

Work-Life Bloom

Loneliness both within and beyond the workplace is rife. **Dan Pontefract** discusses ways to help mitigate this and the importance of 'finding your people'





With all due respect to the 1980s Norwegian band, you're bound to have a few "a-ha" moments when you change roles and companies. I joined Canadian corporate giant TELUS in late 2008, a few months after leaving SAP. One of the first events I participated in at TELUS was the annual Retirees Holiday Lunch. Despite its current-day international prowess across multiple business lines, TELUS started in 1904 as a British Columbia-based, publicly run telecommunications company. Given its history, telecom retirees are an essential part of the culture.

The Retirees Holiday Lunch is just as you might expect. In a large room that accommodates hundreds of people, former TELUS team members arrive just before noon to be feted and served by current executives and leaders. The meal is turkey—with all the trimmings—complemented by holiday goodies, eggnog, and hot chocolate. The current leaders revel in the opportunity to put on festive aprons and ridiculously oversized oven mitts, taking orders and delivering hot plates to the retirees' liking. Lovely thank-you gifts are distributed at the end of the shindig.

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During my inaugural Holiday Lunch, I had a conversation with an older woman that sticks with me to this day. It was a festive "a-ha" moment, a gift that keeps giving.

After a few small-talk questions and answers, I realised I was talking to a 40-year veteran of the company. She was a former director who had held several different roles and responsibilities over her tenure. She had been retired for over a decade. Somehow, we then got onto the subject of networks and relationships. I'm paraphrasing, but the end of the conversation went something like the following:

"I love coming to this lunch every year. It reminds me how important my friends were to me at BC Tel [former name of TELUS]. I was busy but happy. There was a lot going on. But I was never bored, never lonely."

And then, without prompting, she offered me some advice, knowing I had only been at the company for about six weeks:

"Find your people: it's the best thing you'll ever do."

I often think about that exchange. It regularly makes me wonder if today's leaders fully comprehend how important it is for team members to *find their people*. Perhaps more significantly, are leaders aware of the impact they can have when they help to create such an outcome?

Research suggests, however, that large swathes of people are lonely. Many individuals have no network, not even a small one. We might construe loneliness as the opposite of finding your people. If a person doesn't have a vibrant network—when there are no strong relationship ties in their orbit—the chances for loneliness increase. If strong ties are lacking, the likelihood of the next tier of contacts—oftentimes referred to as one's weak ties based on the work in 1973 of Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter—dramatically diminishes, too.

Not only does loneliness create negative consequences in one's life, but it also creates deleterious workplace effects. The whole situation is about as stimulating as occupying the middle seat on an airplane, sandwiched between two obnoxiously intoxicated first-time flyers during a five-hour flight. It's that bad.

Nobel Prize winners Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton discovered through their 2010 research, for example, that loneliness was one of the top factors preventing life happiness and satisfaction. Unsurprisingly, people who are lonely demonstrate a high incidence of sadness, stress, and anxiety. In addition, research by the University of Chicago psychologist John Cacioppo in 2014 suggested that loneliness can increase an older person's chances of premature death by 14%.

From a work perspective, in a 2022 study of several hundred hotel employees, researchers showed that workplace loneliness leads to psychological detachment from peoples' jobs. The research also revealed that workplace loneliness contributes to emotional exhaustion, adversely affecting the home front. A similar 2020 study in New Delhi found that loneliness at work "was negatively associated with psychological well-being and self-esteem" and that managers suffering from loneliness at work reported "increased feelings of work alienation." Maybe Paul McCartney was onto something when he wrote the song 'No More Lonely Nights'.



As if things weren't bad enough, the pandemic has done us no favours on the loneliness front. For many workers in roles not deemed essential or operated from the frontline, the shift to a home-based office was swift and even distressing. Steven Van Cohen and Ryan Jenkins, who wrote the 2022 book *Connectable*, found that 72% of all global workers experience loneliness monthly, and a shocking 55% are lonely at least weekly. As the loneliness numbers continue to increase and strong and weak tie relationships plunge, research firms have assessed the costs.





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A massive 2017 study of thousands of UK-based employees conducted by New Economics Research indicated that loneliness costs employers roughly £2.5 billion annually. Cigna, a US healthcare and insurance company, suggests loneliness costs US-based employers more than US\$154 billion annually in stress-related absenteeism. The Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre says it costs Australian employers AU\$2.7 billion. Wherever you look, loneliness and a lack of relationships cost organisations billions. It's like an omnipresent dust cloud that we just can't reach.

Incidentally, in global research that I conducted while writing my book, *Work-Life Bloom*, I discovered that a large proportion of leaders (73%) and non-leaders (59%) polled also believe that relationships are an important element of one's ability to function positively. Incidentally, male and female participants polled identically at 69%, and there was no discernible difference between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers. Between 68% and 70% of each generation surveyed on the topic responded that meaningful relationships were important.

43%

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If relationships, and thus a robust network of strong and weak ties, are essential to a majority of team members, I maintain that leaders bear partial responsibility for nurturing relationships. Not only are relationships good for business, but they also combat loneliness and improve employee performance. Furthermore, a strong network can create a built-in support network for the inevitable times of life and work dodginess.

However, the sad reality that I discovered in my research is that leaders are not creating the conditions for relationships and networks to form. My research suggested only 43% of leaders felt that their current employer had helped them develop their network and relationships, which is relatively feeble. The situation is positively dire for non-leaders. A paltry 23% believed they were being provided with above-average or significant help in this area.

In 2018 - long before COVID-19 took over our lives - the UK Government created a Ministry of Loneliness in response to the loneliness crisis. It has been in operation ever since. Its purpose is clear: "Supporting people to have meaningful social relationships is not just crucial to people's physical and mental health. It also affects their engagement in the workplace and wider community cohesion." It's looking out for both the wellness of its citizens (life) and the organisations that employ them (work). I'd go so far as to say the Ministry of Loneliness could be considered one of the first groups to debunk the anachronistic term 'work-life balance'. There is no balance between work and life if we are lonely and our relationships are miniscule.



A few other people are also trying to fix this loneliness and relationship plight. Aaron Hurst is the author of *The Purpose Economy* and the founder of consulting firm Imperative, which believes "meaningful human connection at work is the key to unlocking transformational benefits both to the business and individual employees." Hurst is one of the good guys doing good things to help solve the above-mentioned predicament.

During our discussion on my *Leadership NOW* programme, Hurst pointed out that leaders must take responsibility for getting employees out of their loneliness cycle. In addition, he's adamant that leaders must help their team members by encouraging them to have meaningful relationships.

"At the junior level, a lot of it is tied to how we design jobs; all the interactions are transactional, and there's no real place for human interaction in the workplace anymore," said Hurst. "It's all transactional interaction. As you get more senior, there is actually more human interaction."





you don't have that, you start to move into an 'us versus them' mentality, losing empathy and shutting down your willingness to take risks. Unfortunately, I think that's happened in the workplace, and the pandemic exacerbated it."

In today's fast-paced world of rapidly advancing changes, creating space for human conversations and connections is critical, especially in the workplace. Leaders must acknowledge that networks and relationships are vital components of team members' well-being. When those components are flourishing, so will the organisation and the individual.

Obviously, you are not the UK Government (unless you are reading this column and are, in fact, part of the UK Government), so you're likely not about to set up a Department of Loneliness at your organisation.

It is clear that social community has declined over the past several years and that networks - proper strong ties - have been decimated. With that decline comes both concern and opportunity. Leaders ought to be concerned because a lonely person in life is likely to be a lonely worker. And, as we've discovered, loneliness is a costly expense.

Leaders may argue that being connected to a community of workplace peers is a given. Being employed is enough.

I counter-argue that when leaders treat the workplace as a social community—when building networks becomes a leadership priority—far greater benefits will accrue for team members and the organisation.



It's a salient point. Leaders are likely very busy and in multiple meetings with different people daily while also possessing a vast network of LinkedIn contacts. The same may not be accurate for team members. It might do leaders some good to check in with their team to see just how wide and deep their networks are, not only to help combat loneliness but also to build up team members' self-esteem, access to information, and sense of meaning. That, in turn, can help eliminate potential sadness, stress, anxiety, and exhaustion at work and home.

"We are wired to be naturally drawn to and thrive when we are with other people and where we feel protected by the group," Hurst said. "We are optimised neurologically to crave that, and when we don't have it, we start to shut down and operate out of fear. It's when you feel like you are part of a group of people, where it's meeting your neurological need for a tribe. And when



About the Author

Dan Pontefract is a leadership strategist and author of *Work-Life Bloom: How to Nurture a Team That Flourishes*.