

From Isolation to Inclusion: Addressing Loneliness as a DEI Challenge in the Workplace

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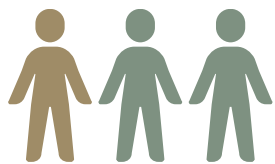
From Isolation to Inclusion: Addressing Loneliness as a DEI Challenge in the Workplace



Loneliness is often seen as a personal struggle—an emotional response to the absence of social connection.¹ Yet loneliness is rooted in broader societal challenges that influence inclusion and equity in workplaces.

As DEI initiatives aim for more inclusive environments, they frequently overlook the profound impact of loneliness—a hidden barrier that affects well-being and productivity. Even as DEI efforts address visible inequalities like race, gender, and sexuality, social isolation remains an underappreciated challenge.

Research shows that marginalized groups, like those from diverse backgrounds, are more likely to experience loneliness due to discrimination and socio-economic disparities. For example, the Mental Health Foundation in the United Kingdom reports that “Black people are on average more likely to be feeling lonely compared to the general population, in which 1 in 3 Black people experience loneliness compared to 1 in 4 of the general population”.² This highlights that loneliness is a barrier to true inclusion. To create genuinely inclusive workplaces, leading organizations address loneliness within their DEI strategy, fostering both diversity and a sense of belonging for all employees.



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Loneliness in the Workplace

Workplace loneliness occurs when employees feel their social needs aren’t met by their colleagues or organization,³ leading to distress from a lack of meaningful relationships. Organizations that understand these dynamics are better positioned to build a culture of belonging and maintain strong employee engagement.

Workplace loneliness manifests in two ways. First, employees may bring loneliness from outside into work, affecting engagement, collaboration, and performance. Successful organizations address this with targeted mental health resources that support employees holistically. Second, loneliness can arise directly within the workplace when social needs like connection and support go unmet. This often stems from poor interactions, weak relationships, or a leadership culture lacking inclusivity. Addressing such loneliness requires a reassessment of organizational culture to create a genuine sense of belonging.

Workplace loneliness leads to disengagement, poor collaboration, and increased stress. It affects employees' well-being, making them twice as likely to miss work or consider leaving.⁴ This results in lower productivity and higher costs, with stress-related absenteeism costing U.S. employers over \$150 billion annually.⁵ Addressing loneliness offers an opportunity to improve employees' well-being and strengthen the workplace.



Loneliness is a key DEI challenge, but it affects everyone. While underrepresented groups may experience it more acutely due to discrimination, loneliness can impact anyone—from entry-level staff to executives. As DEI strategies increasingly focus on mental health and well-being, addressing loneliness is more relevant than ever. Organizations prioritizing social connection recognize that emotional inclusion is as crucial as representation, enhancing equity, well-being, and engagement across the workforce.

Bridging the Gap: Why Loneliness Must Be Part of DEI

DEI efforts often address visible inequalities, such as representation gaps in race, gender, or sexual orientation. Yet, loneliness—a critical but overlooked issue—affects all employees, including those outside traditional minority groups. Marginalized employees, like women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, often face greater isolation due to systemic barriers, including limited representation in leadership or weak support networks.

Women and minority employees often feel lonely in workplaces where leadership or team structures lack diversity. LGBTQ+ employees may feel excluded without supportive



networks. A 2022 EY survey found that 31% of individuals with disabilities or those identifying as LGBTQ+ felt more isolated at work, partly due to the broader political and economic climate.⁶ These factors, compounded by workplace environments, deepen their sense of disconnection.

Loneliness also affects those outside traditionally disadvantaged groups, like older white men, who may feel a loss of belonging amid changing workplace dynamics. The shift to remote and hybrid work has increased disconnection for many. A Harvard Business Review article highlights the challenges remote workers face, including physical distance (different locations and time zones), operational distance (workflow barriers), and affinity distance (feelings of disconnect).⁶

Expanding the understanding of loneliness within DEI frameworks allows organizations to design more inclusive programs. This approach not only meets the needs of underrepresented groups but also strengthens workplace culture, ensuring every employee feels valued and included.

Why Loneliness Should Be A DEI Priority

Loneliness affects employees across all demographics. While DEI initiatives often focus on representation, addressing loneliness through an inclusive lens is equally crucial. DEI leaders understand that tackling loneliness can drive lasting cultural change, creating supportive and connected workplaces for everyone.

Leaders in DEI recognize that addressing loneliness as a core issue allows them to transcend traditional diversity metrics, driving real, lasting cultural change across their organizations. Addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalized employees, while also acknowledging the broader, universal nature of loneliness, allows organizations to create more supportive and connected workplaces for all.

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Building Lasting Connections: Integrating DEI and Social Connection

Our experience in crafting evidence-based solutions demonstrates that a targeted approach is key to achieving meaningful change. Organizations that prioritize tailored, data-driven approaches see long-term gains in engagement and well-being. Effective DEI efforts address the unique needs of underrepresented groups, making inclusivity an active pursuit where every employee feels supported.

Though research on loneliness is extensive, evidence for effective interventions is still inconsistent.^{7,8} This should not deter action. Organizations can leverage promising strategies, such as data-driven, scientific methodologies that combine the state-of-the-art in behavioral science combined with empathic storytelling, to craft tailored programs that resonate with employees' lived experiences.



Effective programs require collaboration between workplace insiders, who understand group dynamics, and experienced scientists who can design tailored, research-based interventions. A tailored, expert-guided approach holds great potential as evidence evolves. While evidence is still emerging, adaptive programs can be designed, tested, and refined to fit specific workplace needs. Embedding these strategies in DEI frameworks allows for continuous improvement, creating truly connected workplaces.

Promising strategies include:

- **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** ERGs create community by connecting those with shared experiences, offering emotional and professional support. They help combat loneliness through deeper relationships. Leading organizations use data to assess ERGs' impact on engagement and connection, ensuring inclusivity.
- **Mentorship and Coaching Programs:** Structured mentorship pairs employees with mentors who share similar backgrounds, reducing isolation. Cross-cultural mentoring fosters connections across different identities, breaking down silos and building inclusivity. Our experience has shown that tailored mentorship programs effectively reduce isolation by connecting employees through shared experiences.
- **Flexible Work Policies Paired with Connection Initiatives:** Remote work can increase loneliness, but pairing flexible policies with connection efforts—like virtual check-ins and collaboration platforms—keeps remote employees engaged. Successful organizations integrate these strategies to ensure continued connection.
- **Inclusive Leadership Training:** Leaders are key to building a connected workplace. Training managers to address loneliness distinguishes inclusive organizations. Using real-time feedback and data analysis ensures continuous improvement. Effective leadership fosters transparency, collaboration, and empathy, creating a thriving environment.

Building a Connected and Inclusive Workplace

Addressing loneliness as a DEI issue is essential for workplaces where all employees feel valued and connected. Organizations that prioritize connection lead workplace innovation, setting new standards for inclusion, engagement, and productivity.



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