

Loneliness: the hidden pandemic



The past year has been a difficult period for many. The pandemic has forced many to work from home and rely on technology to socially interact with their colleagues, making it more difficult to build and maintain relationships, particularly for new employees. Humans are social beings, and our social wellbeing at work is measured on how we feel valued as a person, a colleague and as an employee.

In the workplace

Loneliness in the workplace is not a new issue and is one which has been a key focus employers over the past decade. In 2017, loneliness was estimated to cost UK employers £2.5 billion per year⁽¹⁾ through costs associated with sickness absence, working carers, low productivity at work and loss of staff retention. The most common reason for implementing hot-desk environments in offices was to boost collaboration amongst colleagues – when in reality it is harder to build relationships when you are moving every day.

Research has shown that loneliness affected three in five office workers in the UK⁽²⁾ before the pandemic with many respondents stating loneliness was negatively affecting their stress levels, self-esteem, brain function and sleeping habits. Long term chronic loneliness has been linked to dementia and depression. There are also gender differences - a US study that shows male workers suffer from loneliness more than female workers, although this gap has closed over the last year.⁽³⁾

1/4
of employees in the UK have quit their job from loneliness⁽²⁾

The effects of loneliness are not strictly restricted to an employee's mental health and wellbeing. Loneliness can increase the amount of cortisol (also known as the stress hormone) in our systems impacting our immune system and further research shows links to obesity, coronary heart disease, strokes, and diabetes.

Measuring loneliness

Loneliness is subjective, so there is no “one size fits all” approach to what it looks like. Many people may hide how they are feeling through fear of embarrassment or because they don't want to appear weak. The charity, Mind, have developed ‘Wellness Action Plans’, which are practical guides that allow employees to plan and develop tailored support for when they are not coping. They also provide a helpful framework for talking about mental health which many people find difficult.

Some people thrive on solitude, which should not be confused with loneliness. We can be alone and not feel lonely or feel isolated in a crowd, which can make loneliness difficult to identify.⁽⁴⁾

How to combat loneliness in the workplace

1. Ensure line managers as well as colleagues are equipped to identify changes in an employee's behaviour.

Google initiated a "Blue Dot" programme when they noticed employees were turning to their peers for support. The programme allows employees to become certified listeners (and be identified by having a blue dot next to their name in the employee directory) and offer casual support to colleagues.

2. Remove barriers that isolate marginalised groups.

Work towards removing barriers that isolate these marginalised or minority group employees.

L'Oreal UK and Ireland's #BeatTheStigma initiative is to raise awareness of disability and mental health in the workplace. They have launched a Mental Health Think Tank, developed mindfulness workshops and trained Mental Health First Aiders, all to remove the fear culture and silence around discussing these issues.⁽⁵⁾

3. Technology time-out

The use of smarter technologies has made it easier to send instant messages or emails and exclude social interaction.

SoundCloud have introduced technology-free chill out rooms that aim to remove digital distractions from staff and provides spaces away from their desks and socialise with colleagues.⁽⁶⁾

4. Make time for fun

Set aside time for employees to get to know other colleagues in a casual setting. Whether this is in the form of traditional sports teams, running groups, or a book club.

5. Use your benefit packages

Most insurance policies include additional benefits and services into their policies – such as an employee assistance programme or mental health toolkit - at no additional cost.

The future

Working lives will undoubtedly continue to be affected by the disruption caused by the current COVID-19 pandemic, the risk of future pandemics, earthquakes, tsunamis as well as the effects of climate change such as wild fires. Organisations should be prepared to manage the disruption that these global events bring to our daily working lives.

Now is the time for companies to review their internal policies on flexible working and parental leave, as well as their diversity and inclusion and mental strategies as we navigate the new way of working.

Open up the conversation around loneliness and put the correct strategies and framework in place to support staff. When an employee feels more aligned to the company values, this will help boost their social wellbeing, increase productivity and retain talent.

(1) New Economics Foundation "The cost of loneliness to UK employers" <https://neweconomics.org/2017/02/cost-loneliness-uk-employers>

(2) Total Jobs "How to combat the rise of workplace loneliness" <https://www.totaljobs.com/advice/how-to-combat-the-rise-of-workplace-loneliness>

(3) Cigna "Loneliness and the Workplace: 2020 U.S. report 2020" <https://www.cigna.com/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combating-loneliness/>

(4) Mind, Wellness Action Plans <https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/employer-resources/wellness-action-plan-download/>

(5) L'Oreal key country initiatives <https://www.loreal.com/en/articles/commitments/key-country-initiatives/>

(6) Workplace insight: The flexible solution to workplace loneliness <https://workplaceinsight.net/the-flexible-solution-to-workplace-loneliness/>

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