



Connection Over Configuration

Tackling Workplace Loneliness and Isolation Through Leadership and Choice

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Key findings

- Our findings show no differences in reported levels of workplace loneliness and isolation among fully remote, hybrid, and fully in-person workers, even though remote workers experience fewer social interactions at work.
- Organizational practices that provide employees with more “voice and choice” may enhance their social connectedness and mental health.
 - Hybrid workers who have the autonomy to choose their in-office days are less lonely than those who are told when to be in the office.
 - Remote and hybrid workers are less lonely when they have more control over their work schedules.
- Leaders who are open and accessible play a key role in fostering socially connected work environments.
 - Satisfaction with the frequency of meetings with leadership positively impacts employee well-being.
- Across all work models, new employees feel less isolated if they are satisfied with their onboarding experience.
- Access to in-person and virtual social events can help reduce feelings of loneliness for remote workers.





About this research

The first instalment of this research series, *Real Connections in a Virtual World*, highlighted the growing concerns among Canadian organizations about the value of social connections in the face of the rising prevalence of remote and hybrid work arrangements.¹ We also found that employers lacked evidence-based guidance on how to address concerns about worker loneliness and isolation.

To gain further insight into these issues, the Conference Board conducted a national survey from August 22 to September 11, 2024, to understand the impact of remote work on experiences of loneliness and isolation. Our findings present a clearer picture of how work model choices affect employee well-being and mental health.

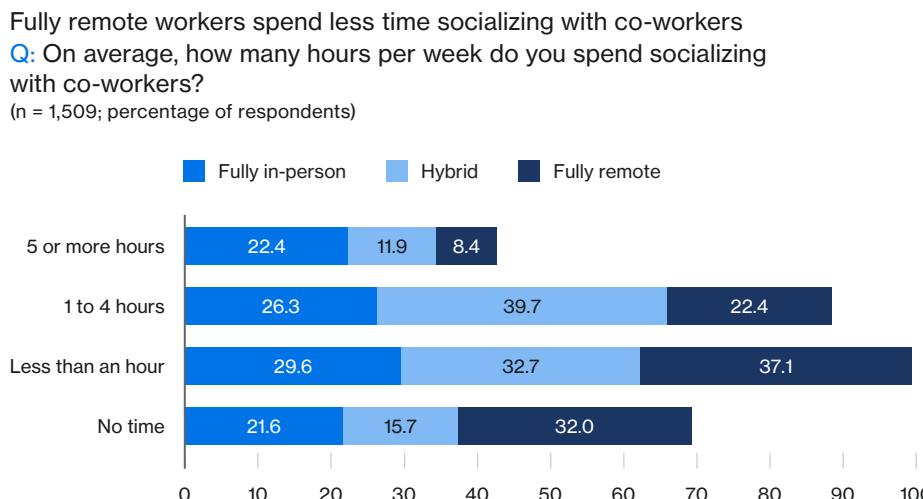
We found that reported levels of worker loneliness and isolation are not determined by the work model itself but by what happens within these models—such as the availability of flexible schedules, the quality of leadership, and opportunities for social events.

¹ The Conference Board of Canada, *Real Connections in a Virtual World*, Ottawa: CBoC, May 22, 2024. https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/real-connections-in-a-virtual-world_2024/.

Remote workers socialize less, but are they lonelier?

Unsurprisingly, our research confirmed that in-person workers spend more time socializing with co-workers than their fully remote and hybrid counterparts. One-third of fully remote workers spend no time socializing with colleagues (32.0 per cent) compared with just 21.6 per cent of fully in-person workers. (See Chart 1.)

Chart 1

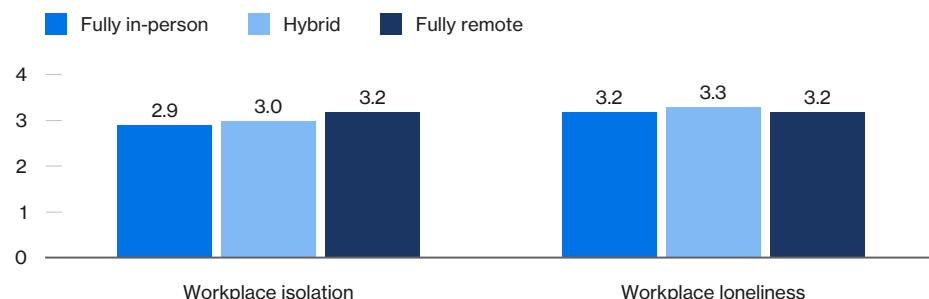


Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

However, less socializing does not translate into higher workplace loneliness and isolation. An employee's work model alone does not determine workplace loneliness or isolation. (See Chart 2.)

Chart 2

Average worker loneliness and isolation by work model
(n = 1,509; average)



Note: Workplace isolation and loneliness were assessed using multiple items on a 7-point scale. Additional details about the measurement approach are provided in the Methods section.
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Factors that impact employee loneliness and isolation

Restricted choice: A recipe for loneliness when establishing work models

Our research indicates that factors beyond the number of hours that people socialize at work and how often they work from home influence feelings of loneliness at work. However, that doesn't mean that certain decisions around work models, such as hybrid work implementation, do not influence loneliness. Our data reveals that the factors that lead to employee loneliness are complex, and one of the most influential is autonomy.

Flexibility to choose in-office days

Some hybrid work models allow employees to choose their in-office days, while others dictate which days their staff needs to be in the office. Employees who have no say in choosing their in-office days reported higher loneliness (24.2 per cent) than workers who have the autonomy to choose. (See Chart 3.)

Employees' input into changing work models

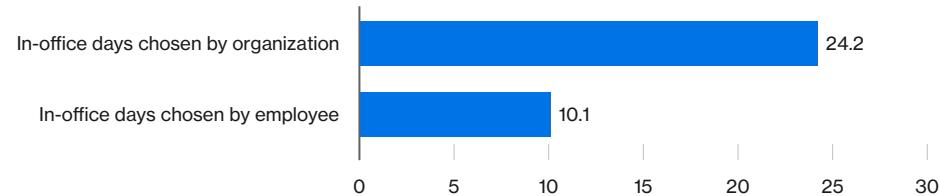
Roughly a quarter of employees (23.3 per cent) whose work model changed in the past 12 months experienced higher levels of loneliness than workers who have been working consistently in the same work model (15.3 per cent). Within the cohort whose work model has shifted in the last year, when the employees did not participate in the decision to make this change, they experience higher levels of loneliness, on average, than those who had input. (See charts 4 and 5.)

Chart 3

Employees were more likely to feel lonely when organizations determined which days to work in office.

Q: Please select the option that best describes how your current hybrid arrangement was established?

(n = 500; percentage of respondents)



Note: Employees classified as lonely are those whose scores on the workplace loneliness scale exceed the average by more than one standard deviation.
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 4

Employees whose work models changed in the past year are more likely to feel lonely

Q: Has your work arrangement changed in the past 12 months?

(n = 1,394; average loneliness scores)

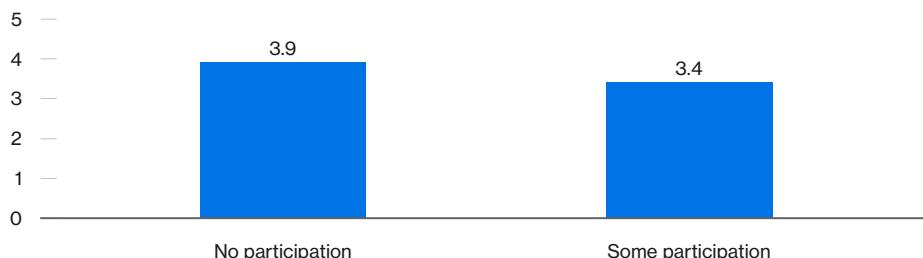


Note: Employees classified as lonely are those whose scores on the workplace loneliness scale exceed the average by more than one standard deviation.
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 5

Hybrid employees who had no input in their work model change are more likely to feel lonely

Q: How would you describe your level of involvement in the decision-making process regarding the change in your work model?
(n = 333; average loneliness scores)



Note: Workplace loneliness was assessed using multiple items on a 7-point scale. Additional details about the measurement approach are provided in the Methods section.

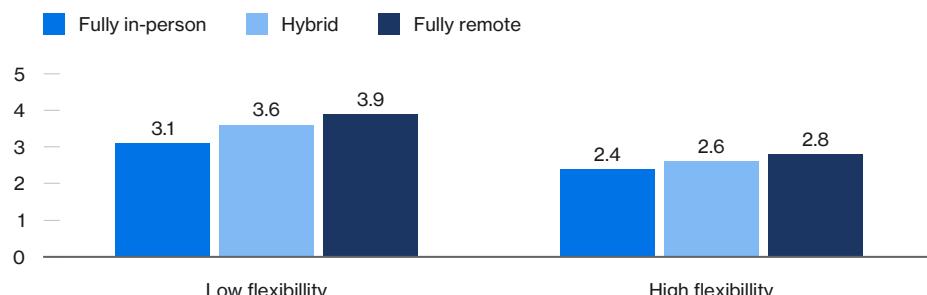
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Flexibility in work schedule

Employees who have control over their schedules and support for time-off decisions feel less isolated than those with less control. For example, hybrid workers who have more control over their schedules report significantly less isolation (2.6 vs. 3.6 on a 7-point scale) than those with less control. (See Chart 6.) Flexibility is associated with engagement across all work models, but our findings reveal that lack of flexibility has an even greater impact on remote workers. Those with high schedule flexibility report significantly higher scores for engagement (4.2 on a 7-point scale) compared with just 2.4 for those with limited flexibility. (See Chart 7.)

Chart 6

Workers who had control over their schedules were less isolated
(n = 1,509; average isolation scores)

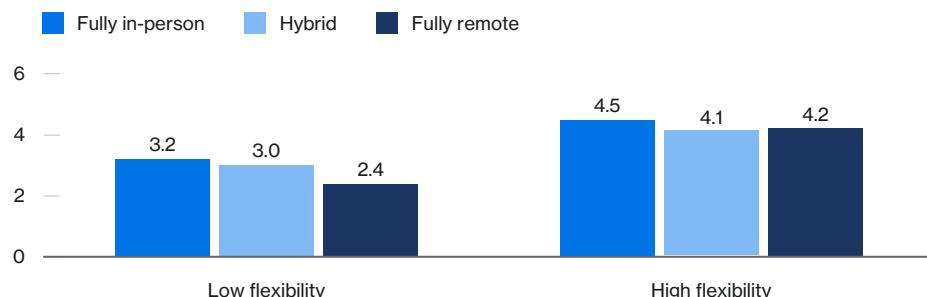


Note: Schedule flexibility includes control over schedule and support for time off and was assessed using multiple items on a 7-point scale.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 7

Employees with schedule flexibility are more engaged
(n = 1,509; average work engagement dedication scores)



Note: Work engagement consists of three dimensions (dedication, vigour, and absorption) and was assessed using multiple items on a 7-point scale.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Inclusive leadership is crucial for reducing workplace isolation and loneliness

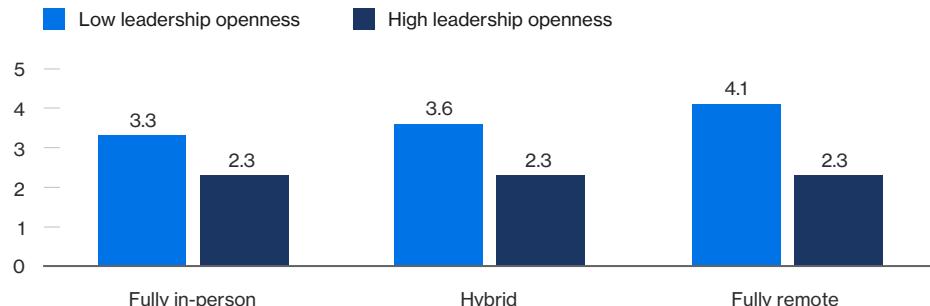
In our study, we define inclusive leadership as a style in which leaders are more available to employees, provide support and guidance, and actively listen to and encourage employees to voice their ideas.² Our findings suggest that open and accessible leadership may help reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness across all work models. For example, higher scores on leadership openness are associated with employees feeling less isolated or lonely. Inclusive leadership is especially critical in reducing isolation in fully remote work environments and plays a crucial role in mitigating loneliness in both hybrid and fully remote models. (See charts 8 and 9.)



² Carmeli, Abraham, Roni Reiter-Palmon, and Enbal Ziv, "Inclusive Leadership and Employee Involvement in Creative Tasks in the Workplace: The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety," *Creativity Research Journal* 22, no. 3 (August 10, 2010): 250–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2010.504654>.

Chart 8

Isolation is lower when leaders are receptive to new ideas, opportunities, and discussions
(n = 1,509; average isolation scores)



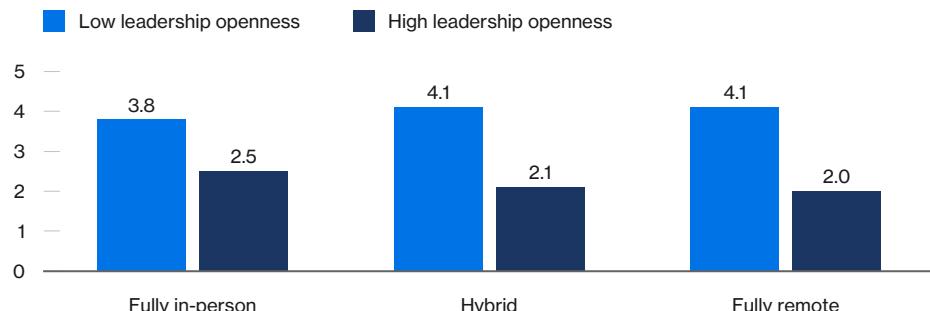
Notes: low and high refer to leadership openness.

Inclusive leadership consists of two dimensions (openness and accessibility) and was assessed using multiple items on a 7-point scale.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 9

Leadership openness plays a critical role in reducing workplace loneliness
(n = 333; average loneliness scores)



Note: Inclusive leadership consists of two dimensions (openness and accessibility) and was assessed using multiple items on a 7-point scale.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Satisfaction with frequency of meetings with leader

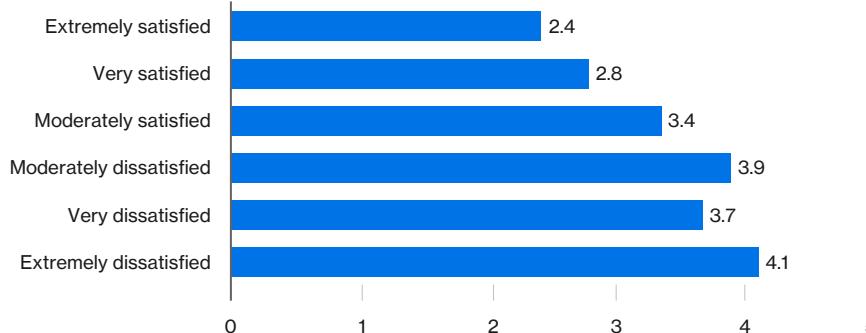
Employees satisfied with the frequency of one-on-one meetings with their leaders reported lower levels of workplace loneliness, regardless of work model. (See Chart 10.) For remote workers, satisfaction was higher when these meetings occurred at least every two weeks. However, this effect was not observed for fully in-person workers, who benefit from more informal interactions with colleagues and leaders in the physical workplace. These opportunities may reduce the need for frequent one-on-one meetings with supervisors.

Chart 10

Employees who are satisfied with the frequency of their meetings with supervisors are less likely to feel lonely

Q: How satisfied are you with the frequency of your individual meetings with the person(s) to whom you report (e.g., supervisor, manager)?

(n = 1,509; average loneliness scores)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

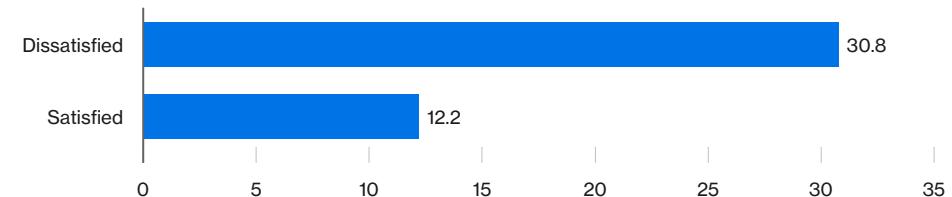
Satisfaction with onboarding

When we compared recent hires' satisfaction with the onboarding experience across all work models, only 12.2 per cent of those who were satisfied reported feeling isolated. In contrast, 30.8 per cent of workers who were dissatisfied with their onboarding process reported feeling isolated. (See Chart 11.)

Chart 11

Employees who are satisfied with onboarding feel less isolated

Q: Overall, how satisfied were you with your organization's onboarding process? (n = 213; percentage of respondents)



Note: Employees classified as isolated are those whose scores on the workplace isolation scale exceed the average by more than one standard deviation.

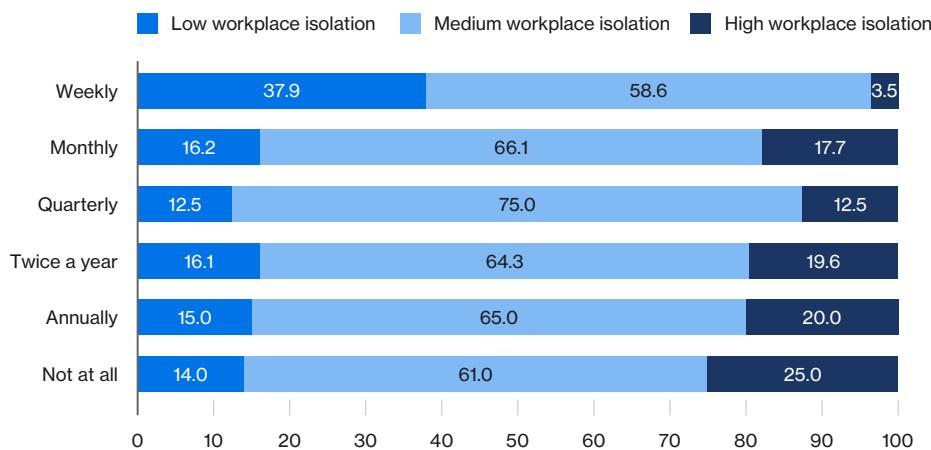
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Virtual and in-person social events for remote workers

Virtual social events (e.g., happy hour, coffee breaks, trivia games) positively influence well-being for remote employees. The highest proportion of remote employees (37.9 per cent) who reported low isolation at work were those who had access to weekly virtual events. Only 3.5 per cent of remote workers with access to weekly virtual events reported a high level of isolation at work. (See Chart 12.)

Chart 12

Remote workers with more access to virtual events are less likely to feel isolated
Q: How frequently does your organization encourage your participation in virtual social events (virtual happy hours, virtual coffee breaks, trivia, online games)?
 (n = 456; percentage of respondents)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

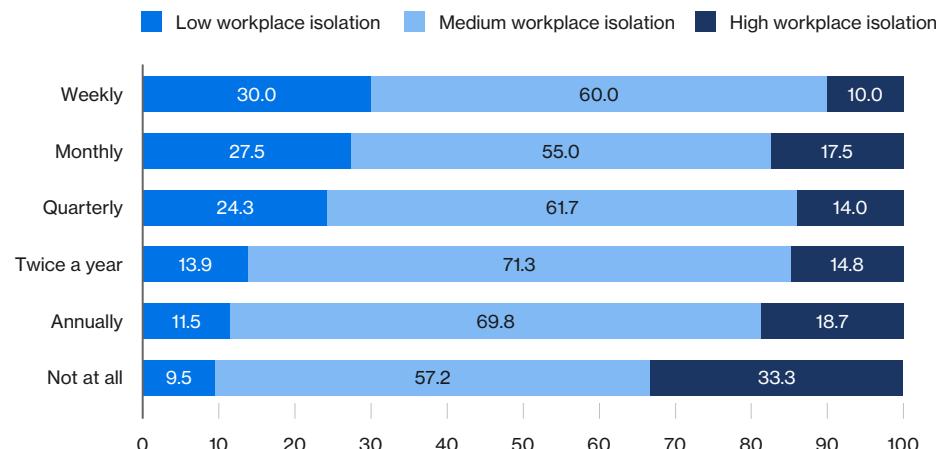
In-person events may also help to reduce feelings of isolation among remote workers. The highest proportion of remote employees who reported low isolation (30.0 per cent) were those who had access to weekly in-person events. (See Chart 13.)

Chart 13

Access to in-person events also reduces workplace isolation for remote workers

Q: How frequently does your organization encourage your participation in in-person social events (games, company-sponsored lunch, celebrations, or staff parties)?

(n = 466; percentage of respondents)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Recommendations

Remote work does not make workers lonely. In-person work doesn't automatically equate to more social connections. What matters is what is done at the workplace, not the format of the workplace. Our recommendations will help leaders reduce loneliness and isolation in workers regardless of the work model.

Train leaders to be more responsive to employee mental health needs

In hybrid and remote contexts, where opportunities for social connections are limited, leaders become crucial as primary sources of support. They play a pivotal role in building social connections between the leader, team, and individual employee.

Research shows that targeted training programs equip leaders with the skills needed to address these challenges effectively. Programs that develop essential skills to manage loneliness and isolation increase leaders' knowledge of mental health issues, help them recognize the warning signs of mental health challenges, and develop their strategies for offering emotional support to employees.³

Foster strong relationships with employees with regular meetings

By regularly asking direct reports about the frequency and content of meetings with individuals and teams, leaders benefit from aligning the meetings with employee preferences and needs. It's a delicate balance. Employees need to feel connected, not overwhelmed by excessive meetings. As circumstances change, regularly revisiting this topic and adjusting the cadence (as required) will help maintain alignment with employees' evolving needs. Conducting regular pulse check surveys with their teams can be a simple and effective way for managers to gather insights on meeting preferences and ensure they continue to meet the needs of their employees.

Regular check-ins help foster relationships between leaders and employees. While there's no one-size-fits-all frequency, our findings suggest that employees are more satisfied with one-on-one meetings that occur every two weeks or more often.

³ Cynthia Mohr and others, "Supportive-leadership training to improve social connection: A cluster-randomized trial demonstrating efficacy in a high-risk occupational context," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 29, no. 5 (2024): 299–316, <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000384>.

Create positive onboarding experiences using best practices

Onboarding new employees is a critical time in building the social connections and rapport needed for success. Effective onboarding ensures employees have the necessary tools and early opportunities to connect with their leaders and co-workers. Key drivers of onboarding satisfaction include:

- setting aside uninterrupted time for supervisors and new hires to connect, especially during the first few weeks;
- offering group orientation sessions that bring together all recent hires, to foster peer connections and a sense of community from the start;
- ensuring new employees are familiar with the organization's essential tools, systems, and resources (e.g., internal communication platforms, wellness programs); and
- assigning a point of contact for informal support and guidance (e.g., a dedicated peer mentor who can help the new employee navigate the organization).

Encourage opportunities to promote social connectedness

Frequent remote and in-person social events can help bridge the socialization gap. Our 2023 survey of Canadian human resources leaders found that promoting social events is one of the most common strategies organizations use to foster connections among hybrid and remote workers.⁴

Our findings suggest that employees value having access to social opportunities, allowing them to choose participation based on their individual preferences. Organizations should also tailor social events to align with employees' location realities, such as offering weekly virtual events for remote workers.

Empower employees with choice and flexibility in their work

Offering as much schedule flexibility and autonomy as your operational needs allow can foster social connection and engagement among employees. Flexibility doesn't have to mean fully remote or hybrid arrangements; it can also include options like compressed work weeks, extended lunch breaks for personal commitments, or the ability to occasionally work from different locations.

When making changes to your organization's work model, organizations should be clear on what aspects of the arrangements are negotiable and which are not up for discussion. This clarity will allow employees to voice their preferences and also allow leaders to act on aspects that are flexible. In addition, it avoids opening conversations where employee input is sure to be ignored. For example, when implementing hybrid work models, ensure that employees have the autonomy, where possible, to choose how many days they work remotely or in person. Regularly assessing employee feedback on work model preferences and experiences (e.g., through pulse surveys) and involving employees in ongoing discussions can foster trust and buy-in.

⁴ The Conference Board of Canada, *Real Connections in a Virtual World*, Ottawa: CBoC, May 22, 2024. https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/real-connections-in-a-virtual-world_2024/.

Appendix A

Methodology

About the research

The Conference Board of Canada conducted a survey on the experiences of social connections among adults in Canada. Our survey gathered data on the aspects of the work environment, relationships at work, employee health, job attitudes, and the standard demographic questions that the Conference Board collects (e.g., gender, age, province).

We used these research questions to guide our research:

1. To what extent do social connections influence employee mental health and business outcomes in the Canadian context? Does this differ by employee group?
2. What organizational-level and team-level strategies have been effective for building social connections in virtual work settings?
3. What types of support do employees need regarding social connection building at work and how do these needs differ by group?

Detailed methods

The employee survey built on findings from our employer survey conducted in the first phase of this research program.

The online employee survey was open from August 22 to September 11, 2024. The survey was administered to a nationally representative sample of 1,509 full-time workers. Quotas were established based on an even segmentation of work models. The sample was collected by the panel research company Leger. The survey gathered 503 responses from those working fully in-person, 500 from hybrid workers, and 506 from fully remote workers. The research team conducted, in partnership with Leger, a pre-test of the survey with 39 participants before fielding to ensure its external validity and identify any wording problem.

A copy of the final measurement scales used for this data briefing is provided in Appendix C.

Because the survey was administered by a panel company using a non-random sample, this survey cannot be considered a random probability sample. Therefore, a margin of error cannot be applied to this data set.

All data was analyzed using R. Data analyses included, but were not limited to:

- descriptive statistics analysis
- independent sample t-test
- different types of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)
- exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis for scale measures
- measurement invariance (multi-group Confirmatory Factor Analysis)
- correlation, multivariate regression analysis, and hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) to analyze relationships between different predictors and criteria.

Our results confirm findings from the research literature

Our data affirms findings around business and mental health outcomes that are widely understood by industry professionals and scholars. Employees experiencing workplace loneliness and isolation are more likely to:

- report higher turnover intentions and higher stress
- experience poor mental health
- be absent from work

We also corroborated findings from the literature on the impact of workplace loneliness and isolation on employee engagement and belongingness. Employees experiencing loneliness and isolation are less likely to be engaged in their job and have a sense of belonging at work.

Appendix B

Glossary

Isolation and loneliness

Workplace isolation: the perception of isolation from co-workers, particularly when the need for casual interactions and support is unmet.

Workplace loneliness: the perception of a lack of emotional support and quality interpersonal relationships among co-workers.

Work models

In-person work: This refers to work activities that require you to be physically present at a specific location, such as an office, store, production floor, or various job sites (e.g., construction workers, electricians, plumbers).

Hybrid work: This refers to jobs that are partially completed from a location of your choice and partially completed from a designated office.

Remote work: This refers to jobs that can be completed from a location of your choice, such as your home or a co-working space.

Inclusive leadership

Accessibility: being present for team members, responsive to their needs, and open to consultation and discussion.

Openness: a leader's receptivity to new ideas, opportunities, and discussions.

Appendix C

Survey scales

Table 1

Measure: Workplace loneliness

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
I often feel alienated from my co-workers	3.12	1.67
I feel myself withdrawing from the people I work with	3.25	1.76
I often feel emotionally distant from the people I work with	3.48	1.79
I often feel isolated when I am with my co-workers	3.06	1.63
I often feel disconnected from others at work	3.31	1.74
I experience a general sense of emptiness when I am at work	3.09	1.75

Note: Response options ranged from 1—Strongly disagree to 7—Strongly agree.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Table 2

Measure: Workplace isolation

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
I have friends at work*	3.08	1.62
I have one or more co-workers available who I talk to about day-to-day problems at work*	3.0	1.66
When I am feeling down there is someone at work I can lean on*	3.29	1.79
I have co-workers available who I can depend on when I have a problem*	2.97	1.62
I have enough people available at work with whom I can talk about my job*	2.9	1.57

Note: Response options ranged from 1—Strongly disagree to 7—Strongly agree.

*reversed item

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Table 3

Measure: Inclusive leadership

Openness

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
My manager is open to hearing new ideas	5.11	1.62
My manager is attentive to new opportunities to improve work processes	5.10	1.60
My manager is open to discuss the desired goals and new ways to achieve them	5.11	1.60

Accessibility

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
My manager is available for consultation on problems	5.25	1.55
My manager is an ongoing "presence" in this team—someone who is readily available	5.03	1.64
My manager is available for professional questions; I would like to consult with them	5.22	1.55
My manager is ready to listen to my requests	5.24	1.56
My manager encourages me to access them on emerging issues	5.26	1.55
My manager is accessible for discussing emerging problems	5.25	1.57

Note: Response options ranged from 1—Strongly disagree to 7—Strongly agree.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Table 4
Measure: Schedule flexibility

Time-off support

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
My work organization accommodates requests to take time off for family/personal obligations	5.63	1.48
I can make arrangements for personal activities because I know my schedule in advance	5.68	1.45
I can take time off of work in order to meet personal needs	5.49	1.5

Flexibility

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
My work organization is willing to re-arrange my schedule to accommodate my personal needs	5.04	1.75
My work organization allows me to change my availability so I can meet family/personal obligations	5.11	1.69
I am able to adjust my work schedule so it does not conflict with family/personal obligations	4.96	1.77

Note: Response options ranged from 1—Strongly disagree to 7—Strongly agree.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Table 5
Measure: Work engagement

Vigour

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
At my work, I feel bursting with energy	3.01	1.35
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous	3.19	1.35
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	3.02	1.59

Dedication

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
I am enthusiastic about my job	3.45	1.39
My job inspires me	3.21	1.49
I am proud of the work that I do	4.07	1.41

Absorption

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
I feel happy when I am working intensely	3.48	1.44
I am immersed in my work	3.75	1.37
I get carried away when I am working	3.18	1.43

Note: Response options ranged from 0—Never to 6—Always.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Table 6
Measure: Stress

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
How often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	2.8	0.94
How often have you felt unable to control the important things in your life?	2.74	1.05
How often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?	3.11	1.03
How often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	2.74	1.04
How often have you felt angry because of things that were outside of your control?	2.81	1.03
How often have you felt that difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	2.58	1.07

Note: Response options ranged from 1—Never to 5—Very often.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

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