

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Final Question

What is the impact of connection in-person on productivity in a general remote work environment?

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped how people work and think about work. A survey conducted by McKinsey & Company in 2022, showcased that 58% of job holders in the U.S. say they can work remotely part time.¹ Moreover, the survey found that 87% of Americans are willing to work flexibly (both remote and in person) if given the opportunity. However, challenges are introduced in a fully remote work environment.³ Ideally, the goal of the research was to provide practical data around how often fully remote employees needed to be brought in person for trainings, conferences, and seminars to reduce the sense of loneliness. Further, the original question was to identify for how long those in-person times would keep employees from having feelings of loneliness once back in a remote environment. Due to limitations on available research of such a new topic, this question become a challenging one. There was little to no concrete data on how much in-person time is needed to remove loneliness for remote employees. As such, this executive summary will discuss the implications of how a sense of belongingness and inclusion within a general remote work environment can affect productivity, and if research shows there is a need for in-person connection. Lastly, the summary will cover some best practices to handle these challenges.

Importance of Employees' Sense of Belonging and Inclusion within an Organization

Belongingness

Organizational belongingness can be defined as an employee's sense of comfort and connection within a company and people, and contribution towards the company's mission.²

Research

Organizational belongingness can impact how employees view work and see themselves within an organization. A study done on teleworkers found that employees who felt like they belonged more had a "shift from production to passion in work" and defined themselves as an advocate for the organization rather than simply defining themselves as an employee.³ This study indicates that the more employees feel like they belong within an organization, the more likely they are to be passionate about their work and have loyalty towards the company which can impact how productive they are. However, with many organizations increasingly allowing remote work post-pandemic, research has shown that a sense of organizational belonging has proven to be more challenging. This is due to the lack of frequent interactions they have with other employees which further causes challenges on building meaningful and stable relationships.⁴ This lack of organizational belongingness can cause workers not to only feel excluded and isolated, but it can also lead to disengagement and employees' motivation to perform. This lack of connection can cause loneliness; there is a "direct correlation between loneliness and [work] productivity and absenteeism."⁷ If employees feel isolated in a remote work environment, they are less likely to perform better and be productive because they are disengaged and do not have a bond to the company, work, or their teammates.

Inclusion

Inclusivity can be defined as how valued and integrated employees feel within an organization.⁴

Research

While belongingness discusses how connected employees feel to an organization and the people, inclusion is how valued and integrated they feel within an organization. With the shift to remote work there has been an impact on an organization's culture and the values people had to make on everyday tasks shifting.⁵ This

change in organizational culture can then in turn create feelings of exclusion as people may feel that they are no longer being recognized and acknowledged as they once were in a traditional workplace in terms of making decisions.⁴ If employees do not feel their opinions are valued, this can contribute to feelings of exclusion and affect how they perform and their productivity.

Recommendations to Increase Belongingness and Inclusion

With the knowledge that belongingness and inclusion plays an important role within a remote work environment, the following recommendations can be made to help employees productivity levels.

Recommendations

Onboarding and Orientation³

To help employees feel more connected, organizations can have an effective onboarding and orientation program which helps employees better get to know the organization, their work, and team. A critical component of this is to help them feel comfortable. Onboarding practices can include having documentation of resources and contacts for new employees to reach out to set up meet and greet calls.

Coaching Managers and Leaders^{3,4}

Managers should be trained on how to communicate, empower, and engage their remote direct reports. Managers and leaders should be trained on how to create a safe space where employees feel accepted and empowered to voice their opinions and talk transparently about ideas they have and how they are feeling.

Support from Colleagues⁶

A study done on hybrid workers in Western Australia, found that support from colleagues when working from home played a vital role in job satisfaction as it helped not only with combating loneliness and helping employees feel like they belong, but it also helped them to connect with others faster and get work done.

Ways organizations can help remote workers connect with one another include:

Peer Buddy System and Mentorship: Managers can match new teammates with a buddy. Within this buddy system, new employees would be matched with a relatively experienced employee who knows the company but is also on the same grade job as the new employee. This peer buddy will allow new employees to ask questions they may not want to ask their managers as well as have a buddy to check in on them. Additionally, a mentor can be assigned to a new employee who will help them with networking in a remote work environment and be an advocate for their career development.

Promote Socialization: Organizations can help to organize virtual coffee chats, happy hours, and other fun ways to virtually connect with other remote employees.

Conclusion

Research has shown that loneliness within remote work is a symptom of lack of organizational belongingness and inclusivity, which in turn impacts employees' productivity and engagement. Additionally, no research has been done to indicate in-person connection in a general remote work environment is important to productivity. While organizations can promote in-person connection or have opportunities for remote workers to connect in person, it is more important for organizations to act on how they can increase belonging and inclusivity within a virtual environment in order to make employees feel valued and connected to the work, the people, and the organization.

References

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