# WFH loneliness is the latest virtual challenge for employers

By Alyssa Place, Evelina Nedlund | 12-07-2020 | Employee Benefits News



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The abrupt change to a more remote and isolated work experience has been jarring for many. Loneliness in the workplace is yet another symptom of COVID-19 employers must grapple with when addressing mental health and well-being.

More than half of employees said they have felt lonely while working from home, according to a survey by Blind, an anonymous professional network. Lonely employees are less satisfied with their jobs and were more likely to quit their current position within the next six months, according to BetterUp, a mobile-based coaching platform.

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"This year, we have all been traumatized in some way, shape or form," says Mike Veny, a mental health speaker and author of "Transforming Stigma." "People are caught up in their own head, and that can be a prison when you don't have your regular social structure in place."

While COVID-19 has exacerbated the effects of isolation on employees, loneliness in the workplace has been a growing problem. A pre-pandemic survey by Cigna found that more than 60% of employees were lonely at work. Nearly 80% of Gen Z employees said they experienced loneliness in the workplace, compared to 71% of millennials and 50% of baby boomers.

"The trends shaping how we work — increasing use of technology, more telecommuting and the always-on work culture — are leaving Americans more stressed, less rested, spending more time on social media and less time with friends and family," Cigna CEO David Cordani says. "For the business community, it is resulting in less engagement, less productivity and lower retention levels."

At Limeade, an employee experience software company, employees have expressed increased feelings of isolation during the pandemic, says Nani Vishwanath, the company's people team manager. Additionally, fears around health and financial disruption have impacted employee well-being, she says.

"Some employees have significant others who have been furloughed or lost their jobs, and some have recently lost family members to COVID-19," Vishwanath says. "And while we may typically look at the new year as a time of renewal, many employees are uncertain about what 2021 will bring."

To combat loneliness, especially as the holidays approach, it's important to offer opportunities for virtual connection, Vishwanath says. Having a manager reach out and share their personal experiences could be a lifeline for someone who is struggling.

"Leaders at an organization can demonstrate vulnerability by sharing how this year has impacted them in an effort to connect with others who are coping," she says. "Feelings of loneliness and stress at the employee level cannot be compartmentalized and left outside of work — we know that employees bring that with them."

The Cigna survey also recommended boosting access to mental health tools and telehealth resources, something employers including Starbucks, Lyra Health and Reward Gateway, among many others, have prioritized this year.

"Mental health is affecting all of us, and we've been chipping away at the stigma this year more than in previous years," says Joe Grasso, clinical director of partnerships at Lyra Health. "The comfort of telehealth makes mental healthcare access more feasible, and it's just as useful and effective."

Employers can encourage informal virtual connections for teams outside of their day-to-day work. Bonfyre, a workplace culture platform, provides tools and activities to create virtual "water-cooler moments," says Mark Sawyier, CEO and co-founder.

"One of the biggest challenges of remote work is that we're social beings, so having fewer interactions with other people takes a toll on us," Sawyier says. "It's absolutely incumbent upon employers to help employees feel a little more connected to each other."

As remote work continues to blur the boundaries between work and home life, building connections among teams can be challenging. Encouraging employees to turn off Slack or Zoom for more interactive experiences can help employees better connect with their colleagues outside of work, Sawyier says.

"Creating another space separate from where people do their work to have non-work interactions with their co-workers is really important," he says. "What makes the break room or happy hour special is that all of those things are physically separated from where we do our work. [Helping employees] build relationships outside of their day-to-day work is more important than ever."

At Limeade, some teams have done virtual painting events, game nights and escape rooms or online happy hours. Creating a vibrant office culture is still possible, says Henry Albrecht, CEO of Limeade, which also hosts 'Weekend Challenges,' where colleagues can share healthy recipes, pictures of their pets and other fun things that humanize work.

"We've seen a huge increase in employee resource groups and some of the sharing and support has been really great and really open," he says. "When you're sitting by yourself in a home office all day, it's fun to do that to feel you're not alone."