

Loneliness - something no one is immune to. It doesn't matter if you work for a company with 100K employees or if you're a self employed contractor, loneliness in the workplace is something that we all deal with in some way or another, in some part of our life.

More and more of the workforce is becoming remote and flexible working hours are becoming the norm. What happens when your workplace becomes 100% remote. Perhaps your office no longer exists and you find yourself working from home everyday? For some people this would be a dream come true. What does it mean for those of us who rely on our workplaces for social interaction. Does this limit your job options? Are you then forced to consider alternative options that work for you, OR should a workplace accommodation be considered?

When an employee has a bad back, we don't hesitate to accommodate with a standing desk. But if you have crippling loneliness, should you be able to request a place of work where you are able interact with people? Perhaps a stipend for a coffee shop or a coworking space?

In today's working world, increased remotability and isolation is normalised and technology has displaced in person connection and communication. Additionally, compounding this, we see a consistent breakdown in the barrier between "work" and "life" and how work has expanded outside of office hours due to the accessibility of technology. Being "busy" is a brag as opposed to a problem that needs to be addressed. Checking emails in the evenings and weekends, even while on vacation, has become the norm.

This breakdown between work and life has made it difficult to get a mental break from work and thus, there is no quality time or space left for human interactions. Additionally for those that are already feeling closed off due to remote work or flexible hours, "being busy" can become an excuse to continue to isolate oneself.

In November of 2017 the CBC wrote an interesting article on "Lonely in Vancouver." Claiming the 20% of young people in Vancouver are, in essence, lonely. "A [report by the Vancouver Foundation](#) found that nearly a third of 18- to 24-year-olds across the region experience loneliness "almost always" or "often." Of the nearly 3,800 people surveyed in

Metro Vancouver, 14 percent of the general population say they feel lonely frequently.”

In 2018, UK's parliament tasked [Tracey Crouch](#), Britain's under secretary for sport and civil society, to coordinate the government's response to loneliness. This led to the establishment of the Minister of Loneliness. Granted the UK's report focuses primarily on the elderly but the issue of loneliness is as compelling today no matter what age you are.

So why should we take note?

Loneliness is bad for your health. It has been found to be directly equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Historically we, as 'people', are a social group. Evolution baked social connection into our psychological state for survival reasons. Being void of that social interaction creates higher levels of stress, an increase risk of diabetes, arthritis and much more. Being lonely is stressful. It can lead to depression and isolation. Whether young or old, no one is immune to loneliness.

So how does loneliness impact the workplace?

Two of the big things we look for as markers of a successful workplace, are productivity and alignment. It has been proven that individuals who are struggling with loneliness can also struggle with productivity, engagement and creativity. Loneliness has also long been connected to stress. Numerous research studies underline that individuals in a high stressed state can often struggle with decision fatigue. This impacts their ability to make crucial decisions.

Workplace environments with lackluster productivity, creativity and engagement typically see a higher than normal level of attrition and a low retention rate. Individuals struggling with connection are less likely to stay engaged at a company. They are more likely to look for an external solution to their disengagement.

So what can we do to reduce loneliness:

Asses how connected you are as a company. How authentic are the connections? We aren't just talking about those who turn up to happy hour or attend the socials. We mean; how many of your employees really feel like they know the people they work with on a day to day basis? Create opportunities for people to understand each other as whole people, on a values basis. After all, each of us have an innate desire to be understood

Talk to your workforce about working remotely, is it working for them? Do they enjoy it? If not, get creative. Is there an option for your team to work one day a week at a coworking space? Is there an option to offer your remote workers a Coffee Shop Stipend. (Before the days of the coworking space, BLANKSLATE used to offer this stipend of \$25/day. This allowed them to hang out and work somewhere in their community.) .

When working remotely, encourage your team to share where they are working, either from home or out and about. Share a list of places that people can work within the community. The local libraries and community centres are great for getting sh!t done. Plus many have free wifi!

Protect the time that people have outside of work, allowing them to connect with their friends, family or community. Design a communication alliance that empowers people to disconnect outside of office hours. This gives permission to reconnect with the people/community/nature in their life.

Consider investing in a Lifestyle Spending Account (LSA) that allows individuals to participate in community events and stay healthy and engaged. Perhaps the LSA pays for pottery classes, or a weekly Yoga class?

If this blog has piqued your interest, and you are interested in talking more about Mental Health in the workplace, please feel free to reach out!

