predictor of employee engagement. Even more than that, in another study, highly engaged police officers displayed higher levels of organisational commitment and a lower intention to leave (Brunetto, Teo, Shacklock, & Farr-Wharton, 2012). The assumption can thus be made that it might be the same for employees working in South African organisations. Employee morale was also mentioned to rise due to positive co-worker relationships in the organisation. A group of workers experiencing high levels of morale also display positivity, optimism and satisfaction with their co-workers (Forret & Love, 2008). Where the relationships are negative, employees seem to have decreased employee morale. Poor morale seems to be connected to lower levels of productivity and work effort (Weakliem & Frenkel, 2006).

Another definite observation participants made was the relationship between negative relationships and the intention to leave the organisation. Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) found that negative co-worker relationships relate negatively towards job satisfaction, organisational commitment and job performance. On the other hand, it was found that it is positively related to higher absenteeism rates as well as higher turnover rates. Participants commented that an increased flow of information will be the outcome of a positive working relationship with one's peer. In contrast, Labianca and Brass (2006) mention that negative behaviour in poor relationships can be the reason that employees are denied timely access to the most relevant information. If information is withheld, performance may be hindered. Findings further indicated that employees experience a sense of belonging towards the organisation as they experience meaningful relationships. Another study showed similar results. Findings suggested that the prevalence of positive co-worker relationships improve organisational citizenship behaviours (Li & Hung, 2009).

The sixth objective of this research study was to make further recommendations for future research and practice.

### **Practical implications**

This study might enhance awareness among South African employees regarding the importance of their workplace relationships with peer co-workers. This study has the ability to elicit a motivation

among employees to truly invest in their co-worker relationships in order to increase their work performance and ultimately the overall performance of the organisation they work for. The dynamics of workplace relationships have hopefully become clearer, and individuals should be active in their pursuit to establish quality connections in the workplace. Organisations should educate their employees on the importance of co-worker relationships and of the processes involving the necessity of forming positive relationships. Managers should work hard towards creating organisational cultures in which it is possible to form good work relationships and the concept *positive relationships* is taken seriously. Organisational leaders should be a living example employees can follow. By doing that, organisational and individual success will follow.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

As is only natural, although this research study provided a high volume of insightful findings, that it does have its limitations. The first limitation can be found in the nature of qualitative research. The objective of qualitative research is not to generalise, because sample sizes are relatively small. It should therefore be noted that the results from this research study cannot be generalised, due to the sample size of only 18 participants. Secondly, participants were only gathered from two organisations, which means that a slightly narrow view on peer co-worker relationships could have been provided. Adding to this, because participants only experience co-worker relationships within their own organisation, yet again results cannot be generalised because it is solely related to the organisation in which participants are situated. Another limitation might be the fact that some participants might not have been interviewed in their home language. Possibly, certain participants could have found it difficult to fully express themselves. The researcher did, however, take the necessary steps in order to ensure fairness by probing and asking for clarification whenever the meaning of something said wasn't clear.

Recommendations can be made regarding future research. First of all, a larger sample size can be utilised in order to gain broader perspectives into workplace relationships. Participants should also differ more in terms of their employing organisation, since this will provide more generalised data. Furthermore, future researchers should perhaps take more care in finding a sample that is more representative of the South African workforce, for instance including Indian employees as they also form part of the South African labour market. With regards to future research, field workers may be employed to assist in the event where language differences exist.

Recommendations can also be made for practice. Organisations, and typically management, can implement the findings of this study by highlighting the absolute importance of healthy workplace relationships. These findings can be utilised to assist in constructing the culture of organisation. Managers should coach teams and individuals on how to develop quality relationships by emphasising the benefits it could hold, as well as the destructive nature of poor co-worker relationships. Management should set the example by exercising the necessary effort to establish positive relationships among themselves, before expecting it from others as well.

Organisations should foster cultures where it is easy to implement factors contributing to positive relationships. When awareness is aimed at increasing the meaningfulness of relationships, increasing organisational growth and success might be less of an effort.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, employees within selected South African organisations seem to experience both negative and positive peer co-worker relationships. The terms positive and negative relationships at work are very popular among various literature sources. Findings of this study provided the researcher with rich information on co-worker relationships. Not only did participants describe the reasons for which they will classify their relationships as negative or positive but they also provided in-depth data on what aspects are really important for a co-worker relationship to be positive. These findings are very useful and can be practically implemented in the workplace by managers who realise the value of healthy workplace relationships. Employees who participated in this study also provided an indication of how the relationships they have with their co-workers influences their personal work performance as well as the organisation and the outcomes the organisation wishes to obtain. The conclusion can be drawn that employees truly realise the importance of nourishing well-developed co-worker relationships and that they wish to pursue such relationships in the workplace to improve overall work life.

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

## **CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter provides conclusions regarding the findings from the research article (Chapter 2). The conclusions are aligned with the general and specific objectives of this research study. In addition, this chapter also discusses the limitations of this study and makes recommendations for the organisation / practice and for future research opportunities.

### **3.1 Conclusion**

#### **To conceptualise peer co-worker interpersonal workplace relationships according to literature**

Work relationships in general refer to patterns of exchanges between two members or interacting parties. Interactions can occur between individuals, groups, or organisations. However, the exchanges are usually focussed on achieving some common objective (Ferris et al., 2009). Researchers, for instance Roopa and Velumani (2016), describe interpersonal relationships at work as the day-to-day interactions between co-workers that form part of the natural work environment. Peer co-worker relationships are defined as the connections employees form with individuals that operate on the same level of the organisational hierarchy; possessing no formal authority over one another (Sias, 2009). Kram and Isabella (1985) also discovered that peers serve various functions. Employees naturally have information, collegial, and special peer relationships in the workplace. Information peers experience low levels of intimate communication. Collegial peers interact with moderate levels of intimate communication – typically a blend between a friendship and an acquaintance. Special peer relationships are considered to display high levels of intimate communication as well as a deep friendship between co-workers (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

#### **To explore the experiences of peer co-worker interpersonal workplace relationships according to employees within selected South African organisations**

According to the findings in the research article, South African employees seem to experience peer co-worker relationships in the workplace as either negative or positive. Their experiences differ and various aspects contribute to the level of negativity or positivity embedded in these relationships. A theme that came through strongly was co-worker support. Whether it is the ability to ask for advice, caring for one another or being available to help with tasks, co-workers rely heavily on one another for support. For instance, researchers are of opinion that co-workers may be ideal in supporting one another concerning mistreatment from an authoritative figure because they might

experience the same treatment and therefore know how to empathise with one another's complaints (Hodson, 2001; Lively, 2008).

Literature describes a negative co-worker relationship as one in which the result of the interaction is undesirable for at least one of the parties involved. Further to this, the negative relationship is identified by the prevalence of harm being transferred to a co-worker (Griffin, Stoverink, & Gardner, 2012). The findings of this research study did, however, not necessarily indicate harm having been done. Employees mentioned other behavioural aspects that constitutes a negative relationship such as no direct communication, a lack of personal knowledge of each other and unequal distribution of work, to name but a few. The conclusion can thus be drawn that employees perceive relationships to be negative when there is little co-operation between one another or where feelings of connectedness are absent. Research furthermore identifies typical peers that can be troublesome in a relationship and create stress for others. Peers that are obsessively focussed on their own problems, demanding and controlling peers, bullies, as well as incompetent and harassing peers contribute to an unhealthy stressful working environment (Fritz, 2002).

**To explore what aspects contribute to effective peer co-worker interpersonal workplace relationships according to employees within selected South African organisations**

Participants of this study mentioned various aspects to be important for successful co-worker relationships. The main contributing factors to a positive relationship seems to be an ability to listen attentively, conflict management, instrumental co-worker support, open communication channels, respect and trust. Sias (2009) provides a description of the positive functions peers serve in their respective relationships with one another. These functions include mentoring each other, exchanging information, and providing each other with social support. The assumption can thus be made that when these functions are well-managed within a peer relationship, it will naturally add to the quality of the relationship. Kahn (2007) writes that numerous ways exist in which we can understand what types of connections can be labelled meaningful to employees. According to Ibarra (1993), social networks that serve specific functions for employees include communication, advice, support, friendships and influence. Additionally, in general, a tie between two people are considered positive when it conveys positive affect, such as liking or love, emotional and physical support and mentoring (Baker, Cross, & Wooten, 2003).



**To explore what the influence of peer co-worker interpersonal workplace relationships is on work performance according to employees within selected South African organisations**

Employees who feel satisfied with the quality of the exchanges they have in the workplace are more prone to show higher levels of performance (Shaw, Dineen, Fang, & Vellella, 2009). This correlates with the findings of this current research study. Participants indicated that well-developed, meaningful relationships with their co-workers assist them in performing better. On the other hand, though, negative relationships and conflict between employees have the ability to drag down the performance of an individual, team and department. Morrison and Nolan (2007) found in a qualitative study regarding negative relationships that negative relationships make the job more difficult. It furthermore seems to be breaking down communication channels and creating tension, resulting in missed deadlines and mistakes at work. Employees also mentioned that, due to negative feelings towards a co-worker, they would rather avoid contact, resulting in delayed processes (Morrison & Nolan, 2007). It is therefore evident that co-worker relationships cannot be ignored due to the significant impact it has on employees' work performance. It therefore comes as no surprise that co-worker relationships have become critical to manage effectively, due to the increased demand for collaboration in the workplace (Forret & Love, 2008).

**To explore what the influence of peer co-worker interpersonal relationships is on organisational outcomes according to employees within selected South African organisations**

Participants reported that co-worker relationships have definite influences on the organisation. Positive relationships seem to lower employees' intention to leave. It also results in generally more engaged employees who experience a strong sense of belonging towards the organisation. Fay and Kline (2011) also found that co-worker liking was associated with higher organisational commitment, and job satisfaction among employees. They further agree that co-worker relationships should be on managers' priority list. Pearce and Randel (2004) additionally point out the fact that deeper relationships and sufficient advice systems among employees can be linked to better performance ratings. Findings of this study that can be added to this argument state that a much better flow of information exists in the organisation which results in faster decision-making when relationships are properly managed. These findings are consistent with other arguments, such as that of Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) who found that co-workers make the workplace. Elaborating on that argument, they believe that co-workers provide help and information which lowers work overload and addresses role ambiguity and conflict. For these reasons, the actions and behaviours of co-workers are strongly linked to increased job satisfaction, job involvement and a

serious commitment to the organisation. Participants also mentioned that they experience higher levels of loyalty towards their employing organisation when they are happy within a healthy work environment with positive work relationships.

Sloan (2012) identified that co-workers who perceive that they are being treated unfairly by others might experience more psychological distress and less job satisfaction. Venkataramani, Labianca, and Grosser (2013) furthermore state that if co-workers dislike one another and act rudely to one another, employees are known to spread gossip, interrupt other workers' workflow and withhold a helping hand. Employees did indicate that silo effects may result when they do not collaborate effectively. This leads to disrupted information flow between departments. The effects are thus spreading to different areas in the organisation. Evidently, findings indicated that the influence these co-worker relationships have in an organisation are widespread, be it positive or negative. It simply goes to show that workplace relationships are fundamental to behaviour in organisations in which employees are in constant interaction and that it serves as a foundation to successfully complete work related-tasks (Ferris et al., 2009).

#### **To make further recommendations for future research and practice**

This objective will be addressed in section 3.3

### **3.2 Limitations**

Even though this study provided rich and insightful findings regarding workplace relationships it still had its limitations.

The first limitation concerns the sample size of ( $N=18$ ) employees from only two organisations. Even though it might appear that the sample size is relatively small, taking into consideration research in general, for purposes of qualitative research, data saturation has been reached. Even though Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) recommend that single case studies should generally include 15-30 interviews, many qualitative studies tend to have smaller sample sizes. Another concern might be that the sample was not totally representative of the South African labour market. Although the sample was equally representative in gender it was predominantly white employees (61%) who spoke Afrikaans (56%). Hence, in terms of race, the sample could have been a bit more representative of South Africa's diverse workforce. This only means that this study cannot be replicated for the entire South African population.

A further limitation of this research study concerns the language used to conduct the interviews. It is possible that some of the participants may have concluded the interviews in a language other than their mother tongue. Participants were asked prior to conducting the interviews whether they feel comfortable with the interviews being conducted in either Afrikaans or English. Still, some of the participants could have found it difficult to completely express themselves and give meaning to what they intended to say. Relating to the language concern, the interviews that were conducted in Afrikaans had to be translated into English. The researcher did however exert the necessary effort to ensure that the original meanings of statements were not lost during the translation.

Finally, the last limitation concerns the use of an electronic voice recorder. Participants were informed that interviews need to be recorded for purposes of data analysis. It could have been that some participants were not totally comfortable with the idea, but nevertheless, they participated voluntarily in the interview process.

### **3.3 Recommendations**

Recommendations are provided for the organisation / practice and future research opportunities.

#### **3.3.1 Recommendations for the organisation**

This study provided meaningful insights into the richness of workplace relationships. Organisations are reminded that human connections within the organisation are vital and that these connections assist employees in accomplishing the work in the end. Due to the time spent at work and among employees, the relationships have significant impacts on how organisations perform (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Participants indicated that they really seek meaningful and positive relationships with their co-workers and that many aspects in the workplace have an influence on the quality of these relationships.

This study also identified many unique aspects which employees consider important to be present in a successful peer co-worker relationship. This information can be utilised by organisations, together with findings of other, similar studies. Managers can raise awareness within departments that these contributing factors should be pursued and that employees should act on them in accordance with organisational values.

The workplace of the twenty first century has become a global field of competition and employees need to collaborate and co-operate with one another as never before (Pearlman & Barney, 2000). It is imperative that organisations promote healthy co-worker relationships. If employees are constantly keeping score of as to how they are treated and the rewards they receive they will not be able to contribute effectively to a peer co-worker relationship (Forret & Love, 2008). Hence this research study provides organisations with the recommendation to help employees pull together in teams and while working on tasks help them foster relationships that will take the organisation forward.

Organisations are provided with information they can apply. It might be beneficial for organisations to spend some time on this subject and realise some practical solutions and interventions to diminish negative relationships between peers. Many participants indicated the importance of a relaxing environment and friendships among co-workers. Organisations should perhaps invest more in social exchanges and informal gatherings to enable employees to foster more meaningful relationships outside the working environment.

Literature indicates that collaborative work environments display a higher work engagement rate; managers should thus work purposefully to establish organisational cultures that support healthy, engaging interpersonal relationships (Warshawsky, Havens, & Knafl, 2012).

### **3.3.2 Recommendations for future research**

Various recommendations can be made for future research. Regarding future studies, a more diverse sample should be obtained that provides a more representative image of the South African workforce. It would be insightful to include all races and cultures within a study regarding workplace relationships as perceptions can differ in different cultural groups.

Further qualitative studies can also be conducted. In this particular study the researcher investigated peer co-worker relationships more broadly. The purpose was ultimately on work and organisational outcomes. More in-depth research can also be performed on the direct influence workplace relationships have on the individual or on a specific work team. Certain themes that emerged strongly during this study can also be explored in more detail. For instance, many participants mentioned friendships and knowing their co-workers on a personal level to be important and that it contributes to positive relationships. Future researchers can possibly focus more on these emerging themes and how it can be established effectively in the workplace.

Another recommendation for future research can be possible quantitative studies to validate certain findings. An example could be a quantitative research study concerning many possible outcomes of positive and negative workplace relationships. A well-designed questionnaire can be a very powerful tool for establishing statistical findings in collaboration with qualitative interviews. It might be possible to even invent certain interventions in organisations and use quantitative methods to gain insights in that regard.

As was mentioned, this study's aim was more broadly defined. It would be interesting to conduct further research that has its focus on more specific areas. Future researchers can possibly investigate the effect of gender or age on co-worker relationships and whether differences exist regarding these demographic factors. Finally, in terms of the limitation concerning language, future researchers should utilise experienced and trained fieldworkers that are able to conduct interviews in participants' home language to ensure that participants are completely comfortable and able to share their deepest experiences.

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