

Workplace loneliness is the modern pandemic damaging lives and hurting businesses

September 26 2023, by Shea X. Fan, Fei Zhu and Margaret A. Shaffer



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Loneliness is a much discussed [social issue](#), but it is rarely considered to be a workplace problem that needs to be managed like other health issues at work.

The [Social Connection in Australia 2023 report](#) acknowledges [loneliness](#)

hurts businesses, as it causes [employee](#) absenteeism and reduced productivity.

However, people are often unaware particular work roles, environments, responsibilities and work-related relocation is often what causes loneliness.

These work conditions may cause [social isolation](#), distort [interpersonal relationships](#), and prevent employees from developing or maintaining [social connections](#)—all of which are a catalyst for loneliness.

The expression "it is lonely at the top" suggests senior managers or chief executives are especially likely to suffer from loneliness.

Their position and associated power makes authentic workplace relationships rare because they are socially and psychologically distanced from most people in their organization.

As leaders, they are held responsible for making significant decisions. Having nobody to share the risks and responsibilities with is an implicit social deficiency that increases workplace loneliness.

Similarly, loneliness is also a classic occupational hazard for business entrepreneurs who are prepared to take risks in pursuit of goals developing their own businesses. In 2019 and 2022, we surveyed 363 entrepreneurs [in Indonesia and the United Kingdom](#), and found 50% reported they sometimes or always experienced loneliness.

This rate was consistent with an article published in Harvard Business Review in 1984 written by D. E. Gumpert and D. P. Boyd titled, The loneliness of the small-business owner. Their research found 52% of the business owners researched frequently experienced loneliness.

It appears that loneliness experienced by entrepreneurs has not changed over 40 years. Entrepreneurs' responsibilities for running and developing their businesses substantially reduce the time they can share with families and friends.

Entrepreneurs may also have to withhold negative information about the business and pose a strong and positive image to others in order to retain resources and support for their companies. The nature of this line of work turns them into "lone wolves."

Loneliness is also found among employees relocated overseas by their multinational corporations. It is [common among expatriates](#) separated from their social networks, to find it difficult to develop new connections because of cultural differences, [language barriers](#) or insufficient social resources.

Remote work accelerated by the COVID pandemic has given people the flexibility to work from home but it has also worsened social isolation as a result of fewer opportunities for informal chats and face-to-face bonding with colleagues and managers.

Although most companies are keen to see workers return to offices, the continuation of hybrid forms of working creates challenges in addressing work-related loneliness as many people continue to work partly from home.

Similarly, [digital technology](#) has created another modern work phenomenon, gig work. While gig workers may enjoy flexible schedules, the nature of their work provides few opportunities to develop deep relationships with colleagues.

Given the pervasiveness of workplace loneliness and the challenges it poses, it is surprising that there is little public awareness of how to deal

with it.

To stimulate more interest in this topic and to help ease this modern pandemic, our research, soon to be released² proposes resource-based solutions to combat loneliness. We also identify strategies for both individuals and organizations to deal with loneliness:

Strategies for individuals

- **Understand your desired level of social goals.** Loneliness arises when desired social relations are not satisfied by actual relations. People need to be clear about their [social needs](#) at work. Some may be happy with a few [strong relationships](#), some may prefer broad but weak social connections. Understanding personal social goals helps employees notice when they might need to develop appropriate strategies to battle loneliness.
- **Evaluate personal resources that make developing social connections difficult.** Employees need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of personal factors and change them if they are preventing social connections. For instance, is the lack of contact caused by our personality, lack of social skills, or low social motivation? As individuals, we cultivate our social connections, so we are the key to shaping them.
- **Do not waste daily resources.** Time, energy and mood are also resources, but they fluctuate daily. They can also be used to achieve social goals. We all have regular feelings of being time-poor, tired, not wanting to talk to people or to be social. This causes daily opportunities to develop connections to be wasted. Desired social relations are developed gradually, and we need work on this regularly to achieve our desired level of connection.

Strategies for companies

- **Audit work practices and identify what causes social isolation.** Organizations need to acknowledge that work practices can cause loneliness for employees and find creative solutions. For example, they could reduce work intensity and give employees time to socialize; they could help expatriates maintain old social bonds and develop new connections in their new work location.
- **Remove social barriers for employees by cultivating an inclusive work environment.** An inclusive environment is especially beneficial for demographically diverse employees. Organizations have the power to promote and normalize inclusion, shape employees' social behaviors and help minority groups to develop desired social ties in the workplace.
- **Provide opportunities for employees to have occasional and repeated face-to-face interactions.** Organizations can offer a variety of socializing opportunities. These might include mentoring and support programs, social events, holiday celebrations, coffee breaks and team-building activities.

Of course, employees must be proactive and take charge of overcoming their loneliness. They can begin this by developing or expanding their repertoire of personal resources and by taking up opportunities offered by their employer.

These investments in alleviating workplace loneliness will result in employees having a stronger sense of belonging to organizations and being more productive.

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