CONNECTING AT WORK

WE'RE MORE CONNECTED THAN EVER, BUT LONELINESS IS EPIDEMIC. WORK IS PART OF THE PROBLEM. NOW IT MUST BE PART OF THE SOLUTION.

BY VIVEK MURTHY

WORK AND THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

REDUCING ISOLATION AT WORK IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS.
BY VIVEK MURTHY

On August 24, 1992, in the early hours of the morning, my family and I stepped out of our temporary shelter to find our city — and our lives — forever changed. We had spent the past several hours huddled together as Hurricane Andrew battered our South Florida neighborhood with torrential rain and near 170 mile per hour winds. We saw pieces of homes strewn across the landscape, power lines flung about like pieces of string, and sea creatures stranded in trees having been blown far inland by the storm.

Like thousands of others, we survived the storm and the many dark days that followed because of the kindness of strangers who brought food, water, and comfort. Hurricane Andrew forged a deep sense of connection and community in South Florida as the nation rallied around us and as we supported each other. But slowly, as normal lives resumed, the distance between people returned. We went back to our homes, our work, our schools, and our lives, and once again we grew apart.

Looking today at so many other places around the world ravaged by disasters of all kinds, I think about how often tragedy brings us together — and how fleeting that connection often is.

There is good reason to be concerned about social connection in our current world. Loneliness is a growing health epidemic. We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s. Today, over 40% of adults in America report feeling

lonely, and research suggests that the real number may well be higher. Additionally, the number of people who report having a close confidante in their lives has been declining over the past few decades. In the workplace, many employees — and half of CEOs — report feeling lonely in their roles.

During my tenure as U.S. Surgeon General, I saw first-hand how loneliness affected people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds across the country. I met middle and high school students in urban and rural areas who turned to violence, drugs, and gangs to ease the pain of their loneliness. I sat with mothers and fathers who had lost sons and daughters to drug overdoses and were struggling to cope alone because of the unfortunate stigma surrounding addiction. And I met factory workers, doctors, small business owners, and teachers who described feeling alone in their work and on the verge of burnout.

During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness. The elderly man who came to our hospital every few weeks seeking relief from chronic pain was also looking for human connection: He was lonely. The middle-aged woman battling advanced HIV who had no one to call to inform that she was sick: She was lonely too. I found that loneliness was often in the background of clinical illness, contributing to disease and making it harder for patients to cope and heal.

This may not surprise you. Chances are, you or someone you know has been struggling with loneliness. And that can be a serious problem. Loneliness and weak social connections are associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that associated with obesity. But we haven't focused nearly as much effort on strengthening connections between people as we have on curbing tobacco use or obesity. Loneliness is also associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety. At work, loneliness reduces task performance, limits creativity, and impairs other aspects of executive function such as reasoning and decision making. For our health and our work, it is imperative that we address the loneliness epidemic quickly.

Once we understand the profound human and economic costs of loneliness, we must determine whose responsibility it is to address the problem. The government and health care system have important roles to play in helping us understand the impact of loneliness, identifying who is affected, and determining which interventions work. But to truly solve loneliness requires the engagement of institutions where people spend the bulk of their time: families, schools, social organizations, and the workplace. Companies in particular

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Dr. Murthy has called emotional well-being one of the most important — and underappreciated — drivers of health. In particular, he has drawn attention to the profound impact that loneliness and social disconnection have on health, productivity, and education.

Dr. Murthy received his Bachelor's degree from Harvard and his MD and MBA degrees from Yale. He completed his residency training at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, where he later joined the faculty as an internal medicine physician and instructor. As a clinician-educator, Dr. Murthy has cared for thousands of patients and trained hundreds of residents and medical students.

In addition to clinical practice, Dr. Murthy has dedicated himself to improving health through the lens of service, research, and entrepreneurship. He cofounded VISIONS, an HIV/AIDS education program in India and the United States and the Swasthya Community Health Partnership in rural India, which trains women to be health providers and educators. As a research scientist, Dr. Murthy conducted laboratory research on vaccine development and studied the participation of women and minorities in clinical trials. He also cofounded TrialNetworks, a software technology company, now part of DrugDev, that accelerates collaboration in clinical trials.

have the power to drive change at a societal level not only by strengthening connections among employees, partners, and clients but also by serving as an innovation hub that can inspire other organizations to address loneliness.

THE ROOTS OF LONELINESS
Loneliness is the subjective feeling of having inadequate social connections. Why has this feeling increased over past decades? Partly because people are more geographically mobile and are thus more likely to be living apart from friends and family. Indeed, more people report living alone today than at any time since the census began collecting this data. In the workplace, new models of working — such as telecommuting and some on-demand "gig economy" contracting arrangements — have created flexibility but often reduce the opportunities for in-person interaction and relationships. And even working at an office doesn't guarantee meaningful connections: People sit in an office full of coworkers, even in open-plan workspaces, but everyone is staring at a computer or attending task-oriented meetings where opportunities to connect on a human level are scarce.

Happy hours, coffee breaks, team-building exercises are designed to build connections between colleagues, but do they really help people develop deep relationships? On average, we spend more waking
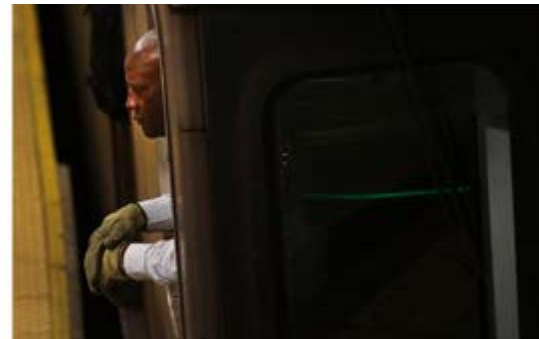
MANY EMPLOYEES – AND HALF OF CEOS – REPORT FEELING LONELY IN THEIR ROLES.

LONELINESS SHORTENS LIFESPANS IN A WAY SIMILAR TO SMOKING 15 CIGARETTES A DAY.

hours with our coworkers than we do with our families. But do they know what we really care about? Do they understand our values? Do they share in our triumphs and pains?

These aren't just rhetorical questions; from a biological perspective, we evolved to be social creatures. Long ago, our ability to build relationships of trust and cooperation helped increase our chances of having a stable food supply and more consistent protection from predators. Over thousands of years, the value of social connection has become baked into our nervous system such that the absence of such a protective force creates a stress state in the body. Loneliness causes stress, and long-term or chronic stress leads to more frequent elevations of a key stress hormone, cortisol. It is also linked to higher levels of inflammation in the body. This in turn damages blood vessels and other tissues, increasing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, joint disease, depression, obesity, and premature death. Chronic stress can also hijack your brain's pre-frontal cortex, which governs decision making, planning, emotional regulation, analysis, and abstract thinking.

This isn't just bad for our health; it's also bad for business. Researchers for Gallup found that having strong social connections at work makes employees more likely to be engaged with their jobs and produce higher quality work, and less likely to fall sick or be injured. Without strong social connections, these gains become losses. Connection can also help indirectly by enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy while also shifting our experience toward positive emotions — all

of which can buffer an individual during stressful situations and have positive effects on health. Indeed, studies have found that companies whose workers feel they have high stress jobs have markedly higher health care expenditures than their counterparts with low-stress employees.

Our understanding of biology, psychology, and the workplace calls for companies to make fostering social connections a strategic priority. A more connected workforce is more likely to enjoy greater fulfillment, productivity, and engagement while being more protected against illness, disability, and burnout.

FORGING CONNECTIONS AT WORK

My experience has been that people bring the most to their work when they feel connected to the mission and the people around them. While I was at the Surgeon General's Office, our staff grew quickly as we sought to build a team that could address an array of pressing public health issues. Although team members got along well, it soon became clear that we didn't fully recognize the rich life experience that each person brought to the team. We had a decorated Army nurse, a woman who had spent years providing medical care to prison inmates, an accomplished pianist and preacher, an Olympic-level runner, and several team members who had struggled with addiction in their family. Even though we were operating with the formality and hierarchy of a uniformed service, my team was hungry to know more about each other.

SOLVING LONELINESS REQUIRES THE HELP OF INSTITUTIONS WHERE PEOPLE SPEND THE BULK OF THEIR TIME.

COMPANIES HAVE THE POWER TO ADDRESS THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC QUICKLY.

To bring us closer, we developed "Inside Scoop," an exercise in which team members were asked to share something about themselves through pictures for five minutes during weekly staff meetings. Presenting was an opportunity for each of us to share more of who we were; listening was an opportunity to recognize our colleagues in the way they wished to be seen.

The impact was immediate. These sessions quickly became many people's favorite time of the week, and they were more enthusiastic about participating at staff meetings. People felt more valued by the team after seeing their colleagues' genuine reactions to their stories. Team members who had traditionally been quiet during discussions began speaking up. Many began taking on tasks outside their traditional roles. They appeared less stressed at work. And most of them told me how much more connected they felt to their colleagues and the mission they served.

I remember one Inside Scoop from a team member who had proudly served in the U.S. Marine Corps. I expected him to talk about his experiences in the military. Instead, he spoke about the complex relationship he had had with his father and how he could see his father's spirit living on in the musical talent of his grandchildren. He described his mother as his hero and shared how remembering her in the face of a challenge would transform his doubts into strength. As he spoke, his eyes glistened. I felt a deep connection to him in that moment and was inspired by his honesty and

compelled to reflect on my own relationships. Even though we were close before, my relationship with him became even stronger after that day.

I share what my office did not as the antidote to loneliness but as proof that small steps can make a difference. And because small actions like this one are vital to improving our health and the health of our economy.

CREATING CONNECTION

We know that if we are to prioritize our health and the health of our companies, the workplace is one of the most important places to cultivate social connections. And while it may seem easy enough to organize a team-building event, grab a cup of coffee with a colleague, or chat with people around the water cooler about *Game of Thrones,* real connection requires creating an environment that embraces the unique identities and experiences of employees inside and outside the workplace. Here are five deliberate steps that can help build healthy and productive relationships:

Evaluate the current state of connections in your workplace. Strong social connections are not simply about the number of friends and family members one has; it's the quality of those connections that matters more. You can be surrounded by many people and have thousands of connections on LinkedIn or Facebook and still be lonely. Conversely, you can have just a handful of people with whom you interact and

feel very connected. To assess the quality of the relationships at your organization, here are some questions to consider: Do employees feel that their colleagues genuinely value and care for them? Do they believe their institution has a culture that supports giving and receiving kindness? Would they characterize their relationships with colleagues as being driven more by love or by fear?

Build understanding of high-quality relationships. Strong social connections are characterized by meaningful shared experiences and mutually beneficial two-way relationships, where both individuals give and receive. High-quality relationships must be grounded in love and informed by kindness, compassion, and generosity. There is a tendency to look at such positive emotions as "soft" and even as a liability that distorts judgement and impairs tough decision making. But research increasingly shows that positive emotions enhance performance and resilience. Be clear with employees and colleagues about the types of relationships you want to see at work and what types of actions, like generosity, foster those relationships.

Make strengthening social connections a strategic priority in your organization. Designing and modeling a culture that supports connection is more important than any single program. It will require buy-in and engagement from all levels of the organization, particularly leadership. Having senior members of an organization invest in building strong connections with other team members can set a powerful example, especially when leaders are willing to demonstrate that vulnerability can be a source of strength, not weakness. Ask yourself if the current culture and policies in your institution support the development of trusted relationships.

Encourage coworkers to reach out and help others — and accept help when it is offered. Although it may seem counterintuitive to assist others when you are feeling lonely, extending help to others and allowing yourself to receive help builds a connection that is mutually affirming. Late one night during my residency training, I was managing a busy intensive care unit when one of my colleagues stopped and offered to help with a sudden influx of critically ill patients. Because of his generosity, we were able to rapidly place specialized catheters in patients with bloodstream infections and get them life-saving antibiotics quickly. We worked together for only an hour that night, but the connection we built lasted years. Giving and receiving help freely is one of the most tangible ways we experience our connections with each other.

Create opportunities to learn about your colleagues' personal lives. The likelihood that authentic social connections will develop is greater when people feel understood and appreciated as individuals with full lives — as mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, individuals with passions outside of work, concerned citizens and community members. Everyone in an organization has the power to create spaces for sharing, whether it is in a formal gathering or an informal conversation over lunch.

HEALING ONE ANOTHER

When I think of loneliness, I think about the first day of my internal medicine residency program. A faculty member advised us to call the people we love and tell them that they wouldn't be hearing from us much over the next year. As medical students, we'd heard about the trials of residency training: the unforgiving hours, the grueling intensity, and the crushing isolation. That morning, the idea of stepping away from our most trusted social relationships felt unnerving.

Despite my initial fears about loneliness, those three years ended up being the best of my life. The hours and intensity were just as billed if not even more so. As predicted, it was very difficult to stay in touch with friends. But in time I developed rich and fulfilling relationships with my colleagues in the hospital.

Coming to work came to feel like spending time with friends. There were plenty of difficult moments when our emotional, intellectual, and physical reserves were tested: navigating a difficult end-of-life conversation, trying to find an elusive source of infection in a critically ill patient, or simply fighting back our own exhaustion — but my bonds with my colleagues softened the blows and saved me from plenty of others. Those bonds enabled me to do more, give more, appreciate more, and be a better doctor to thousands of patients. Today, years later, I wonder if these relationships provided deeper healing: if they made me not just a better doctor but a better colleague and leader, too.

The world is suffering from an epidemic of loneliness. If we cannot rebuild strong, authentic social connections, we will continue to splinter apart — in the workplace and in society. Instead of coming together to take on the great challenges before us, we will retreat to our corners, angry, sick, and alone. We must take action now to build the connections that are the foundation of strong companies and strong communities — and that ensure greater health and well-being for all of us. ■

INTERACTIVE
CONNECTING AROUND THE WORLD

Are your colleagues also your closest friends? HBR readers from around the world share their stories about friendship in the workplace.
by Harvard Business Review Staff

This fall, HBR spoke with readers around the world about how they feel in their workplaces. We asked whether they felt lonely at work, who their friends were, how they made them, and what would make a difference in work today. Here's what we heard:

"I used to feel lonely at work because I'm on a distributed team and work in a different time zone. The people I see on a daily basis are not working on the same thing as me and have no interest in what I am doing. I share my office with three colleagues, but we don't talk about work, only basic pleasantries. What helped me was making digital connections. Skype was fantastic; Slack even better. I began chatting with colleagues on the other side of the planet as though they were in the room. It really lightens my day when we're

able to share jokes, have a laugh, and relax." — **Anonymous,** *HR, Switzerland*

"At my workplace I have developed many friendships over the past 35 years. But I'll always remember how my work friends helped me when I had a car crash several years ago. I was returning from work in another city, and I fell asleep on the highway. I rolled my vehicle, resulting in serious injuries; I broke my neck. At the time my wife and I had three young children. Senior colleagues and others gathered together to help my recovery and return to work." — **Philip Fernandez,** *Canada*

"I felt the sting of loneliness in my previous job, where my colleagues took advantage of me and bullied me. Where I work now, there is a strong camaraderie that extends across every unit. My workplace has an open-door

policy. My CEO is my mentor, and my colleagues value my opinion and respect me as a member of the team. Many of my colleagues belong to the same club, so we get to talk about the organization and the problems that bedevil it."
— **Adelaja Olaneye,** *Finance, Nigeria*

"When I transferred to my current job, my new colleagues invited me to group outings and gave me tips how to settle in. Colleagues are even closer than family members because we spent more time together and share the same period of history together, for better or for worse. I truly care about them and celebrate their success. It's not easy to be friends with everyone, but it's possible to have a few." — **Iris,** *Chemicals, Singapore*

"Work is a place where you have coworkers, not friends. I've changed jobs four times in 25 years, and I have invested quite a bit in work relationships over the past 10 (5 of those in senior management positions). But once I left, these investments were lost, which made me wonder whether work relationships are superficial by nature. Still, I've seen how connecting can make work better. When I worked in France, we had trouble getting the

French to work with their coworkers in India, so we asked everyone to share something personal. One guy was a guitar player, which he had in common with a notoriously defensive senior French accountant. The French employee reached out and asked his Indian colleague to bring his guitar the next time he was in Paris. He did, the relationship grew despite the language barrier, and work results improved. They found something deeper that connected them." — **Frank,** *Consulting, Germany*

"As a remote employee, the shared experiences I have are less serendipitous and more scheduled around times when I'm in the office. At its best, our team finds ways to include me even when I'm not there in person. During a fitness challenge, I went for a walk with others on staff via FaceTime; I was walking in Massachusetts; they were walking in DC. Another time, we were celebrating some good news at work and just as staff were enjoying cake in the office a FedEx truck showed up and delivered cupcakes to my home office." — **Anonymous,** *Nonprofit/ Philanthropy, United States*

"In the Foreign Service, work relationships are often intertwined with your social life. You usually live in the same building or area as coworkers. Yet people are constantly moving, so even when you create strong bonds with your colleagues, some will leave. I personally love my job, but I also hate living in a fishbowl, so I am selective about who I hang out with outside the office. I prefer to have most of my friends overseas be non-coworkers. This helps me have a good work/life balance. At the same time, work relationships are important because when you really need something or are going through a difficult time, it is fellow FSOs who understand more than others."

— **Anonymous,** *Foreign Service, United States*

"I've always felt like an outlier in terms of age, skills, and background at work, but at my previous jobs — at hip, small, and tight-knit firms — I was able to move past that because I was a good cultural fit. But my current position, which I've had for a few years, is a conventional cubicle job. I haven't really thought about it like this before, but I traded a better fit for more stability and money, and in hindsight I think that move might have stunted my growth personally and professionally." — **Britt,** *Digital Marketing, United States*

"In a previous position, I worked in a high-rise in New York City. When Hurricane Irene hit, back in 2011, the city essentially shut down as a precaution. Our building shut down the elevators mid-afternoon, so I invited my colleague over for a homemade dinner since restaurants were closed and grocery stores had limited supplies. We ended up chatting for five hours. Although we've since moved on to other companies, we still keep in touch and remain friends." — **B. Xavier,** *Marketing Communications, United States*

"I had to move to another country for a seven-month period to fill in for someone who was fired. I had no one to socialize with after work, and the situation was a little bit tense. One day, one of the girls I was working with invited me to go on a trip over the weekend with her and her son. After that, she became my family there. With the other girls in the office, we created a group for running after work, and now, two years later, we are still friends and talk frequently, even though I'm back in my country and working for another company." — **Fiores,** *Predictive Maintenance Consulting, Dominican Republic*

"I used to share a workspace with about five people. We would joke or talk about current events, workplace gossip, our shared dislike of Taylor Swift, etc. One person in our 'pod' left for another job opportunity. Then one by one, most of us left. Now I don't have many colleagues my age or at my stage in career. There also is a lot of competition between teams now, which makes friendships harder." — **Anonymous,** *Media, United States*

"Because we are busy at work all day and we "disconnect" when we are outside, it can be hard to know if our coworkers are our friends. I didn't realize how much people at work cared about me until my mother passed away. I received many calls at home and many words of encouragement, hugs, and stories of their families that made me feel better." — **Gaby,** *Computing, Mexico*

"I have found some of my best friends in my workplace. If you have office colleagues who are not insecure and who share the same value system, they can be your best support system in this era of cutthroat competition. Your colleagues know the office politics, so they can relate to you and offer sound advice. My friend and I compete for posts without any ill feeling. We have ended up saying to each other, 'Please prepare well! No one should get this other than one of us.' " — **Anonymous,** *Development, India*

"I had a friend at work who had a great sense of humor and often showed me that he cared about me. A few months after he left,I burned out. I knew he was helpful for my well-being, but once he was gone I realized he was vital. From him I learned that laughter can be the shortest distance between two people. When we laugh, we last." — **David Zinger,** *Education/Consulting, Canada*

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT LONELINESS AND WORK?
A roundup of the latest thinking on the power of human connection
by Scott Berinato

Spend any time reading about loneliness, and you'll quickly hit upon a scary statistic: Since 1985 the share of people who have no one to confide in has tripled, to 25%. This statistic is common internet knowledge; it's also wrong. The research paper it comes from — which also suggests that nearly half of all Americans feel isolated — has been refuted by multiple follow-up studies. As it turns out, structural flaws in the survey account for the seemingly massive jump. At least one of the original study's authors concedes that the data is unreliable. But the statistic is so sexy that it stubbornly hangs on, used to explain (or try to explain) everything from why Millennials are the way they are to why our democracy is eroding.

Researchers aren't actually sure if rates of loneliness are rising. Some surveys report increases in isolation in terms of absolute numbers — as the population ages, the thinking goes, more people are lonely, even if the percentage is unchanged. Some studies suggest that technology is making things worse, isolating us from our important relationships. One recent paper draws a clean line between Facebook use and well-being, showing that increased activity (more likes, status updates, and clicks on links) is associated with a decrease in self-reported mental health. Other studies see an upside to technology, finding that screens and social media help us create connections we couldn't otherwise make.

Here's what we do know: A significant number of people in the world are lonely, and loneliness is unhealthy for individuals and organizations. How unhealthy? One paper lists the following health effects: increased incidence of clinical depression and suicidal ideation, elevated blood pressure levels, increased levels of stress hormones, and compromised immune-system functioning. Loneliness has been also linked to Alzheimer's disease, poor sleep, alcoholism, cancer, and premature death. (The stark finding from one study: "Rats who were isolated experienced increased incidences of breast cancer. The tumors were significantly larger than [those in] rats who were not isolated.") Other work has shown that socially

isolated breast-cancer survivors have a higher risk of recurrence, higher cancer-related mortality, and higher mortality overall than their less isolated counterparts. Two separate meta-analyses made international headlines by suggesting that loneliness and isolation rival smoking and obesity as public health threats.

Worse still, loneliness spreads through (literal, not digital) social networks. In other words, it's contagious. "We detected an extraordinary pattern at the edge of the social network. On the periphery, people have fewer friends, which makes them lonely, but it also drives them to cut the few ties that they have left," reads a study led by professor John T. Cacioppo. "But before they do, they tend to transmit the same feeling of loneliness to their remaining friends, starting the cycle anew. These reinforcing effects mean that our social fabric can fray at the edges, like a thread that comes loose at the end of a crocheted sweater."

THE ORGANIZATIONAL COSTS OF LONELINESS

All of this has implications for companies. It stands to reason that if lonely workers are less healthy, they'll be less productive and less engaged. Many studies support this correlation, including one suggesting that one-third of all sick days results from mental health issues. Research also shows that employees who report higher well-being miss fewer days, get better evaluations, and are more productive.

A growing body of work outlines more-specific downsides. Several papers have documented a link between loneliness and lowered organizational commitment among hotel workers, school principals, medical workers, and others. (Interestingly, one study of migrant workers found no correlation between loneliness and commitment.) A study conducted at five companies in China showed a relationship between loneliness and lowered creativity.

The migrant workers notwithstanding, isolations' negative effects are well established. So the question becomes: Are there ways to mitigate them? Can we not only stanch the health declines but actually improve health by making people less lonely? The answer seems to be yes. What psychologists call *prosocial behavior* is our best way to combat loneliness and isolation and their effects. A study of terminal cancer patients showed that patients who regularly interacted with other patients lived twice as long as those who didn't. Researchers in China found that leaders who show compassion to their employees (through "leader-member exchange") can mitigate the negative effects of loneliness and thereby boost creativity.

What researchers call *everyday prosociality* — basically, being nice to and interacting with others — proved to be a powerful antidote to isolation in a study of workers at Coca-Cola's Madrid headquarters. Researchers divided subjects into "givers," "receivers," and "controls." Givers were coached to perform five acts of kindness a day to designated receivers. The resulting prosocial acts benefited both groups in the short term (after weeks) and in the long term (after months). Givers reported feeling less depression and more satisfaction with their lives and jobs. Receivers were happier. And crucially, compared with controls, receivers were 278% as likely to engage in prosocial behaviors themselves. Loneliness may be contagious, but so, it seems, are prosocial acts.

ALL CONNECTIONS MATTER

Most of the research on loneliness and isolation has been in the context of colleagues, friends, and family. When we have close ties and interact with them regularly, we're happier and less lonely. But those on the periphery of our lives have surprising power, according to research by Gillian Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn of the University of British Columbia. People who engaged in simple prosocial behaviors with "weak ties" — coworkers they didn't know well, people in their fitness class, and so on — reported less loneliness and isolation and a higher level of happiness and well-being than people who avoided unnecessary conversation.

Sandstrom and Dunn examined loneliness through a lens familiar to any business: efficiency. In a simple study they intercepted people going into a coffee shop, asking half to make a social connection with the barista — in other words, to treat a stranger as a weak tie in their social network. They asked the other half to complete their transaction as efficiently as possible. The first group reported higher well-being and satisfaction with their visit.

Juliana Schroeder of UC Berkeley reinforced Sandstrom and Dunn's finding that prosocial behavior not only combats loneliness but also makes people happier with their environment. She found that encouraging people waiting in line at an amusement park to be social with nearby strangers made them feel that their wait was shorter and led them to rate the experience higher. The simple intervention increased their enjoyment of the overall experience.

In his book *Someone To Talk To*, Harvard professor Mario Small notes that although many interactions with weak ties are planned — think of going to the doctor or taking your car to the mechanic — a surprising number arise spontaneously or from convenience (someone was nearby at the time). Small found that we confide in these weak ties more than we think we do — in fact, nearly half of our confiding is done with weak ties. He concludes that making

these connections is more beneficial than it may seem.

WHY WE RESIST MAKING CONNECTIONS

It all sounds so easy: Be social. Talk to strangers. So why are so many of us lonely? Why can't we all just smile at one another, strike up conversations with colleagues and friends, and show compassion to our subordinates?

Professors Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder tackle this issue in their paper "Mistakenly Seeking Solitude," noting that "connecting with others increases happiness, but strangers in close proximity routinely ignore each other." According to their study of commuters on trains and buses, two things keep us from initiating interactions with strangers: We don't want to break the ice, either because we fear of being rejected or because we underestimate others' desire for social connection ("They don't want to be bothered"). And we worry that if we do engage, we won't be able to end the interaction. But the study also showed that overcoming these barriers has undeniably positive repercussions. "Those who misunderstand the consequences of social interactions may not, in at least some contexts, be social enough for their own well-being," the researchers write. "Human beings are social animals."

The idea that human beings are social animals comes through in much of the loneliness research. One paper demonstrates it particularly well. The title is fairly academic: "Creating Social Connection Through Inferential Reproduction." But the subtitle gets at the nut of it: "Loneliness and Perceived Agency in Gadgets, Gods, and Greyhounds." In the paper, Nichloas Epley, Scott Akalis, Adam Waytz, and John Cacioppo painstakingly demonstrate that in the absence of human connection, we create a facsimile with whatever is available.

We can't help it. We humanize gadgets (think of Wilson, the volleyball in the movie *Cast Away*), gods (socially disconnected people tend to have more faith in deities and are more apt to believe in ghosts), and greyhounds (lonely people speak of their pets in terms that describe human rather than animal behaviors). The takeaway: There's something almost primal about our need to be connected, so it's no wonder our bodies respond badly to isolation. Loneliness is as elemental as hunger, thirst, and love. ◼

About the author: Scott Berinato is a senior editor at *Harvard Business Review* and the author of *Good Charts: The HBR Guide to Making Smarter, More Persuasive Data Visualizations* (2016).

LONELINESS AND THE DIGITAL WORKPLACE

Slack's CEO on why feeling connected to our colleagues matters, and how technology can strengthen our bonds.

by Laura Amico

'm typing this in a nearly silent coworking space. All of us here at HBR are intently focused on our computer screens. The tap-tap of our fingers on keyboards, occasional rustle of paper, and clink of a coffee mug landing on a desk are the sounds of work. Look into our screens, though, and you often see a noisy, sometimes raucous place. We're commenting on news stories, checking on projects, sharing photos of kids and cats, and flagging work problems. Looking around my office, I'm considering how connected I really am with my colleagues. Is this kind of interaction enough? Are we actually feeling isolated or lonely, staring at our screens?

To better understand the role of technology in workplace loneliness,

I turned to an expert: Stewart Butterfield, the CEO of Slack, a platform for group chat, direct chat, and file sharing. In many industries, Slack has become a prime communication tool — a way to engage with workers across the world and right next to us.

Butterfield, who also cofounded the photo-sharing platform Flickr, believes that workers having a sense of belonging to their company is critical for a business's success. In this conversation, edited for clarity and length, he talks about technology's role in building connections.

HBR: You have a front-row seat to how people communicate and connect at work. What do you see and hear from where you sit?

BUTTERFIELD: When I talk to executives from all kinds companies — from a startup in the Bay Area to a giant financial services firm on the East Coast — everyone has exactly the same concern: communication. If we were playing Family Feud and the question was "What do office workers feel most frustrated about?" one of the top five answers would be something like "I'm always out of the loop" or "I never have enough information." When people feel that they don't know what's going on, their level of trust drops and their sense of isolation gets worse.

Technology sometimes gets blamed for dividing people. What is the role of Slack and other technologies in connecting people?
Human beings are still in the very early stages of learning about how we communicate and connect electronically. To use the analogy of electricity adoption, we're in 1905 territory here. It may take generations, hundreds of years, for the applications of electronic communications to unfold. But it's clear that the connections between people and the ways they work

together are going to be increasingly important to the success of companies.

I once had a job as an office clerk. My job was to file correspondence, and then, when somebody wanted something, to go back and find it. Very few people have that job anymore. I don't think we're going to employ fewer people over time, but work is going to require more emotional intelligence. It's almost certainly going to require more interaction and coordination with other people. And that's the hard part. Much of the answer, I think, lies in transparency. When people talk about transparency at work, they are usually talking about the bosses being forthcoming with the workers; I don't mean that. I mean that people can see across the organization: The engineers can see the discussions that customer support is having and be proactive in helping the team, rather than waiting for something to get escalated. The marketing team can see when the sales team is frustrated with the marketing materials and is having trouble engaging with customers effectively. Having access to those conversations increases everyone's ability to feel as though they are part of making things work.

Technology can help make a company's day-to-day culture more transparent, too. People develop all kinds of social norms that define a group. Every company has running jokes, catchphrases, special terminology, and jargon, and it all adds up. Making all these elements of company culture more transparent increases everyone's sense of belonging.

How important is that sense of belong-ing for helping people feel connected at work?
One of the reasons why work comes up as a possible antidote to loneliness is that we spend so much time there. It's often the place where we have the most

social contact with other human beings. Even if you have very few one-on-one interactions with people, if you feel that you understand and trust them, it reinforces a sense of belonging and alleviates that feeling of loneliness.

The employer-employee relationship differs from a romantic relationship in many ways, but it's similar in this way: If you don't trust your partner, it can't work. A basic level of trust is a prerequisite for success, and everyone has a role in building that trust. As CEO, I have a welcome meeting for new hires. I start by saying, "Raise your hand if you've ever treated someone you love in a way that you later regretted." Of course, everyone puts up their hand. And then I tell them that if we act in ways that we regret in the relationships that matter most to us — with spouses, parents, children, close friends — we're going to do it here at work, too. We're going to step on each other's toes, and — intentionally or not — we're going to insult one another and challenge and provoke one another in all kinds of ways. In order to get things done, everyone has to bring a certain level of trust and assumption of good intentions to work. Because it's a downward spiral if you don't.

How can technology help employees feel more connected? What things have you tried?
A lot of companies that use Slack have an "ask me anything" channel, where any employee can ask an executive any question. Earlier today, an engineer asked me to interpret some of the statistics that a bot posted in our business operations channel, which shows daily sales, revenue growth, and other things like that. Those reports can be really complicated, so an engineer used the channel to ask me, "What do you look for in these reports?" Later today I'm going to answer that question. If he's

confused about it, there are probably a few hundred other people who are confused about it, too. But the fact that he got to ask the question makes him feel more connected. It reinforces people's sense of belonging to know they have a space to ask questions like that, and it makes people feel a little bit more comfortable that they could ask something, even if they never do. When I go in and answer the engineer's question, people will see that when one person puts themselves out there, asking a question in a very public forum, it creates value for everyone else. And that makes them feel good about their own relationships.

When I'm online, there's a whole part of my identity that people can't see: my facial expressions, my mannerisms, and so on. How important is that? Is technology able to overcome those barriers?
We're beginning to. I sometimes hesitate to talk about this because it might seem silly, but emojis have been very helpful in allowing people to express themselves in a way that can be sincere and authentic but also creative and wry. The reaction figures don't require any words to get a point across, and they help the timing and pacing of messages, breaking them up so that there's some suspense or a punch line. They provide a much larger palette for expression than what people have in email. GIFs are another example; there's a whole bunch of meaning that is culturally encoded in them that fleshes out people's personalities. And that increases trust and connection.

Given all the benefits of digital com-munication, is something lost when I don't walk across the office to check in on a project or a colleague? Does the ease of digital communication damage in-person communication?

My first answer is no, it doesn't. Digital communication frees up capacity so that the in-person conversations can be about things that require more nuance. Over the past few weeks I've been doing a bunch of press interviews, and often when I'm talking to a journalist I need to share stats — for example, 55% of Slack's user base is outside the U.S., there are 420,000 Slack users in New York, and so on. It's much more efficient to just say "We'll send that to you."

The job of digital communication is to take care of those low-bandwidth conversations, where things are on the record, you don't have to remember the details, and the content is straightforward. A lot of information falls into that category. And then there are the high-bandwidth conversations, where people may or may not exchange factual information, such as stats, but where a high degree of trust is necessary. These types of conversations can benefit greatly from social signals such as body language and facial expressions.

I think it takes time for people to learn how to really use digital communication — to offload the things that are better handled electronically while reinforcing culture and bonds through transparency. When these things happen, in-person communication becomes that much more valuable. ■

THE SOCIAL MUSCLE

Physical fitness is a proven key to well-being. Social fitness should be, too.
by John T. Cacioppo and Stephanie Cacioppo

Loneliness and social isolation are deeply physical ailments, on par with obesity and smoking for negative health outcomes. They have a damning effect on productivity, innovation, and organizational commitment, and they exact a high price on individuals, organizations, and our entire society. Loneliness is also contagious. Just one person in a network can infect many others, even mere acquaintances, causing cascading effects.

But there is good news. The effects are reversible, as we learned in our work with the U.S. Army, where we conducted a five-year study on loneliness. The army has long had a deep understanding of how to build cohesion in groups, but much less was known about reducing loneliness and strengthening social resilience — two critical factors for improving soldiers' mission readiness and quality of life. Our study looked at the problem through a physiological and psychological lens. Just as you can start an exercise regimen to lose weight, gain strength, or improve your health, you can combat loneliness through exercises that build emotional strength and resilience. The soldiers engaged in a range of social fitness exercises over the course of the study, and the results were encouraging: Social fitness training reduced loneliness and improved well-being in the soldiers.

We believe that companies stand to reap similar benefits. It's time for managers to turn their focus from traditional structural interventions that are designed to reduce social isolation — such as mandatory social activities at work or specialized workspace design efforts — which studies have shown are less effective. They should instead develop social exercise regimens that reverse the negative effects of loneliness in the workplace. And just as loneliness is contagious, the benefits of replacing negative behaviors with positive ones also spread.

IT WORKS FOR SOLDIERS

Our study was informed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Advances in equipment, training, and battlefield medicine had raised the proportion of soldiers who returned home from the wars; however, those who did come home showed an alarming rate of adverse outcomes, including suicide. In 2011 a large-scale study confirmed that many returning soldiers struggled with loneliness and found that those who committed suicide had reported being lonelier and more depressed and tended to think in more catastrophic terms than soldiers who did not commit suicide.

To address the problem of loneliness among soldiers, we worked with now-retired General Rhonda Cornum, then the director of the Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, to develop a program focused on social resilience and social fitness. Our training was designed to improve the capacity of soldiers to develop

and sustain positive relationships, adapt to social challenges, deal with the inevitable feelings of stress and loneliness, recover and grow from personal and social adversity, and forge and capitalize on healthy relationships.

We developed about 50 social fitness exercises to help soldiers identify and address maladaptive social cognition and behavior. Interventions ranged from very simple tasks — doing someone a favor, for example — to more-complex exercises, such as getting groups to go beyond settling for easy solutions. We applied those exercises in a randomized controlled experiment to evaluate the effectiveness of the social fitness training. In some cases, the instructions were explicit: Say hello to someone. In others, people were coached through situations to help them learn techniques for forming, maintaining, and strengthening their bonds with fellow soldiers. The goal was to give them tools to deal with their own feelings of isolation and help others who were feeling lonely.

Before starting, we assured the soldiers that social fitness is malleable. We explained that just as training in physical fitness strengthens muscles and improves the body's endurance, resilience, flexibility, and coordination, training in social fitness strengthens the brain in ways that increase social fitness and well-being. We did this for two reasons. One, soldiers know well the positive effects of physical fitness; they work out every day. Drawing that parallel helped them readily grasp the concept that you can cope with loneliness through workouts. And two, it helped them overcome the natural inclination to attribute well-being to deterministic factors such as genetics. Often subjects may say "Yes, I'm lonely, but that's just how I am" or "The people around me are wretched"; we wanted to make it explicitly clear that the brain does not work that way, that people

have the power to improve their social fitness.

Each platoon in the study received social fitness training for two hours a day over five days. The soldiers learned techniques for identifying the behaviors and moments in a day that reinforce loneliness and isolation and for transforming those negative moments into positive ones. For example, soldiers learned that loneliness is contagious, and learned to identify moments when their isolating behavior may be having a negative effect on others. We then gave them several ways to intentionally change their behavior in that moment. Instead of avoiding conversation, for example, they could choose to ask someone a question. Instead of looking down to check their phone, they could put it away and engage with someone.

We made sure that subjects understood that the choice to focus on work at the expense of spending time with friends and loved ones was an isolating behavior. By contrast, choosing to put aside work and focus on social interactions activates the ventral striatal regions of the brain, which are steeped in dopamine receptors, evoking feelings of pleasure and happiness. In other words, positive interactions are rewarding and make people feel closer to one another. We also emphasized the benefits of doing small favors to create reciprocity. A small favor implicitly creates a sense of obligation to return the favor. When the initial act is perceived as kindhearted, the social norm of reciprocity stimulates a sense of gratitude and mutual respect, promotes cooperation, and strengthens the trust and bonds between people.

The interventions produced the results that we expected: Soldiers assigned to the social fitness training showed reductions in loneliness and improved well-being. On a follow-up visit to one of the Army bases, we spoke to a

master sergeant who had participated in the training. When we asked about his experiences, he said that he'd applied what he learned to interactions with his spouse, who in turn responded, "What has the army done to you? And why haven't they done this sooner?"

APPLYING THE LESSONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Loneliness reaches far beyond the lives of soldiers, of course. It's a growing problem in most industrialized nations, and efforts are under way in the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, and Canada to raise awareness and to develop treatments. Most of these efforts target older adults, and few if any address loneliness or social fitness in the workplace.

But there are many simple tools that managers and individuals can use to decrease social isolation. Often it's a matter of realizing that our ingrained patterns and behavior may be making the problem worse. We are creatures of habit, and many of our responses in social interactions have a reflexive quality. An unpleasant act by a coworker tends to be reciprocated. An error tends to elicit criticism. Each response can undermine an individual's ability to fight a sense of loneliness and can inhibit the capacity of groups to learn and excel. We've seen this effect very often in meeting settings. Getting many people together who are all feeling isolated and lonely can go badly.

It's in our power to replace those negative habits with positive interactions and improve not just our own well-being but the social fitness of our organizations and communities. This is our recommendation for an entry-level social fitness class:

Unplug. Find moments each day to put away screens and connect with someone, even for a brief exchange. Lonely and isolated people tend to bury their faces in their screens and their

minds in work. Consciously choosing to be social reaps benefits, just as consciously choosing to go out and walk a mile for some exercise makes us feel better.

Do small favors. Make an effort each day to do something helpful or nice for others. Gratitude is powerful, and some will repay your kindness, making multiple people feel connected and less isolated.

Work together. Find moments each day when you typically divide labor, and choose instead to work together. A simple example of this in daily life is when one partner may do the dishes and the other may fold the laundry at the same time to be efficient. Instead, change things up occasionally, and do each task together. Take the opportunity to speak with and listen to one another and reconnect. Whatever efficiency is lost will be repaid through feeling better and less isolated. The same applies to work, where efficiency reigns. Look for ways to work together rather than dividing up the labor and sending everyone off to their own corners to work alone. Doing so on occasion not only lessens the monotony of work but also can lead to new insights or previously unrecognized efficiencies.

Reach out. Choose to engage with people on different levels and on a range of topics. In meetings or when interacting with colleagues, we tend to focus on what we have in common. Staying close to what everyone knows is comforting, but the quality of our decision making and the resilience of the group benefit from the diversity of knowledge, experiences, and capacities of the members. Force yourself and others to share ideas and opinions that may be unexpected and that come from a place of difference, not commonality.

Just say hello. Take a cue from Oprah Winfrey, who is leading a "Just Say Hello" campaign to combat loneliness. The idea is to begin simply, by just saying "hello" to a friend, a stranger, or someone with whom you would like to reconnect. Even simple actions like this can stretch the social muscle.

The social muscle is among our greatest and most distinct evolutionary traits. Humans are not particularly strong, fast, or stealthy relative to other species. We lost our canine teeth thousands of years ago, and have never had the protection offered by natural armor or flight. What makes us such a formidable species is our ability to reason, communicate, work together, and learn from one another. We do all this through culture, by establishing norms, sanctioning violators, forming alliances, recognizing the transient and dynamic nature of alliances, and adjusting our interactions and alliances accordingly. Isolation and loneliness run counter to this. They run counter to being human. It's a cliché, but it's true: We are social creatures. We have a social muscle. The more we exercise it, the healthier we'll all be. ■

About the authors: John Cacioppo is the Tiffany and Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor and the founder and director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago. **Stephanie Cacioppo** is an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral neuroscience and director of the High-Performance Electrical Neuroimaging (HPEN) Laboratory at the University of Chicago.

AUDIO POSTCARDS
YOUR TAKE: CONNECTING AT WORK

Five stories about the nature and nurture of workplace friendships **by Harvard Business Review Staff**

A PowerPoint project leads to a friendship. A management change breaks up a close-knit group. An act of generosity leads to a new career. HBR asked our readers to share their experiences with loneliness at work, and people from around the world responded, telling us about moments that transformed relationships with colleagues.

Listen below to hear from people in a range of industries and workplaces.

Abhishek Kothari, a banker, told the story of becoming friends with a colleague who outranked him at the financial firm where they worked. Though they worked near one another, their relationship was casual and they rarely said anything more to each other than "hello." When Abhishek was asked to work with this person on a high-stakes presentation, he got to know his colleague much better. While the work was stressful, the two were able to crack jokes and get to know one another. They shared details about their families and laughed over "immigrant experiences" that they shared. Their friendship lasts to this day. Of the moment the friendship was made, Abhishek said, "I believe empathy is very powerful, and every business is personal."

> "I believe empathy is very powerful, and every business is personal."
>
> –Abhishek Kothari, *Banker*

Harvard Business Review | THE BIG IDEA

▶ PLAY 1:49

Linda Stallard Johnson, a journalist, worked for the *Dallas Morning News* for 25 years as a copyeditor. Then she was laid off. "The newspaper industry is just getting smaller and smaller and smaller," she explained. "My turn came to be laid off." Since leaving the newsroom, she's been working from home as a freelance journalist, but she misses her workplace friendships. She misses sharing jokes with colleagues, knowing what's going on in people's lives, gathering around shared food, and the feeling of working together. Her freelance work is going well — DMN friends have helped her find freelance clients — but she wants to be in an office and have work friends again. "You just don't have that camaraderie when you're sitting at home and it's just you, the laptop, daytime TV, and the dogs," she said.

> "You just don't have that camaraderie when you're sitting at home and it's just you, the laptop, daytime TV, and the dogs."
>
> –Linda Stallard Johnson, *Self-employed*

Harvard Business Review | THE BIG IDEA

▶ PLAY 1:47

Amy Dahm, a consultant, was facing the loss of a friendship when her friend moved to another company. But then he recommended her for a job there too, and even more than helping her prepare for the interview, he told her his salary. "He gave it to me unprompted, so that I would have a strong negotiating position," she said. "I was bowled over by his generosity. He set me up for success." Amy ultimately didn't end up working at the company, but she remains friends with her former colleague. "Men and women colleagues can be friends, can have each other's backs, and can help each other rise through the ranks together," she said.

"Men and women colleagues can be friends, can have each other's back, and can help each other rise through the ranks together."

–Amy Dahm, *Consultant*

Harvard Business Review | THE BIG IDEA

► PLAY 1:50

Brendan Rose, who owns a small business in Alberta, Canada, takes his management cues from when he worked in IT at a large office-supply chain several years ago. He joined the company for the camaraderie; he hadn't enjoyed freelancing. At the store he found a close-knit team. There were inside jokes and some parties. Mostly everybody stayed at the store, from open until close, working unpaid overtime and being together. Then management changed. Colleagues spent less time helping one another and were tasked with accomplishing their own discrete assignments. Jokes and check-ins turned bitter, as conversation turned more and more frequently to the management change. Brendan stopped spending any more time at the store than was necessary, clocking in and clocking out right on schedule. Eventually he left. Now, as the head of a small company, he tries to create the same camaraderie he experienced when he started that job. "If you actually enjoy what you do and enjoy the people you're with, then it doesn't matter what you're doing," he said.

"If you actually enjoy what you do and enjoy the people you're with, then it doesn't matter what you're doing."

–Brendan Rose, *Small Business Owner*

Harvard Business Review | THE BIG IDEA

► PLAY 2:04

Amy Aughinbaugh, a business analyst, was new in town and looking to meet some friends. She Googled her new town (Dallas), her alma matter (Rhodes College), and her industry (nonprofits) to see if there was anyone she should connect with. Up popped Catherine's name. Amy invited her to coffee, but Catherine instead took her out to a fancy meal. It was the start of a lasting friendship that has woven in and out of the two women's professional lives, too. When Amy finished grad school, Catherine hired her to work at the Communities Foundation of Texas. Though Amy already had a work friend when she started, she knew she needed to reach out to her new colleagues and get to know them, too. "Coming into a job where I already had a friend and was working for my friend, there's obviously a lot of benefits to that. We had a certain level of trust and we could speak up front with each other," she said. "When Catherine moved on and I stayed here, it was really important for me to have developed other friendships and relationships."

"Knowing your colleagues better means you can know how to work with them better, and ultimately produce better outcomes."

–Amy Aughinbaugh, *Business Analyst*

Harvard Business Review | THE BIG IDEA

▶ PLAY 2:05

ARTICLE
THE DANGERS OF "MANDATORY FUN"

It can make social isolation at work even worse. **by Adam Waytz**

A few years ago upper management at the organization where I worked decided that people in my department did not connect enough socially. Recognizing that loneliness and a lack of connection are serious workplace issues, they arranged a weekly gourmet lunch for us, creating a comfortable, relaxed venue where we had the time and space to bond. It was a simple and, on its face, noble idea.

But within three weeks I stopped going to the lunches (and soon after that, they petered out altogether). My decision had nothing to do with my colleagues, whom I liked quite a bit. I stopped going because the conversation always turned to work. The personal downtime that I'd previously spent pondering Minnesota Timberwolves box scores, personal rankings of Stevie Wonder albums, or nothing at all had been absorbed into my workday. And I didn't like that.

The leaders in my organization had correctly identified the problem, but they missed the mark on a solution. They are not alone; companies routinely hold mandatory social activities that are awkward at best and alienating at worst. As the typical work-life balance shifts ever more toward the office, companies need to consider a new approach that encourages connections outside the office to help employees recharge, reenergize, and reengage.

WHAT STOPS US FROM CONNECTING AT WORK

Office holiday parties, workplace mixers, and organizational retreats — complete with trust falls and the like — have become the stuff of cinematic parody. Beyond the general trivialness of such activities, their ability to establish genuine social ties often fails because of several basic psychological tendencies.

Common ground. At those workplace lunches, my colleagues and I succumbed to one of the tendencies — what psychologists call the *common information effect*. This is the inclination of people with different expertise, interests, and experiences to immediately gravitate to topics they have in common. In our case, the topic was work. For an activity that was intended to help us connect with one another and develop new bonds, focusing on what we already had in common was hardly useful. Many of us have experienced social functions at work that end up being complaint-and-gossip sessions that just make us feel worse.

Birds of a feather. Homophily, a related phenomenon, is the tendency of people to seek out others like themselves. It serves some useful purposes — it makes it easier to break the ice with people we don't know very well, for example. But several studies show that homophily has a downside, preventing us from reaching out to people who aren't like us, especially when it comes to race. Research led by Ohio State professor Tracy Dumas shows that participating in work-related social events generates social connections among coworkers only if they are of the same race. In a related study, Columbia professors Paul Ingram and Michael Morris examined a mixer

attended by 100 business executives who were primarily based in New York City. Although the event was advertised as an opportunity to meet new people, attendees associated mainly with those they already knew, and most joined groups that contained at least one member of their own race.

Muddling relationship types. It's also difficult to create real social connections at work because doing so requires us to mix different relationship types. In 1979 the psychologists Margaret Clark and Judson Mills identified two types of human relationships: *communal* and *exchange*. The foundation for communal relationships is providing to others on the basis of their needs; we typically form these relationships with friends and family. In exchange relationships, a person gives in anticipation of receiving something in return. Not surprisingly, this is the type of relationship we typically form with colleagues.

Mixing communal behaviors with exchange relationships — often the implicit function of work-driven social gatherings — can be discomfiting. When one person in an exchange relationship adopts communal behaviors, by disclosing vulnerabilities, asking for emotional support, or, worse, making romantic overtures, the other person may want to run for the exit. There's a time and a place for mixing business with pleasure, but for the most part, crossing the line often results in shared awkwardness, not closer connections.

CO-OPTING LEISURE TIME

Despite the abysmal track record of many if not most attempts to engineer social connections at work, companies continue to promote all manner of activities and events. This causes a broader problem: the creeping intrusion of the workplace into every facet of our lives. Numerous commentators have described the increasing tendency of

employers to co-opt our leisure time, including in an HBR cover story last year on how to survive the "24/7 workplace." Many organizations today expect employees to be constantly available for work and to prioritize work over other important aspects of life, including parenting. In such cultures, employers increasingly blur the line between work and social lives. Stroll through the headquarters of any well-funded tech company, and you'll see "perks" ranging from well-stocked kitchens to gyms, meditation spaces, physical therapists, and play spaces (foosball, Ping-Pong, and similar activities), all designed to encourage employees to bring elements of their outside life into the organization. The goal may be to reduce loneliness by building social connections among employees, but it's possible that by keeping us away from genuine communal relationships, this encroachment of work into our personal lives is driving much of our isolation.

Two recent books expound on companies' desire to control their employees' social lives outside the workplace. James Livingston's *No More Work* and Elizabeth Anderson's *Private Government* describe employers' capacity to determine our employment status on the basis of whether we have consumed alcohol outside work, tweeted a disagreeable statement, or even attended — or declined to attend — a political rally. Anderson also addresses companies' tendency to interfere with their employees' social lives, stating, "Employers unilaterally determine work schedules [such as split shifts that] wreak havoc with the private lives of workers: they can't arrange child care…and [workers] are left with unpaid junk time on their hands in the middle of the day, often hours from home, and with no opportunity to spend it with friends and family." It's likely that such policies inhibit or damage communal

relationships, making loneliness on the job even worse.

Another take on the corporatization of social life can be found in Andy Merrifield's *The Amateur,* in which he relates how leisure activities including gardening, working on one's car, and sculpting have become increasingly professionalized. Merrifield describes this trend as a societal pressure to turn things we enjoy doing into lines on our CVs. When hobbies become jobs, he writes, "The job, in simple terms, transforms a labour of love into a loathing of labour." The same is true of our social lives: Even for people who are naturally extroverted, being forced to be friendly in a work context may sap the intrinsic joy of affiliating with others.

Merrifield, like Livingston and Anderson, is an academic in the humanities. In my world, that of business schools and corporations, their views are uncommon — even, in many places, nonexistent. In my world "engagement" is a buzzword on par with "disruption." In my MBA classes I've taught plenty about engagement. And countless companies and organizational scholars preach the importance of motivating employees and making them feel more connected and less lonely.

But as the epidemic of loneliness in and out of the workplace has spread, I've decided to try something different: disengagement. Let people go home, let them spend time with their families, let them head to the bar and check out Tinder, let them play in a band and record an album. Rather than mandating "fun," give them a day off, and watch their social lives flourish and their loneliness fade away. ■

About the author: Adam Waytz is a psychologist and an associate professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

NEXT IN THE BIG IDEA:

NOVEMBER 2017

The "Good Jobs" Solution

MIT's **Zeynep Ton** examines how a growing number of major companies, especially in retail, are adopting a radically different operating model that provides higher wages and growth opportunities for low-level employees.

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