
Engage

Feeling connected when working remotely

by AMANDA WALLIS

With rates of remote working on the rise, research suggests that it can be beneficial for both the employer and the employee to allow for time away from the office.

But there's a catch – teleworking only works when it's done well (see [here](#) for our recent piece on maximising the advantages of remote working).

Economic benefits aside, one of the most frequently cited issues with remote working is a lack of connection to the workplace. Loneliness is a problem affecting one in three New Zealanders and former United States Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, has cited the changing nature of work as a contributing factor to the '[loneliness epidemic](#)'. When working remotely, employees run the risk of isolating themselves without the regular interaction and social support that a shared office facilitates.

So, how can we push back against professional isolation?

The way we communicate and build rapport with one another makes all the difference. In fact, research has found that perceived proximity can be even more important than physical proximity when it comes to the quality of our work relationships. Perceived proximity can be built through two key processes: communication and a shared identity. The more frequently we communicate with our colleagues, and the more alike we perceive ourselves to be, the greater the chance that we can build solid connections in the remote workplace.

A recent Monitor on Psychology [research report](#) suggests a few steps you can take to keep connected:

Facilitate regular interaction amongst your team members. Leaders can encourage space for co-workers to talk socially as well as focus on work during work hours, and share information about their non-work lives (assuming they are comfortable with this, find other common neutral topics if not) during team calls. Be proactive when it comes to organising other on-line social mixers, or walking meetings.

Offer small stipends for virtual lunch or coffee dates. Research shows that the act of sharing food can facilitate human connection and social support. Stipends can provide incentive for co-workers who are geographically isolated to 'meet' and bond over a shared experience, irrespective of the distance between them.

Work together against a common adversary. For example, compete with your colleagues in a social sports league or pub quiz against other teams. This can help to develop a group identity as well as facilitate regular interaction outside of work.

Take care to formalise the roles and duties of each team member and communicate them clearly. Co-workers are more likely to reach out for help and connect with one another when they know who to approach when they encounter an issue.

Engage with technology that enhances team collaboration, communication, and connection (e.g. online message boards). Don't be afraid to drop in some personal information about yourself such as your favourite TV show or a personal story about your day. Conversations such as these help to forge connections and social support on a personal level and build trust.