

Human Resources

Feeling Lonely at Work? You're Not Alone

BNA Snapshot

- Loneliness lowers employee engagement
- Loneliness impairs work performance
- Managers can foster social interaction



By Gayle Cinquegrani

Electronic communication, remote work, flexible scheduling, and frequent job changes have given workers many options, but they also can cause workers to feel disconnected and lonely.

Employers should take note because loneliness can damage an organization's productivity.

“Loneliness reduces task performance and employee engagement. It can also impair creativity and executive functioning like reasoning and decision making,” Vivek Murthy, the U.S. surgeon general from 2014 to 2017, told Bloomberg BNA Oct. 3. “It can be harder to focus, to be patient, and to resolve conflicts.”

Several recent studies “indicate there has been at least a moderate increase in loneliness over the past several decades,” Murthy said.

Only a Third of Workers Feel Engaged

A 2016 Gallup poll concluded that only 32.6 percent of U.S. workers are engaged in their jobs, while half (50.7 percent) aren't engaged, and another 16.7 percent are “actively disengaged.”

Murthy mentioned several possible causes for on-the-job estrangement. “Technology has led people to substitute online connections for offline connections,” and flexible schedules can make it difficult to maintain sufficient personal contact, despite their other advantages. “The connections that people have with each other are essential to their being productive and fulfilled at work,” Murthy said. “A company cannot be strong if its employees are not healthy and fulfilled.”

There is a “direct relationship between happiness and workplace success,” Annie McKee, a senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, told Bloomberg BNA Oct. 3. “Our relationships are absolutely core to being able to enjoy our work and to be effective.”

Finding Meaning in Relationships

“When we go to work, we want to feel like we belong. Even just one friend can make a big difference,” said McKee, the author of a book called *How To Be Happy At Work: The Power of Purpose, Hope and Friendships*. “We can find meaning in our relationships at work.”

Loneliness can cloud thinking, McKee said. “When we feel frustrated or angry, our brains shut down,” she said. When we're happy, “we're able to think more clearly and make better decisions.”

“When people are lonelier at work, their work performance suffers,” Sigal Barsade, a management professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, told Bloomberg BNA Oct. 5.

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—Sigal Barsade

Barsade and Hakan Ozcelik, a management professor at California State University in Sacramento, are among the first academic researchers to study workplace loneliness. They presented a research paper—“Work Loneliness and Employee Performance”—to the Academy of Management in 2011.

Breaking a Negative Cycle

“Once people start feeling lonely,” Ozcelik said, “the way they approach people changes.” Chronically lonely people may become socially awkward, which can cause them to appear unapproachable to their co-workers and lead to even more emotional isolation, he said.

The level of closeness a worker feels with his or her direct supervisor is “a very important factor” in the person's feeling of connection with the job, Ozcelik told Bloomberg BNA Oct. 5. Managers should take the first step to make employees feel valued, he said. They can approach workers who seem disconnected “and try to build a relationship.”

A manager could form work teams and put the lonely employee on a team with welcoming people, Barsade said. “One of the best ways for people to connect is through shared work,” she said.

A manager also could ask a hand-picked co-worker to be the employee's “work buddy” as long as the recruit understands that the initial outreach “may be met negatively” and that “they may have to be persistent,” Barsade said.

Both Barsade and Ozcelik cautioned against managers trying to foster friendships between lonely workers. “The last thing you want to do as a manager is to bring two lonely people together because neither of them has the drive to reach out to the other,” Ozcelik said. “They'll feel even lonelier.”

Official Social Functions

Office-related get-togethers such as happy hours aren't the solution, either. “An official program is going to be problematic” because a lonely worker probably would withdraw, Barsade said.

Team-building exercises can help, but “they can't be too forced or too trite or people will opt out,” McKee said.

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—Annie McKee

“The focus should be more on helping these people build higher-quality relationships,” Ozcelik said. The best solution may be therapy to help the lonely person change his “perception of threats and opportunities” posed by social interactions, Barsade said.

“We've got to make time for getting to know each other,” McKee said. Managers should dispel the notion that conversations among co-workers are a waste of company time, she said.

When workers aren't physically present at the office, video contact is better than phone contact, and phone contact trumps e-mail contact, McKee added. She suggested starting meetings by going “around the table” and having people introduce themselves.

Getting the Inside Scoop

At the surgeon general's office, Murthy used an exercise called “Inside Scoop” to help staffers get acquainted as people. During staff meetings, he set aside time for workers to share personal stories. It made “a profound difference” and led to “a greater sense of commitment,” he said. Workers felt more valued and began volunteering for tasks outside their traditional roles.

“We have to provide opportunities for social connection to develop” at work, Murthy said. “People need human contact to have a sense of community,” but “human contact is increasingly being driven out of our work experience.” Murthy prefers using videoconferences, when possible, rather than e-mails because “you lose so much context when you can't see people's facial reaction,” he said.

“Employees who were lonelier were less committed to the organization,” Barsade said. The bottom line is that “managers shouldn't just treat workplace loneliness as a private problem to be solved by individual employees. It's an organizational problem,” she said.

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