

The hidden costs that loneliness could be having on your startup

At the peak of the pandemic, a survey found that one in four of us had feelings of loneliness and young people were among the most at risk. With offices and workplaces reopening, you might expect that this epidemic of loneliness would subside.

Hybrid working has many benefits, with many organisations making this a permanent offer to staff. However, we must take care to mitigate the potential negative impact this may have on colleagues, particularly new starters and those joining the workforce for the first time.

“Loneliness will sit over our roofs with brooding wings”

In a clinical sense, loneliness isn't a mental health condition in its own right. You can't diagnostically test for loneliness and there isn't a list of defined symptoms.

But it takes a mental toll, leaving underlying and unexplained feelings of sadness and despair. In fact, feeling lonely can be a predictor of anxiety, psychological stress as well as depression.

Studies have linked loneliness to multiple chronic conditions, from heart, lung and cardiovascular disease to metabolic disorders such as obesity. It's also closely associated with substance abuse and eating disorders, as people seek out ways in which to feel happy.

But in the wake of Covid, loneliness is also creating profound and potentially long-lasting professional costs.

The imposters

New entrants to the workplace who have begun their working life remotely have reportedly felt disconnected. A study, published in the midst of the 2021 lockdown, found that pandemic-induced loneliness has triggered “countless episodes” of impostor syndrome among younger workers and students.

Missing the “water-cooler moments” – natural interactions where colleagues get to connect and bond – in an office, has exacerbated the feeling, among some, of not belonging.

Without such interactions, workers can then feel excluded and lack confidence. They can't accurately gauge how well they're performing and the opportunities for them to be mentored or supported are no longer natural or serendipitous. When surrounded by colleagues, it's easier to get a feel for different people's ways of working, or to understand that someone may be warm in real life even if they come across as cold on email.

These issues apply to workers of all ages, but it's particularly damaging for younger employees who haven't yet built up the skills to do their job.

At the other end of the spectrum, if a boss is somewhat of a tyrant over Zoom or email, remote workers may assume they only behave that way with them. They're not privy to conversations and interactions that that boss has with other employees, in the way they would be in an office. Consequently, feelings of inadequacy and exclusion can spiral.

Business impact

One in six people working in the UK are struggling with mental health conditions. In the short-term, such feelings impact the individual but in the long-term, they can have a detrimental effect on colleagues and the wider business, too.

If an employee repeatedly feels inadequate or that they don't belong, or they don't feel like they're being supported, they will leave. Such feelings are in part

behind the decision millions of people have taken to leave their jobs – tagged the Great Resignation.

If loneliness leads to feelings of anxiety or depression, staff may start to withdraw and put off tasks or avoid meetings. Alongside the damaging effect this can have, absenteeism is said to cost the UK economy in the region of £21B.

Then there are costs which are less tangible but are just as impactful. When people are struggling, it can lower morale, leading to wider resignations, staff shortages and time spent on recruitment. There could even be conflict between team members, or customer dissatisfaction.

Towards a solution

Simply ditching hybrid working is no solution either. Businesses should be looking for new ways to help people connect – no matter what working environment they're in.

By regularly checking in with employees and providing them with feedback, managers can provide a platform where staff feel safe to ask questions and seek support. Keeping people informed of changes and helping teams to appreciate that different ages and genders may handle such changes in different ways can hugely affect morale.

Where possible, interactions in the workplace should extend beyond the day-to-day. Teams should be encouraged to come together in ways that suit them. Time spent bonding and talking outside their scope of work will pay dividends, if it curbs the more damaging effects of isolation and loneliness.

The most significant impact managers can have, though, is to make discussing mental health normal. For some businesses, that may involve partnering with local groups, offering therapy services as part of workplace benefits, hosting webinars with experts or delivering relevant training courses.

Making sure team members know they have someone to talk to at work is vital. Hybrid working is most likely here to stay and seems to work for the majority, so the least managers can do is to be mindful of team members who work alone and may feel isolated or lonely.

Dr Beverley Flint is clinical director at HelloSelf for Business.

