



[REMOTE WORK]

## The Loneliness of the Hybrid Worker

Having supportive colleagues in the workplace is key to feeling less isolated when working from home.

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Unprecedented levels of hybrid work seem likely to persist beyond the pandemic conditions that revolutionized employers' attitudes toward flexible working arrangements. Even as offices have reopened, many employees are loath to give up the benefits of working from home at least some of the time. But some two years into what has been an unplanned global experiment in remote work, the costs of that approach are coming into sharper focus.

While employees appreciate saving time, shedding the stress of commuting, and having more flexibility to balance work and personal demands, remote work has downsides that go beyond domestic distractions and blurred work-life boundaries. In particular, the quality, frequency, and nature of interactions change when colleagues are physically remote and there is less dynamic, spontaneous communication. Neuroscience research has found that only in-person interactions trigger the full suite of physiological responses and neural synchronization required for optimal human communication and trust-building, and that digital channels such as videoconferencing disrupt our processing of communicative information. Such impoverished virtual interactions can lead to static and siloed collaboration networks, workers with a diminished sense of belonging to their organization, and social and professional isolation.<sup>1</sup> Long before COVID-19, these issues led some to question whether the large-scale practice of remote work would create a society devoid of social connection, lacking communication skills, and less able to develop meaningful relationships.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, when employees are colocated in a physical workplace, they are set up for richer communication when they bump into one another in the hallway, stop by one another's desks for impromptu meetings, go out for a chat over coffee, or socialize after work. While workplaces can be noisy and full of interruptions and other distractions, collaboration and coordination among team members is easier, and individuals are more visible when career development opportunities arise.

We wondered whether hybrid work arrangements would help reduce the potentially severe social disadvantages of working remotely. The research we conducted among individuals in hybrid work situations, in which we probed for differences in their experiences working at home versus in the company workplace, indicates that in-office interactions — especially with colleagues — can indeed improve employees' job satisfaction and reduce their feelings of loneliness, even when working at home.

In May and June 2021, we surveyed hybrid workers in Western Australia, where such arrangements had persisted for more than a year even though minimal impact from the pandemic meant there was no public health need to keep employees at home. This provides insight into what we might expect to see emerging elsewhere as hybrid work persists to suit employee preferences rather than to accommodate pandemic restrictions. Our 386 survey respondents worked 33.8 hours per week on average, with 40% of that time spent at home.

We asked two sets of questions about colleague support, manager support, job satisfaction, and loneliness. One set of questions asked participants to reflect on their experiences while working from home, and the other asked them to consider their experiences while in the office. Previous research has exclusively investigated differences between

individuals rather than focusing on differences within individuals' experiences.

## Support From Colleagues Helps Combat Isolation — and Boosts Job Satisfaction

Our research results support the idea that spending some portion of one's working hours colocated with colleagues and managers might offset the social downsides of remote work. Survey respondents reported experiencing significantly more support from both colleagues and managers when in the office or other company workplace compared with working from home.

While a majority reported receiving the help and support they needed in both locations, open-ended survey responses point to a possible qualitative difference. One person noted that “engaging online is totally different than being present and interacting with staff,” a sentiment echoed by others. Another wrote that it is “easier to complete tasks and resolve problems based in the office,” suggesting a benefit not only for developing work relationships but for getting work done. Others highlighted the difficulty of team collaboration when working remotely.

We might expect workers to experience better support in the office, especially given what is known about the value of in-person communication. But the survey also uncovered somewhat counterintuitive findings about the sources of support that have the most impact: It is help from colleagues, *not from managers*, that is vital to improving the hybrid work experience, especially when it comes to loneliness.

Our survey respondents felt significantly more lonely, on average, when working from home than in the office, with 22% stating that they often or always felt isolated from others when working from home, compared with 19% who felt that way when working in the office.

However, looking more closely at this data, we found that the most significant factor in loneliness was lack of support from colleagues at work. Our model took into account contextual factors such as age, gender, working hours, hours worked from home, and caring hours, but only office colleague support was a significant predictor of *reduced* loneliness — more important than managers' support at either the office or at home, and colleagues' support when working at home.

The good news in this finding is that, in the case of hybrid workers, support from colleagues when in the office can protect against loneliness. This is probably because connecting with others face-to-face enables higher-quality, more meaningful interactions to take place and increases a sense of belonging to a workplace.

That doesn't mean that support for employees when they are working from home isn't important — in fact, we found that job satisfaction depended on feeling supported by both managers and colleagues at home as well as in the office. But again, relationships with colleagues were the most significant factor. Our results showed that colleague support when working from home was the strongest predictor of job satisfaction, followed by colleague support in the office, with manager support when in the office or at home the least important predictor, again controlling for contextual factors.

## How Can Managers Encourage Supportive Collegial Relationships?

Not all work environments or teammates are created equal, however, and support from colleagues may not be easy for some workers to get. So how can we promote work environments rich in colleague support? Correlational analyses revealed two key predictors of higher office colleague support that managers can influence: first, having the autonomy to schedule one's

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work in the office, and second, experiencing little close monitoring by management.

The strongly positive and significant correlation of autonomy and higher levels of colleague support in the office suggests that it's easier to access support if one can schedule office activities to fit in with colleagues' availability. And the finding that those who are closely monitored report significantly lower colleague support in the office may be due to workers feeling untrusted when closely monitored, and tethered to their desks in order to prove their worth — a finding from a previous study.<sup>3</sup> This means they may feel unable to take time out, even to ask colleagues questions that would help them in their work.

Managers seeking to decrease loneliness and improve job satisfaction among hybrid workers should look for ways to foster a social climate that is rich in collegial support. Based on our research findings, we suggest that they consider the following four tactics.

**1. Allow individuals the autonomy to decide when, where, and how they go about their work.** Employees who can sync their time in the office with colleagues' are more likely to be able to access the support they need. This means allowing workers to choose which days they are in the office and to be flexible with their days, and the freedom to arrange meetings when they require them. Much research supports the view that autonomy is important for well-being and performance; our results suggest that one reason for this is that it enables workers to gain adequate social support.

**2. Refrain from closely monitoring workers.** Early in the pandemic, reports emerged of managers keeping close tabs on their newly remote workers, such as through constant messages, calls, or even electronic monitoring. These tactics can diminish productivity by leading employees to feel untrusted and stressed. Allowing employees the freedom to go about their

work how they choose, without feeling surveilled, will pay dividends in employee well-being and performance.

**3. Set up peer buddy systems for at-risk categories of workers.** We found that younger workers and those with less status in the hierarchy received less colleague support. Managers could encourage these employees to partner with a trusted colleague to check in on each other weekly. New employees could be assigned a mentor who could introduce them to others in addition to supporting them; this could help new workers get a foothold socially and develop meaningful relationships with teammates.

**4. Promote socializing in the office.** Encourage morning teas, lunch meetings, or catch-up coffees to create social, warm, open environments in which employees feel comfortable connecting with coworkers and sharing work experiences.

**THE NEW WAYS** of working that employers adopted out of necessity in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic have permanently changed worker expectations and added new flexibility to many organizations' policies. Hybrid work, with both its benefits and drawbacks, has been adopted by many more organizations around the world, and its full implications may take years to become evident. Our research is part of a longitudinal study that will enable us to more rigorously explore the causal relationships suggested here.

While the option to work from home was once viewed as a perk, with the implication that it was incumbent on the employee to deal with any downsides, remote work is now so widespread that organizational leaders must be prepared to manage the negative impact on social climate that can result. This will require conscientious attention to ensuring support from managers and colleagues in both the office and at home — because

one source of support cannot wholly compensate for another. And it will require fostering a social environment that emphasizes colleagues supporting one another, both at home and in the office. If that can be achieved, hybrid work really might be able to offer the best of both worlds, at least in terms of job satisfaction and loneliness.

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