

Why Organizations Should Prioritize Community in the New World of Work

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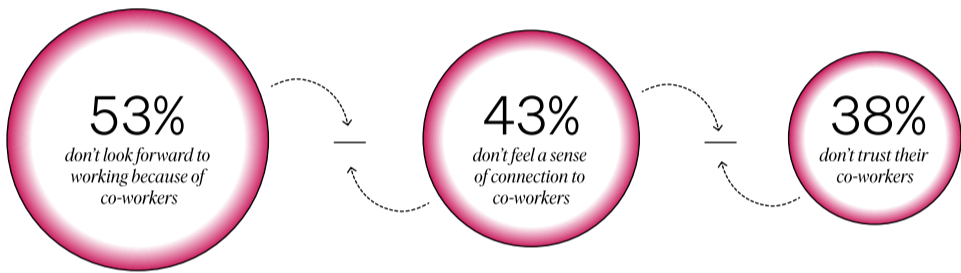
THE CONNECTION CRISIS

Why organizations should prioritize *community* in the new world of work

A lack of social connectivity at work drives high and costly attrition and burnout and leads to reduced well-being, performance, engagement, and productivity across your workforce.

Employees don't feel *connected*

Our latest research of **3,000+ US workers** reveals a growing connection crisis across the workforce.



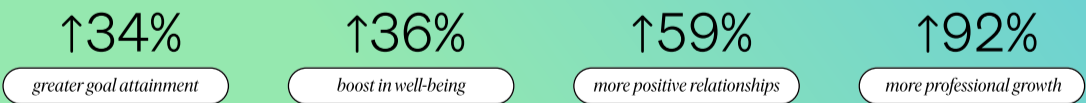
Those *low* in social connection experience:



Without connection to their peers, individual commitment craters, talent leaves, and teams lose their ability to innovate and effectively adapt to changing needs and working conditions.

The benefits of highly connected employees

When workers have the right opportunities to strengthen key mindsets and behaviors science says leads to more enriching workplace relationships.



Take action to create more connection for your people

Learn how social connection is reshaping work— along with science-backed techniques for cultivating more of it across your workforce in our latest research report and on-demand webinar with author and Harvard researcher Shawn Achor, Farrell Redwine, CHRO of Nordstrom, and Erin Eatough, Manager, Behavioral Science at BetterUp.

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The Connection Crisis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Workplace connection
matters more than ever.
So, why do the majority
of workers say they're
not getting enough?

It's an important question, even as our daily lives hint at glimmers of stability and normalcy. While some endeavors are coming back naturally, the last two years have laid bare just how much of an art and science social connection can be. The truth is, many of us are finding it tricky to remaster.

Science has helped us measure and quantify the benefits of social connection — improved cancer survival, decreased cardiovascular mortality, fewer depressive symptoms, and improved overall mental health, among others. There is significant evidence that social support and experiencing connectedness to our fellow humans shape and impact many vital aspects of our daily lives.

Connection may be personal, but it affects our working lives, too. **Ninety-six percent** of organizational leaders say they recognize the importance of relational skills for their employees. Yet, **43%** of employees say their organization isn't doing enough to help them feel connected to their colleagues. In the new world of work and workplaces, with some employees back in the office and others moving flexibly around the clock or the country, finding and maintaining connection is increasingly complex. Bridging this gap is now an organizational imperative — how connected workers feel to their colleagues plays an outsized role in everything from employee experience to talent retention.





The power of feeling connected to our colleagues

We conducted four surveys spanning 3,000+ US workers, evaluated data from over 150,000 BetterUp members, and analyzed 78 leading companies on Glassdoor to better understand what connection means to today's workers and what benefits the individual and organization experience when it's properly cultivated.

Importantly, we learned that **connection at work** now has two distinct features: 1) the size of our networks (that is, how many people we know or are connected to in an organization) matters, but also 2) connection is about the feelings we experience within those networks, such as belonging, friendship, a sense of collaboration, and more.

We found that being **highly connected** to our peers has distinct advantages:

91% *more personal growth*

101% *more professional growth*

And that those **low in social connection** report higher adverse outcomes like:

129% *more loneliness*

107% *more anxiety and depression*

49% *more stress*

78% *more burnout*

What is driving such a massive disconnect between workers, and just how much responsibility do organizations have in addressing it? What happens if you can get connection right?

Connection has been declining for years

For over a decade, many in the health and science community were sounding the alarm about a new kind of public health crisis slowly percolating — a “loneliness epidemic.”

Studies repeatedly show that social isolation negatively impacts our mental and physical well-being, job performance, creativity, decision-making skills, and more.

It's easy to think that loneliness is defined by isolation, yet research, and our own experience, tell us this isn't true. We can be surrounded by people all day yet feel intense loneliness. If we don't have the opportunity to connect on a personal level, then others can't share similar values or see and appreciate our unique perspectives and contributions — this goes beyond feeling sad or physically isolated. We're not just looking for a crowd. What we crave is belonging.

Having more interaction doesn't equal feeling a sense of connection, either. Despite one-click video conferencing and smart everything at our fingertips, just 31% of employees say they're satisfied with the level of social connection in their workplace.

Additionally, one might conclude that the answer is to bring everyone back into the office together full-time. However, our research found that only a fraction of the in-office employee population is content

with their work arrangement, and that they also experience lower social connection, lower belonging, and feel less cared for than their colleagues.

Our data show alarming trends taking hold across the workforce:

61% *don't socialize with their co-workers outside of work*

53% *don't look forward to working because of co-workers*

44% *don't have a true friend at work*

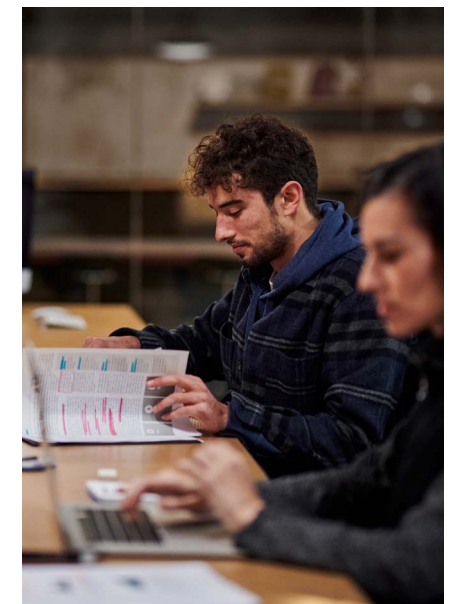
43% *don't feel a sense of connection to co-workers*

38% *don't trust their co-workers*

22% *don't have even one true friend at work*

These stats should raise concerns for all leaders. A lack of social connectivity at work drives high (and costly) employee attrition and burnout and leads to reduced psychological safety, physical well-being, cognitive ability, and social thriving. Without connection to our peers, individual commitment craters, talent leaves, and teams lose their ability to innovate and effectively adapt to changing needs and working conditions. Organizations are less able to sustain performance or be agile in the midst of uncertainty. **It's clear: We're in the midst of a connection crisis.**

¹ Washington Post — There's a Loneliness Epidemic, and Work is Partially to Blame, Oct 2017



“Our social connections are in fact largely influenced by the institutions and settings where we spend the majority of our time. That includes the workplace.”

— US SURGEON GENERAL VIVEK MURPHY on the “loneliness epidemic in America”¹

The connection status quo is gone

In the past, organizations could play more of a hands-off role in promoting employee relationships. By designing spaces tailored for connection, a subset of employees would naturally step into the role of cultural facilitator or social connector using lunchrooms, open offices, happy hours, and the like as the connective tissue in the modern workplace. However, the past two years exposed just how much we took this kind of organic social connection for granted.

In the quick shift to remote and hybrid in the wake of Covid-19, leaders had to invest in tools and processes to make work work. Zoom appeared as a near-seamless heir to in-person meetings, but it was borne out of necessity, not preference. While we needed digital services to stay productive and accomplish work, connection was left behind. The tools that were meant to keep us in sync effectively extinguished the workplace small talk, spontaneity, random social interactions, and social cues we rely on to build and maintain relationships and understand one another on a deeper level. A lack of these opportunities — and facilitators to help enable them — meant weakening our abilities to build and maintain networks with our colleagues, to be creative with them, or to have opportunities to practice empathy.

In turn, employees battled increased social anxiety, withdrawal, fatigue, and feelings of isolation.² They also lost access to



fresh ideas and new perspectives that not only support work but make it more interesting and satisfying. In short, for many, the workplace of 2022 has become boring and monotonous. Whether you like your work or not, the days and weeks — and now years — blend together. We have fewer shared experiences with our colleagues to serve as touchstones in our interactions. And with less connection, we lose trust — in our organizations and each other.

With less trust, we are less willing to make an effort, and feel less committed. The majority (3 in 5) of employees say their employers are not doing a good job of supporting social connection, and that lack of a helping hand is translating into lower effort by employees: 1 in 3 say they're not working hard to create quality relationships with their team (36%), and 1 in 3 say they don't feel they know their teammates.

² Stanford University — Four Causes for 'Zoom Fatigue' and Their Simple Fixes, Feb 2021

Connection fuels employee well-being

The power of building relationships at work

Compared to their peers, employees who report putting in the effort to build relationships in the workplace reported experiencing several positive impacts. While effort is highly dependent on the individual, organizations can play an active role by encouraging, rewarding, and helping employees build skills they need to build stronger relationships and cultivate the right spaces or structure needed to promote that effort. When that's successful, individuals see benefits of relationships like:

41% *higher social connection*

59% *more positive relationships*

36% *greater life satisfaction*

Friendships at work are important for our growth

We found that employees who go beyond just building positive relationships with their peers and cultivate more friends at work experience 41% more personal growth and 48% more professional growth.



Experiencing more belonging also drives considerable impact

As professor and author Brené Brown noted, "fitting in is about becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are." Belonging means feeling seen and appreciated for who you are (both unique and ordinary) and valued, not just tolerated or included. Belonging also means feeling safe in the strength and variety of the connections you share with others so that you don't fear that a mistake or choice will lose your place in the group.

We found employees higher in belonging experience:

24% *resilience*

36% *well-being*

83% *more growth personally*

92% *more growth professionally*



Almost none of us are getting the connection we want

Our data revealed that people need 5 friendly co-workers at work to feel connected, and around 7 to feel they belong. But, no workforce is a monolith. We know that people want and need different types, degrees, and amounts of social connection. What feels satisfying to one person might be lacking to another and overwhelming to a third. As a result, leaders need to understand that facilitating connection isn't one-size-fits-all. However, our data show that people today overwhelmingly want to have more friends or friendly colleagues in the workplace.

Friends (39% of the workforce): feel as though co-workers know about them on a personal level to the degree that they consider each other "friends." Co-workers take

an active interest in each other's families, hobbies, interests, and personal desires in life. Friends at work go a level deeper than any other category and explore their hopes, fears, and worries.

Friendly (50% of the workforce): say that they know their co-workers personally but mainly consider each other "friendly" rather than close friends. They occasionally share something about their inner world, such as a musing about a current event, but generally don't get too deep with their co-workers.

Professional (11% of the workforce): These individuals say they keep

their work relationships strictly professional. They don't spend time talking about their personal lives or sharing about their families because they feel there isn't space, time, or need to share their inner worlds in the workplace.

We learned that across the board, the most well-connected people know about 10 or more people at work on a friendly level, while the least well-connected know just 0-2 people at a friend/friendly level. Whether they're looking for arm's length or a bear hug, 50% of employees indicated that they want their employers to cultivate closer social connection:

Ideal Connection Category	Contented	Want closer
<i>Professional</i>	41.7%	17.4%
<i>Friendly</i>	38.2%	44.4%
<i>Friend</i>	28.2%	66.2%

1 in 2 workers value connection more than money

Employees felt so strongly about meeting their needs for connection in the workplace that the majority (53%) indicated they'd be willing to trade some compensation just to experience stronger ties with colleagues. The average pay cut? **Upwards of 6% of their salary.**

But money isn't all that employees are willing to forego to improve the quality and quantity of their relationships. We also found that for better social connection individuals would make other important trade-offs, like:

- A narrower (but deeper) professional network
- Experiencing slower career advancement
- Receiving less quality feedback about their work

It's worth noting that we're not advocating for employers to cut pay and stop promotions in exchange for a happy hour. Rather, the data makes it clear that **connection is anything but a "nice to have" at this point** — it has to be a key lever in any talent strategy. A culture of connection can be an advantage in a highly competitive talent market. And without it, your current employees may seek it elsewhere.





Managers feel well connected. But their direct reports are struggling.

Managers are more socially connected than their direct reports, perhaps due to their work's inherently collaborative and communicative nature. More frequent opportunities to connect and build relationships by default through the day-to-day responsibilities of their roles, like weekly 1:1s with their team, onboarding new team members, and gaining greater exposure to upper management all contribute to a higher level of connection with their colleagues and teams.

Managers also report putting in more effort to build relationships at work, 21% more than individual contributors.

22% *Greater sense of connection*

53% *More friends at work*

20% *More belonging*

Compared to individual contributors, managers experience: However, while managers may be satisfied with their level of social connection, individual contributors were 25% more likely to say they want closer connections. Like many other areas of development in the workplace, managers play a vital role in fostering and facilitating these opportunities for their teams.



Organizations that get connection right will prosper

When leaders make social connection an organizational priority — and take active measures to facilitate it across the employee spectrum — they see higher performance, productivity, well-being, talent retention, and more. Connected organizations will have higher levels of adaptability, trust, and resilience to be agile in a changing world.

Social connection is key to retaining and attracting top talent

Less socially connected workers may lack the motivation to persist past setbacks and sustain commitment for the long run. They may be more susceptible to burnout, a decline in performance, more absenteeism and presenteeism, and costly attrition.

Employees who have few friends at work have:

71% *Stronger intention to quit*

31% *likelihood of seriously job seeking outside organization*

And those who identified as low in belonging have:

313% *Stronger intention to quit*

176% *likelihood of seriously job seeking*

Those numbers have staying power. We looked back on a nationally representative sample of US employees we followed through 2020 and 2021 and found that those with low belonging had a 39% higher actual quit rate during that time.

But it's not just retention that improves with better connection. Building a strong company culture that prioritizes social connection also offers a competitive advantage for recruiting and hiring marquee talent: 45% of people who job search now say social connection is **moderately to extremely important** job search criteria.

Strong connection also has a reputational impact

What makes a great place to work or an organization worth

recommending? We used natural language processing of Glassdoor company reviews to identify organizations whose reviews signaled a strong prosocial culture (i.e. one that is positive, helpful, and promotes social acceptance) and level of interpersonal connection. We found that organizations that had the strongest signals of employee connection at work were above average in other ways too:

32% *Higher overall company ratings on Glassdoor*

14x *More likely to be named on a "Top Places to Work" list*

25% *Employees are more likely to recommend company to a friend*

Take the next step

Learn actionable ways your organization can build a more connected and thriving workforce through a custom BetterUp demo.

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