

Flexible working – a cause of loneliness at work?

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Flexible working arrangements are those which ‘allow employees to vary the amount, timing or location of their work’¹ and may include part-time working, mobile/home working, compressed hours or job-sharing - among others. Currently, according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), more than half of all employees in the UK use at least one form of flexible working², while a study by Gallup in the US suggests as many as 43% of employees work flexibly³. The practice has been found to have positive effects on job satisfaction, employee commitment, reducing work-family conflict – and for many is now an essential component of modern working life.

But are there potentially negative effects of the trend towards flexible working? A new study by Nespresso Professional⁴ which surveyed over 7,500 employees around the world, revealed some interesting answers. The research found that nearly 20% of all employees (and 25% of millennials) felt that flexible working was contributing to feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, nearly half of those surveyed felt that the use of technology such as video conferencing had negative effects on their social connections with colleagues.

Academics refer to social relationships at work as the ‘social glue of any workplace’, key for both the psychological and physical wellbeing of employees, and the success of the organisation. Despite this, the growth of communications technology and flexible working arrangements has meant that less time is spent face to face. As a result, building and maintaining these relationships has become harder.

Flexible working arrangements are necessary for many to be able to balance life and work, and for the vast majority, these arrangements are positive. However, whether we work flexibly or not, social connections at work are important and flexible working can be a factor in these being weakened. Here are three tips to improve your social relationships at work:

1. Don't over-do working remotely

Research has shown that if you only work from home/remotely 2 or 3 days a week rather than all of the time, your social relationships will not be damaged. There can be huge physical and psychological effects of loneliness, and to make it worse people who feel lonely can become more cut off and avoid interaction, which leads to people thinking that they just aren't interested in socialising. Planning ahead and balancing the amount of time you spend in and out of the office can significantly help.

Small talk has a social function for maintaining relationships and is the ‘social glue’ in organisations. It goes without saying that this is made easier in the office, but even if you

¹ de Menezes & Kelliher, 2011

² CIPD Mega Trends: Flexible Working Report, January 2019

³ Gallup Workplace Poll, February 2019

⁴ Global survey of 7,800 office workers conducted by OnePoll in January 2019.

are working from home, make an effort to ask a colleague a non-work related question every day.

If it isn't possible to work from the office regularly, arrange to meet with colleagues for a coffee at home or somewhere convenient. The Nespresso Professional research found that 84% of employees believe that social connections at work boost work quality. It's all about the balance.

2. Put regular time in the diary to meet your colleagues

You may speak to or email them all the time, but face-to-face communication is important too. Making an effort to attend staff meetings and getting to know your colleagues can help.

Nearly half of people that Nespresso surveyed thought the use of technology, such as video conferencing, had negative effects on their social connections. We send emails or instant messages rather than talk to people and have 'helpful' new communication programmes like Slack and Trello, which provide virtual team workspaces to save the inconvenience of having to speak in person. We need to get in the habit of broaching actual conversations.

Communications technology has also been shown to increase the risk of miscommunication – meaning it may not only slow the growth of relationships, but also harm them, leading to social isolation and loneliness for some. Of course, this is not specific to flexible workers – research shows that employees can experience social isolation even when working in the same physical location as their colleagues. But in the modern workplace - where both flexible arrangements and communication technology are ubiquitous - loneliness is on the increase.

You may even want to consider attending or planning a social event to help this. If working from the office during the day doesn't work for you, maybe an evening event once in a while could be beneficial.

3. Make an effort to chat

Having 'non-work' conversations has a strong effect on building relationships in the office. Next time you are chatting to a colleague, rather than focusing just on work, ask them about something else - such as last night's TV, the football or weekend plans. To challenge yourself further, try talking to someone new at work each day.

Informal conversations create a sense of belonging at work and long conversations about non-work topics make people feel more supported at work.

One of the fundamental misassumptions that people make about loneliness is that it's about the number of people you speak to. We know that this isn't the case; it's actually about the quality of those conversations and whether people feel like others are genuinely interested in what they have to say. Loneliness is essentially the gap between your perception of a social interaction and your expectation of a social interaction.

Ultimately, working from home is sometimes one of those things that just cannot be avoided. Nevertheless, there are definitely ways to prevent yourself from suffering from loneliness and seclusion, whether that could be balancing time spent working at home and in the office as well as making an effort to meet regularly with colleagues and chat about non-work related topics. Following these tips are a first step towards improving your social relationships at work.