

LONELINESS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE AMERICAN WORKPLACE

Understanding the drivers of workplace loneliness, the costs and the solutions

The following report was compiled based on the findings from Cigna's 2020 Loneliness Index and includes data predating the coronavirus pandemic.

March 2020

Executive Summary

America's loneliness epidemic is getting worse, with three in five adults (61 percent) surveyed reporting they feel lonely, a seven percentage point increase from 2018, according to Cigna's 2020 Loneliness Index, based on the UCLA Loneliness Scale. Cigna's loneliness research shows that loneliness is a multifaceted issue with multiple drivers, including a lack of social support, too few meaningful social interactions, poor physical and mental health, and a lack of balance in our lives. And since much of our adult lives is spent at work – the average American employee spends 90,000 hours at work over their lifetime¹ – Cigna's 2020 Loneliness Index study sought to better understand the impact that work and employers can have on the American loneliness epidemic.

Extrapolating the results of our 2020 research suggests that 62 percent of U.S. workers may be considered lonely. In other words, taken as a percentage of the number of employed adults in the U.S., there are over 97 million lonely workers in America.² Lonely workers are less productive than non-lonely workers; moreover, each lonely worker may cost their employer nearly \$4,200 a year in additional work days lost. At the national level, loneliness could cost the U.S. economy over \$406 billion a year.³ Therefore, employers can, and should, be agents of change in addressing workplace loneliness, not just because they have a responsibility to look after the health of their workforces, but also because combatting worker loneliness is a business imperative.

>97M



MORE THAN 97 MILLION
U.S. WORKERS ARE LONELY²



LONELINESS COULD COST
THE U.S. ECONOMY OVER
\$406 BILLION A YEAR³

While there is no easy solution for workplace loneliness, there are clear ways for employers to create the conditions that can reduce the prevalence of loneliness among their employees. By encouraging meaningful relationships among coworkers, promoting good work-life balance, creating common causes between employees and their company, and using workplace technology to help facilitate meaningful connections, employers can reduce loneliness among their employees and positively impact both their workforces and the business community at large.

Workplace Loneliness Is Widespread

While employment itself is a deterrent to loneliness – employed Americans in our survey are significantly less lonely than unemployed Americans (62 percent lonely versus 77 percent lonely) – employed Americans are still vulnerable. Workplace loneliness is driven by a variety of circumstances including employees feeling the need to hide their true self at work, an unbalanced use of workplace technology and employees not finding their work meaningful or fulfilling. These types of feelings are present no matter the job setting or industry; employees in workplace environments ranging from in-person office settings to remote work environments to clinical and sales positions are all susceptible to loneliness. Even in work environments with the lowest rates of loneliness, such as pre-K through secondary education and in-person office settings, one in two workers is considered lonely (56 and 58 percent lonely, respectively).

The Importance of Work-Life Balance and Good Coworker Relationships

Beyond *where* people work, *how* people work together and their workplace culture have an impact on worker loneliness. Employees know that a core component of a positive workplace culture is good work-life balance. Daily balance in general is important; doing too much or too little of any one thing, be it work, exercise, family time or “me time,” can significantly increase loneliness. When employers promote and enable this balance, employees are less lonely. In fact, employees who believe they have a good work-life balance are significantly less lonely (55 percent lonely) than those who disagree (78 percent lonely). And employees who say their work life spills over into their personal life more than they would like are lonelier than those who do not feel that way (73 percent lonely versus 54 percent lonely).



WHEN EMPLOYERS ENABLE WORKERS TO MAKE MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS WITH EACH OTHER, EMPLOYEES ARE LESS LONELY

Employees’ personal and professional connections, and whether they feel they have good relationships with their coworkers, are additional critical components of work culture. When employers foster and facilitate meaningful connections among coworkers, employees are less lonely. Employees who say they have a “best friend” or close friend at work are less likely to be lonely. And 81 percent of employees who do not feel part of a group of friends at work are considered lonely, versus 54 percent of those who do feel that they are part of a group of friends. Employers can help build these workplace relationships by supporting initiatives such as mentor and volunteer programs and by encouraging team activities and events both during and outside of work.

The Role of Technology

The technology we use at work also has an impact on worker loneliness. In today's workplace, the question is not *if* technology is present, but *how* it is used and the extent to which it facilitates or hinders meaningful coworker relationships. When employees feel that technology helps them make meaningful connections with their coworkers they are less lonely. Workers believe technology can help them develop these meaningful coworker relationships. Indeed, over three in five workers (61 percent) agree that the use of technology at work helps them feel more connected to their coworkers.

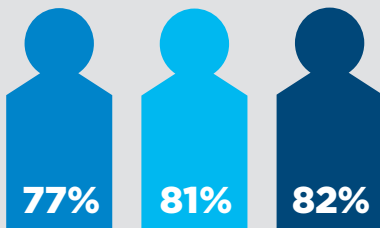
The key for employers is to try and ensure that the use of workplace technology meets employee expectations. Workers who say they use different types of workplace communication, such as phone calls, video calls and instant messaging, either too often or not often enough, are lonelier than employees using different communication platforms in the amounts they prefer. For example, workers who use the phone *less* than they want, as well as those workers who use in-person conversations, video calls, instant messaging and social media *more* than they want, are all more likely to be lonely. Employers can tackle these imbalances by gaining an understanding of the technologies employees would like to use more - or less - and then implementing programs and policies that encourage better balance.

The Loneliest Workers

HOW DEMOGRAPHICS PLAY A ROLE

Who are the loneliest workers? Male workers are lonelier than their female counterparts (64 percent lonely versus 59 percent lonely). Men are more likely to feel a general sense of emptiness when at work and to feel alienated from their coworkers.

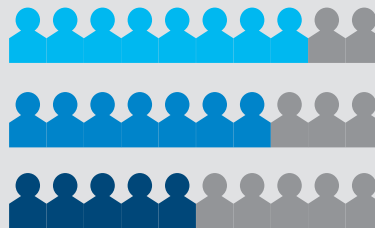
Age also matters. Younger generations feel lonelier than older generations, and this also holds true for workers. More than eight in ten Gen Z employees (81 percent) and nearly seven in ten Millennial employees (69 percent) are considered lonely, compared to 49 percent of Baby Boomer employees. And while Gen Z and Millennial employees are more likely to say they have a work “best friend” and socialize with colleagues outside of the office, they are also more likely to feel like they can’t be their authentic selves at work. This perception may reflect that younger generations feel more emotionally distant and alienated from their coworkers. Forty percent of Gen Zers and 37 percent of Millennials agree they often feel alienated at work, compared to just 18 percent of Boomers. Older generations, on the other hand, are more confident in their sense of self and feel more connected to their colleagues. Eighty-four percent of Boomers feel they have good relationships with their coworkers, compared to 69 percent of Gen Z employees.



THE LONELIEST WORKERS:
WORKERS WHO HAVE BEEN WITH
THEIR COMPANY/ORGANIZATION
LESS THAN SIX MONTHS (77%)

GEN Z WORKERS (81%)

**SHARING/GIG ECONOMY
WORKERS (82% LONELY)**



**OVER 8 IN 10 (81%) GEN Z WORKERS
AND NEARLY 7 IN 10 (69%) MILLENNIAL
WORKERS ARE CONSIDERED LONELY,
COMPARED TO 49%
OF BABY BOOMER WORKERS**



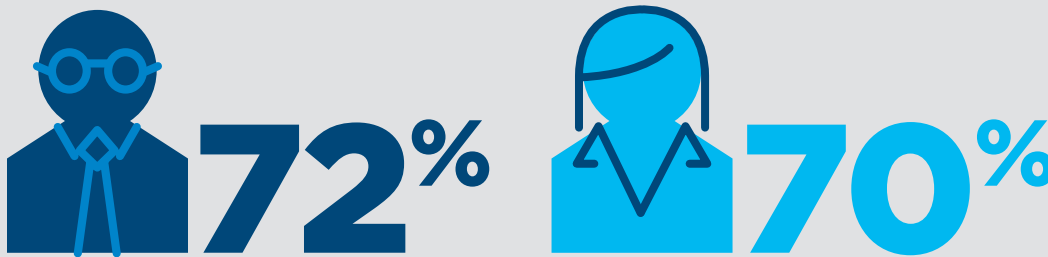
**OVER HALF OF GEN Z WORKERS
(54%) FEEL THEY HAVE TO HIDE
THEIR TRUE SELF AT WORK**

Similarly, minority employees who feel the need to hide their true self at work are lonelier. Nearly half (48 percent) of Hispanic workers and employees who identify their race as “other,” and 41 percent of African American workers, feel this way, compared to 36 percent of Asian and white employees. Minority workers are also comparatively younger than white employees, exacerbating the higher levels of loneliness among minority groups.

IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP - AND AT THE BOTTOM

Worker loneliness also differs depending on the employee's seniority at work. Interestingly, both senior executives and entry-level workers have higher levels of loneliness (72 and 70 percent lonely, respectively) relative to mid-level employees (56 percent lonely). Loneliness among entry-level workers, the majority of whom are Gen Zers and Millennials, reflects some of the same negativity about work relationships and feelings of isolation that these younger generations have. Entry-level workers are more likely to describe their relationships with coworkers as fair or poor, and nearly half feel emotionally distant from the people they work with. As for senior executives, it's truly lonely at the top - executives are most likely to say they do not find their work meaningful and that they often feel isolated from others, and a majority agree they experience a general sense of emptiness while working.

Job tenure also makes a difference; the longer an employee spends at a company means they are more familiar with it and have had more time to build relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly, the longer an employee has worked for an organization, the less lonely they are. Over three-quarters of employees (77 percent) who have been at their job for less than six months are lonely, compared to 52 percent of those who have worked for their organization for more than ten years. Newer employees say they often feel left out and alone. But these feelings of isolation diminish the longer a worker has been with their employer.



BOTH SENIOR EXECUTIVES AND ENTRY-LEVEL WORKERS HAVE HIGHER LEVELS OF LONELINESS (72 AND 70% LONELY, RESPECTIVELY)

THE LONELIEST WORKERS? THOSE WORKING ON THE SHARING OR GIG ECONOMY

The nature of one's work also contributes to loneliness. For example, while discussions of the disadvantages of the gig economy often focus on workers' modest pay and lack of health and other benefits, an underemphasized downside may be the isolating effects of the work that can lead to higher loneliness. Compared to workers in other companies - such as publicly traded, privately-owned and government-owned entities and non-profit organizations - gig economy workers in our survey are the loneliest employees, with more than eight in ten (82 percent) classified as lonely. By comparison, 57 percent of non-profit workers and 61 percent of workers who work for a private company are considered lonely. Seven in ten sharing/gig economy workers often feel like no one really knows them well, and nearly two-thirds of sharing economy workers often feel they lack companionship.

How Telework Impacts Loneliness

Another trend shaping how we work - increased telecommuting - is having an impact on worker loneliness. Whether an employee works remotely or not and the frequency with which they telecommute both make a difference. Full-time remote employees are more likely to be lonely (65 percent lonely) than those who typically work in in-person office environments (58 percent lonely). Remote workers are also more likely to feel that their relationships with others are not meaningful, with more than half of remote workers always or sometimes feeling this way.

Similarly, those workers who telecommute every day or multiple days a week are lonelier than those who telecommute less often. And what we know about the importance of daily balance in preventing loneliness also applies to work travel - employees who usually travel for work just the right amount, by their own standards, are less lonely than those who travel too much (or too little).

The Costs of Loneliness

Loneliness is not just an employee wellness mandate but a financial priority. Workplace loneliness affects worker productivity and business performance. Loneliness results in unengaged workers and imposes real costs on businesses. Lonely workers are more than twice as likely as non-lonely workers to miss a day of work due to illness, twice as likely to miss work due to family obligations and more than five times more likely to miss work due to stress. Annualized, lonely workers miss an additional two weeks of work compared to non-lonely workers. These additional days missed by a lonely worker may cost their employer almost \$4,200 a year. At the national level, the annual cost of worker loneliness to the U.S. economy may be approximately \$406 billion.

LONELY WORKERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO MISS WORK DUE TO:



ILLNESS
(2X MORE LIKELY)



FAMILY OBLIGATIONS
(2X MORE LIKELY)



STRESS
(5X MORE LIKELY)

Besides more days missed, lonely workers report being less productive when at work. Lonely workers are over three times more likely than non-lonely workers to admit they are less productive than most workers with a similar job. More than one in ten lonely workers (12 percent) say their work is often lower quality than it should be. Lonely employees are also more likely to admit to

not doing their work as carefully as they should. Nationally, this is equivalent to nearly 13 million lonely workers who are less productive and nearly 12 million lonely workers who admit their quality of work is lower than it should be.

Attrition also impacts business performance, and lonely workers are more likely than non-lonely workers to think about leaving their jobs. Lonely workers dread working more than once a week and think about quitting almost once a week. Close to six in ten lonely workers (57 percent), or nearly 55 million workers nationally, are likely to look for a new job in the next year. In fact, lonely workers are nearly twice as likely as non-lonely workers to be looking for a new position. Lonely workers are also more sensitive to work friends leaving their place of employment. One-third of lonely workers are more likely to quit their current job if their best friend at work left – over twice as likely as non-lonely workers. Given that the average U.S. cost of replacing an employee ranges from one-half to two times the employee’s salary,⁴ it makes sense for employers to view workplace loneliness reduction as an additional strategy for combatting attrition.

Reducing Loneliness in the Workplace

What can employers do to reduce loneliness in the workplace? Employers must recognize loneliness as an important aspect of employees’ overall mental health and make resolving loneliness part of a comprehensive, whole-person approach to improving worker well-being – and strengthening the bottom line. To do this, employers should adopt a three-pronged approach to reduce the drivers of workplace loneliness and build work cultures that cultivate connections among employees and facilitate meaningful coworker relationships.

A 3-Pronged Approach for Employers

1) AWARENESS: Before employers can work to alleviate the most significant drivers of loneliness among employees, they must develop an awareness of loneliness in their population. The top determinants of worker loneliness, listed by largest impact on loneliness, include:

- > Employees feeling like they need to hide their true self at work
- > Using the telephone less than one prefers
- > Not finding one's work meaningful or fulfilling
- > Misalignment between an employee's values and their company's values
- > An employee having a manager that does not advocate for them

Actionable ideas for lessening these feelings might include: encouraging employees to join or create an employee resource group; asking employees to consider calling a colleague on the phone instead of writing an email; or hosting town halls and other community events – even virtually – where senior leadership shares the company's vision and values, highlights meaningful work and listens to employee feedback. Sharing and gig economy companies in particular – who may have fewer opportunities to engage with their employees and whose employees may be lonelier – should be especially cognizant and should look to understand how loneliness may be impacting the well-being of their workforce.

2) ACTIVATION: Employers can encourage and enable the types of workplace environments and cultures that are most effective in reducing worker loneliness, such as more opportunities for meaningful coworker interactions and helping colleagues find common interests and goals. Even in virtual environments, these efforts contribute to both the social well-being and environmental well-being of employees. Loneliness is significantly lower among employees who:

- > Feel their coworkers are supportive
- > Find it easy to meet new people at work
- > Have good work-life balance
- > Have a “best friend” at work
- > Feel a sense of shared goals with colleagues

To facilitate meaningful coworker interactions and help build these workplace connections, employers can consider creating mentorship, “buddy” and volunteer programs that encourage employees of different ages, levels and tenure to get to know each other both during and outside of work. Employers can also sponsor virtual team lunches and meet-ups to further support workplace relationship-building, and should not forget to keep their remote workforce in mind – encouraging teleworkers to schedule virtual lunch dates, explore hobbies outside of the home and visit the office when safe and possible.



3) ADOPTION: Employers can consider offering benefits and programs that are most likely to have a positive impact on worker loneliness. In this way, employers can demonstrate their commitment to adopting a culture of well-being. Regardless of whether their employer currently offers the benefit, employees who say they either have or would appreciate the following are less lonely:

- > An employer that encourages work-life balance
- > Flexible workday hours
- > Discounted fitness memberships

Other ideas for employers include implementing work email blackout periods (e.g., 8p.m.-8a.m.) to help preserve work-life balance, bringing remote workers into the office for team-building activities, and sponsoring other social activities that encourage coworkers to interact outside of work, when safe and possible to do so.

Conclusion

Americans expect businesses to be leading agents of social change. Sixty-eight percent of Americans we surveyed agree that companies can take actions that both increase profits *and* improve conditions in the communities where they operate.⁵ Employers can rise to the challenge by addressing workplace loneliness, not only to improve their employees' mental health and overall well-being, but also because worker loneliness affects the bottom line.

Employers can begin with a focus on those employees who are most likely to be lonely – younger workers, minorities, new employees, the most junior and most senior employees, and those who work remotely.

There are tangible ways to get started reducing loneliness. Employers can prioritize better work-life balance, encourage and help enable colleagues to make friends at work, and actively observe how employees use technology in order to allow it to complement, not replace, in-person interactions. By alleviating the determinants of workplace loneliness while promoting work environments and behaviors that reduce loneliness, employers can improve the social, mental, physical and fiscal health of their workforces and companies.

Study Background

The 2020 Loneliness Index surveyed more than 10,400 adults (age 18+) and is based on the UCLA Loneliness Scale, a 20-item questionnaire developed to assess self-reported, subjective feelings of loneliness or social isolation. According to the scale, loneliness is measured by a score of 43 or higher. The survey was developed with Daniel Russell, Ph.D., Founder of the UCLA Loneliness Index, and conducted in partnership with Ipsos. It included a 20-item questionnaire and has a credibility index of ± 1.1 percentage points.

¹ Peppercorn, S. (2019, July 26). *Why You Should Stop Trying to Be Happy at Work*. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved January 7, 2020 from <https://hbr.org/2019/07/why-you-should-stop-trying-to-be-happy-at-work>

² Calculated by multiplying the prevalence of loneliness (62%) with the number of employed Americans (157.3 million) sourced from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Labor Force Statistics, July 2019). Retrieved January 16, 2020 from <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab1.htm>

³ Cost of loneliness for a lonely worker is calculated by multiplying the average additional days missed by lonely workers (15 days) by the average wages given an eight-hour workday and the average private-sector hourly salary (\$34.77) sourced from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Employer Costs for Employee Compensation, 2019 Q3). Retrieved January 16, 2020 from <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/CMU20100000000000>

⁴ Estimate from Gallup. Retrieved February 5, 2020 from <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/247391/fixable-problem-costs-businesses-trillion.aspx>

⁵ 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer. Retrieved January 28, 2020 from <https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>

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