Regardless of their age and stage in life, most people place great emphasis on their relationships. Relationships make the world go round whether they are personal, professional or accidental. In this digital age, the rapid growth in the use of social media is built largely on the basic human need for relationships—even if they only occur in the Ethernet. So, it is no surprise that relationships are also very important in the work environment.

In a world still reeling from the profound effects of a great economic recession, employers anxiously looking for ways to seize emerging business opportunities have come to realize the true value of their best and brightest talent. They know that the success they seek is driven by people so they are looking for ways to strengthen their investment in human capital. Just in time to help business leaders cope with the challenges of motivating a multicultural, multi-generational, virtually-connected work force the concept of “employee enrichment” has emerged offering a strategic approach that encourages employers to focus on both the work and non-work factors that will enhance their employees’ lives. The employee enrichment principle centers on the belief that truly valuing an employee’s well-being will ultimately result in better performance.

One of the key components of employee enrichment is the concept of the “Human Value Connection” which encompasses the links between people within an organization as well as the links among people across organizations—think interactions and relationships between employees and customers. The underlying tenet of emphasizing the human value connection is that close interpersonal relationships have enormous benefits to both individuals and organizations. Friendships and other social ties foster higher levels of happiness and, from an organization’s perspective, are likely to have numerous benefits including higher employee satisfaction, higher levels of retention, and better employee and organizational performance.

The Forum, affiliated with Northwestern University, recently conducted a study to identify the best practices of companies that emphasize and encourage high levels of human value connection. The study consisted of personal interviews with high-level managers at SAS, Edward Jones, the American Red Cross, McDonalds, Mayo Clinic, Aflac and Nick’s Pizza & Pub (IL).

What the Research Means to Business
- Organizations benefit from the relationships that employees create within and across the enterprise. Friendships and other social ties foster higher levels of happiness that, from an organization’s perspective, can lead to:
  - Higher Employee Satisfaction
  - Higher Levels of Retention
  - Better Employee and Organizational Performance.
- Many elements contribute to relationship building, some of which are “indirect dimensions,” like having a powerful mission and supporting community service.
- A shared mission creates connections between people as they work toward achieving a significant goal that transcends individual objectives.
- Community service becomes a forum for fostering relationships as employees work together to accomplish meaningful objectives that, in turn, enrich their work experience.
The study revealed that generating positive human value connections is essentially a byproduct of a number of strategies and practices, rather than a direct and deliberate effort on the part of the organizations. Despite the differences in the businesses studied, several common key practices emerged that allow human value connections to flourish.

Infusing Organizational Mission

Organizations with strong missions and a sense of purpose that transcends the pragmatic goals of running a business gain many benefits. Clear, pervasive missions help employees come together to achieve goals they're not able to reach on their own, helping them develop interpersonal bonds along the way. While organizations like the Mayo Clinic and the American Red Cross have a clear higher purpose, even more traditional businesses can identify and benefit from a powerful mission, as demonstrated by Nick’s Pizza & Pub and Aflac.

Noble Mission of the Red Cross

In the case of the Red Cross, an atypical organizational structure that interweaves a heavy reliance on volunteers with an infrastructure of professionals drives an underlying need to connect members in innovative ways. Because the nonprofit Red Cross is primarily driven by volunteers across the entire world, the organization depends heavily upon the initiative, resourcefulness and passion of its members. Social communication tools and other communication technologies allow the organization to communicate, draw on their collective expertise in times of crisis and empower all members to drive the organization’s mission. Given the nature of the business—helping communities in crisis—everyone accepts and buys into the mission because they realize that their collective purpose is to help people. It’s not surprising that the people who work for the organization are loyal and respect its mission. This unity of purpose makes it possible for nearly anyone in the organization to play a leadership role whether he/she is a paid staffer or volunteer. The mission unites the work force while the particulars of the crisis situation create the opportunities for employing individual skill sets.

People who work for the Red Cross experience a high level of personal investment in their work due to the mission as well as the nature of the work. Along the way, communities begin to form based on the knowledge of common interests that emerges as a result of on-the-job interaction. The knowledge of common interests often leads to a deeper level of cooperation and engagement that strengthens members’ ability to collaborate in crisis situations. In the end, the power of the Red Cross is a direct outcome of the degree to which both volunteers and staff identify with the mission.

The “Aflac Way”

In an organization like Aflac, the company’s roots as a small family organization paved the way for a built-in focus on the value of individuals, their families and career development despite the organization’s growth to several thousand employees. Beginning with the philosophy: “if you take care of the employee, the employee takes care of the business,” the company’s leaders developed an overriding mission known as the “Aflac way.” Whether it’s work-life-balance, spot awards or employee appreciation activities, everything stems from the “Aflac way.” New employees are schooled in the “Aflac way” even as the underlying mission is incorporated into internal communications and ongoing employee-focused activities. An open door policy and cross functional interactions strengthen employee-leader and employee-employee relationships throughout the organization.

Pizza On Purpose Equals Success

Nick’s Pizza & Pub Founder and CEO Nick Sarillo stumbled on the importance of having a solid mission when he opened his first restaurant with a commitment to “make it different.” “Everyone I knew who’d had a business told me to ‘watch out. People are going to steal.’ I set out to prove them wrong. I wanted a place where everyone worked hard and cared a lot; where people enjoyed coming to work, felt good afterward, and weren’t motivated to steal,” Sarillo told Inc. magazine’s Editor-At-Large Bo Burlingham (“Lessons from a Blue-collar Millionaire.” 1 Feb. 2010).

Ultimately, Sarillo wound up with a unique management approach built on the central purpose proudly displayed on his website: “The Nick’s Experience: Our dedicated family provides this community an unforgettable place; to connect with your family and friends, to have fun and to feel at home.” The site goes on to explain: “Nick’s Pizza & Pub is a purpose and values-driven company, honoring the people and the communities in which we do business. This allows for extremely low team turnover, provides profit sharing for every member of our team, and creates a fun, open work environment” (www.nicksonpurpose.tumblr.com).

As Inc.’s Burlingham describes the business:

Its two restaurants in the northwest suburbs of Chicago have attracted visitors from far and wide who have heard about Sarillo’s approach to management and the effect it has had on employees. The numbers tell the tale. In an industry in which annual employee turnover of 200 percent is considered normal, Sarillo’s restaurants lose and replace just 20 percent of their staff members every year. Net operating profit in the industry averages 6.6 percent; Sarillo’s runs about 14 percent and has gone as high as 18 percent. Meanwhile, the 14-year-old company does more volume on a per-unit basis (an average of $3.5 million
over the past three years) than nearly all independent pizza restaurants. And customers, it seems, adore the service: On three occasions, waitresses have received tips of $1,000 ("Lessons from a Blue-collar Millionaire").

The secret of Sarillo’s success is embodied in his central people-focused mission that is played out in an unique management system based on trust, commitment and employee value.

The Common Thread

As all three examples illustrate, a clearly stated, well understood and thoroughly embraced mission can go a long way toward unifying an organization in a way that produces better results and promotes connections not only within, but also across organizations. As the New York Times pointed out recently, “People typically leave a company for one of three reasons, or a combination of the three. The first is that they don’t feel a connection to the mission of the company, or sense that their work matters. The second is that they don’t really like or respect their co-workers. The third is they have a terrible boss” (Bryant, Adam. “Google’s Quest to Build a Better Boss.” The New York Times. 12 March 2011). Clearly, infusing employees with a strong sense of organizational mission is an important dimension of the human value connection.

Mission Leads To Community Involvement Dimension

Similar to the ripple that occurs when employees band together to achieve a larger mission, when employees cooperate in serving a community or charitable interest, they build social bonds that transfer back to the workplace. Participation in such activities helps employees feel better about themselves, their co-workers and their organizations, which is why it is identified as another dimension of the human value connection.

Looking at the strong mission of the American Red Cross, it is easy to see the direct connection to community involvement. Community involvement is embedded in the Red Cross's very purpose and contributes to the productivity and efficiency of achieving the organization's goals. Although the goals of the other two organizations, Aflac and Nick's Pizza, may be less altruistic nevertheless the leaders of these healthy organizations think of their employees as unique individuals with the ability to make valuable contributions to the business. They also realize that human connections must be fostered carefully to contribute to employees’ lives and make the organizations great places to work.

Community Involvement In Action

While the Aflac organization has a strong focus on team building events as well as employee engagement and appreciation activities, they also engage in local community activities. For instance, on the first Saturday of every month they provide a bus to pick up Aflac volunteers and take them to the Children’s Cancer Center or to help build homes with Habitat for Humanity. This special after-hours activity complements other ongoing community assistance programs.

Originally a construction worker, Nick Sarillo of Nick’s Pizza got into the business when he discovered, as the father of three, that there was no family restaurant in his area where families could relax and have good food and fun at the same time. His two independent, local restaurants have a natural tie to the community that is strengthened by his commitment to his employees. Nevertheless, he went a step further in March 2009 when he launched a new program in response to the effects of the recession. His half-price dining room Mondays and “Takeout Tuesdays” have turned two of the slowest business days of the week into two of the busiest. At the same time, he also sponsors local youth athletic teams, and regularly supports non-profits by hosting evenings in which 15 percent of all sales...
are donated back to the designated group. Along the way, he has earned the “Good Neighbor Award” from the National Restaurant Association and been ranked as the fifth busiest independent pizza company in the U.S. by *Pizza Today*. Sarillo sums up his success this way:

> I am often asked how our restaurants are so successful with no advertising budget. One of our values is, “We honor the relationships that connect our team, our guests and our community” and, when a community responds to this message, this value, that’s all the advertising we need (www.nicksonpurpose.tumblr.com).

**Employee Enrichment Relies on Human Value Connection**

Enriching employees implies attitudes and practices that are aimed at making an employee’s life more satisfying, meaningful and complete. Employee enrichment suggests that work can and should be a positive experience as reflected in an organization’s culture, structure, policies and processes that acknowledge the importance of the non-work aspects of employees' lives. By fostering a clear and adoptable mission along with the community involvement that naturally stems from that mission, an organization can underscore the importance of the human value connection that is embedded in the concept of employee enrichment.

As part of its ongoing research and analysis into the concept of “Employee Enrichment,” the Forum, affiliated with Northwestern University, recently conducted a study to identify the best practices of several companies that emphasize and encourage high levels of human value connection, a key component of employee enrichment. The study consisted of interviews with high-level managers at a number of well known and respected organizations. An analysis of the findings by Dr. Frank Mulhern and Deepti Saxena was published earlier this year under the title “Employee Enrichment: An Approach to Leadership and Management that Serves Employees.” This paper highlights the findings from three organizations and centers on two of the seven human value connection dimensions: mission and community involvement.