Aduro

The Loneliness Pandemic:

How Can We Support Employee Belonging As the Workplace Remains in Flux?

The Loneliness Pandemic

Beginning in the early part of 2020, the world was hit by two pandemics. The first was a coronavirus pandemic. The second? A loneliness pandemic.

Before COVID-19, only 20% of American workers worked from home. Now, that percentage has risen to 71%. We spend all day on Zoom calls and most of us experience less physical contact with our co-workers than ever before.

The effects of the secondary pandemic – the loneliness pandemic – continue to reverberate. It has been a trying, disorienting 18 months.

Briefly, it looked as though we might all enjoy a speedy return to office. However, thanks to new challenges like the Delta variant, the expected "return to office" has been put on pause for many organizations.

Employers and employees now face a complex situation. Some people will be returning to the office. Some will be staying remote. Some will be working in a "hybrid model."

As working conditions remain in flux and the future of the workplace remains uncertain, employers should prioritize additional support for employee mental health and wellbeing to help with resilience and to address the effects of loneliness in their workforces.

A key factor supporting employee mental wellbeing is encouraging a sense of "belonging." Belonging comes from feeling valued, listened to, and being asked to engage rather than simply told what to do.

The Sustainability and Health Initiative for Netpositive Enterprise (SHINE) at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, in collaboration with the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, promotes the measurement and tracking of belonging, as well as other aspects of workplace flourishing. It strives to understand the factors that influence flourishing and the tactics that promote it.

What can the Harvard SHINE research teach us about employee belonging? How can employers continue to adapt to the shifting landscape to facilitate the smoothest adjustment to the new workplace as we adapt to the next phases of the pandemic?

The Pioneering Research of Harvard SHINE

[Harvard SHINE](#) started six years ago, spearheaded by scientists conducting research on the dynamic connections that exist between individuals, organizations, workplaces, and communities. Aduro and SHINE have collaborated for several years on the incorporation of the flourishing index developed at Harvard into Aduro's platform.

This index is an evidence-based tool for assessing workplace culture and employee social well-being. This assessment helps organizations understand how to create healthier workplace cultures and find the intersection between employee well-being and work performance.

The central aim of SHINE's human flourishing work is to understand, improve and innovate the total well-being of humans.

Human flourishing encompasses more than just physical and mental health. Life satisfaction, happiness, meaning, purpose in life, physical and mental health, social connectedness, and character strengths are all part of flourishing. Financial well-being or financial stability, as well as material stability, can also be included.

Ultimately, this work sheds light on how human well-being is critical to ensuring a sustainable future for all. Every one of us has the potential for well-being based on the environment in which we live and the systems in which we operate.

The success of any organization is dependent on providing opportunities for its individuals to thrive and reach their full potential.

With employees adjusting to ongoing changes navigating remote, hybrid or in-office workplace transitions, the findings from SHINE's research can be an effective guide to a more seamless transition.

Loneliness and Belonging

[Adults aged 25 to 65 years old](#) spend the majority of their waking hours at work. For many, work is the main source of social connection. It is a place where they can find colleagues who share their interests and people with whom they can connect with during, often long, working hours. Workplace belonging boosts employee morale and keeps them resilient, even during hard times. By having colleagues at their backs, employees are more confident in taking jobs and more driven to show up to work every day.

Unfortunately, not everyone has a strong sense of social connection at their place of employment. Employees who feel excluded will experience feelings of loneliness. According to social psychologists, loneliness is defined as the difference between the social connections that we would like to have and the ones that we actually have.

A US national survey found that [61% of US adults](#) are lonely. This is a shocking number that represents a real, often unspoken crisis.

Loneliness can be Definied at Three Levels:

1 Interpersonal Loneliness

This refers to how satisfying our personal relationships and friendships are. This is the most common type of loneliness that humans experience. When a person is experiencing interpersonal loneliness, they feel isolated, or they believe they are cut off from the important people in their lives. For many, working alone at home has exacerbated this type of loneliness.

2 Existential Loneliness

This is what comes with our sense of meaning and purpose in life. Existential loneliness is the direct consequence of a bigger separation from the nature of existence, specifically a lack of meaning in life. A person may be in the company of others but still suffer from existential loneliness. Such feelings may be one cause of the Great Resignation. Employees feel the need to find greater meaning and purpose and are willing to leave jobs that don't tie to a larger pupose for them.

3 Societal Loneliness

This is our sense of being welcomed or included in a group, room, or community, rather than feeling excluded. People experiencing societal loneliness feel left out and isolated from the group. While DE&I initiatives have addressed this type of diversity, they are too frequently siloed in certain areas or functions of the organization; leaving employees feeling disconnected from their coworkers if their own identities or communities are not part of the norm and their participation not activiely encouraged.

It is important to be aware of all three forms of loneliness. Employers can play a key role by promoting belonging in the workplace.

How Can Employers Help Employees Handle Our Shifting Working Conditions?

The future of the workplace is in flux. Harvard Business School performed a study, which revealed that at least 16% of employees would remain working from home post-pandemic. However, thanks to the Delta variant, we are, instead, in an unpredictable, ever-changing situation. Increasingly, studies and polls show that more employees have permanently adapted to some sort of hybrid work style — increasing the pressure on employers to figure out what the work style should be and how to support employees who may be permanently separated from being in the same offices.

With such disorientation, employers need to take a more active role in not just informing employees of their working arrangement, but defining how to best engage with one another in light of these hybird/remote conndtions.

1 Preserve Employee Autonomy

One benefit of working from home is that it has granted employees a sense of independence and autonomy. A study of 16,000 employees by Stanford University shows that working from home actually increased productivity by 13% (despite unfounded fears by some managers to the contrary). Respondents also reported improved work satisfaction, and attrition rates were cut by 50%. According to another study conducted by the University of Birmingham, employees who have higher levels of autonomy at work report a higher sense of well-being and job satisfaction.

Dr. Daniel Wheatley, director of Undergraduate Programs at Birmingham Business School, said: "Greater levels of control over work tasks and schedule have the potential to generate significant benefits for the employee, which was found to be evident in the levels of reported wellbeing. The positive effects associated with informal flexibility and working at home offer further support to the suggestion that schedule control is highly valued and important to employees 'enjoying' work."

To preserve employee autonomy, employers can start with building trust in their employees and giving employees more autonomy in some of their choices, granting ownership over certain decisions, providing tools for reaching individual and group goals, and ensuring that management is open to feedback (and can act on it) when employees feel they've lost this critical element to enjoying their work during this challenging time.

An empowered and autonomous employee will have many of the tools that they need to perform their task better and contribute more to the company.

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2 Support Interpersonal Relationships

An interpersonal relationship is a strong bond between employees who work in the same company. Employees who work together have a special bond to perform at their best and make decisions in the organization's best interest. Employers should notice where these exist and support them. After all, camaraderie inside the workplace is a beacon of resilience during challenging times.

Feelings of employee isolation reduce productivity up to 21%. To counter this, you can help cultivate small groups by giving out meal vouchers for teams that they can use to eat and hang out outside office hours. Employers can also support interpersonal relationships by encouraging small talks that are not necessarily about work, either virtually or in-person.

Employee collaboration is one of the most important advantages of a team-building activity. Collaboration involves understanding who has what expertise, trusting them and their experience, and having access to that person when needed.

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3 Promote Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a strong belief that you will not be ridiculed if you express your ideas, questions, concerns, or commit mistakes. A study shows that employees who feel that they are psychologically safe will have a 27% reduction in turnover, a 40% reduction in safety incidents, and a 12% increase in productivity.

For employers to assure employees that the workplace is psychologically safe, they can promote an open-door policy that enables employees to reach out to them to discuss any concerns. By listening to feedback and taking action where necessary, the feedback loop can lead to positive growth for the organization and employees.

Management must show that they are reachable and always ready to listen to their employees' concerns. It is not enough to simply hear out an employee, managers must listen attentively and avoid demeaning the person or their ideas in order to boost psychological safety. Even your body language when praising or thanking a team member for their contribution and commitment can have an impact on the person's sense of psychological safety.

When employers make the workplace environment psychologically safe, employees will feel a stronger sense of belonging, which in turn will keep them loyal and satisfied with their jobs.

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4 Practice Empathy

The pandemic has helped management practice empathy since everybody is navigating a shared experience. According to a whitepaper published by the Center for Creative Leadership, empathy is positively related to job performance. Managers who demonstrate more empathy toward direct reports are regarded as better performers by their superiors. Empathy can be developed through coaching, training, and other development opportunities.

Empathy makes employees believe that they are not alone. Employers need to stay in an empathic mindset as much as possible. They can practice empathy by

showing that they care and understand what the employees are going through and through non-verbal cues.

Managers can also practice empathy by being sincere in helping their staff during hard times. They can do this by doing one-on-one talks with employees who seem to be struggling with their tasks. Employees who performed well before, but suddenly experience a drop in their productivity, may be experiencing personal issues. Instead of fixating employee slumps, managers should practice empathy and address how the company can help them get back on their feet.

The Impact Of Belonging To The Workplace

Remote work can contribute to a workplace where employees feel alienated from one other — hence the Loneliness Pandemic. Employers can counteract these natural forces by creating a safe place where employees can still flourish and be the best version of themselves. Even in remote environments, our "workplaces" can be places where individuals feel a sense of true belonging and, thus, contribute positively towards workplace goals.

Harvard SHINE's research can help employers ensure that their workplace culture is conducive to social connection and belonging. With this pioneering assessment tool that considers the whole person - their work and their life and the dynamic connections between the two, managers can support their workforce in cultivating life satisfaction, happiness (inside and outside work), meaning and purpose in life, physical and mental health, and of course connectedness.

Aduro Has the Solution

In times like these, we at Aduro feel an elevated sense of urgency to provide solutions to companies and people in need. Your employees are becoming unhealthy, disconnected and overwhelmed. Aduro is built from the ground up to help people achieve and sustain well-being even in the most challenging circumstances.

Crisis fatigue is real, and recovery is essential for the health and prosperity of both individuals and enterprises.

But as these crises fade, the focus on a holistic approach to well-being must not fade with it. One defining characteristic of a crisis is our innate human desire and ability to not only rebuild, but to innovate. So, we call on businesses and leaders to examine the role of employee well-being in the current environment, but also as a pillar of future innovation, resilience and prosperity.

Don't wait. People need your help now. And Aduro is ready to support you. Find out more at Adurolife.com