CIOs Must Address the Next Employee Well-Being Challenge — Isolation

Matt Hancocks, Senior Director Analyst
Christie Struckman, VP Analyst
CIOs Must Address the Next Employee Well-Being Challenge — Isolation

Published 21 September 2020 - ID G00727787 - 11 min read

By Analysts Matt Hancocks, Christie Struckman

Initiatives: CIO Leadership, Culture and People

With the rapid rise in remote working and its continued role in the workplace, a new employee welfare challenge is emerging — that of isolation. CIOs need to address the design of remote work to alleviate the problems isolation brings and its impact on both individuals and the business.

Overview

Key Challenges

- With the rapid rise and deployment of remote working due to the pandemic, especially in IT departments, and its likely continuation as a part of the business operating model, employees are feeling increasingly isolated.

- Normal ways of working in relation to agile methodologies and scrum techniques are challenged because of remote working, leaving employees with a loss of normal social contact with colleagues.

- The psychological strain of isolation is bad for both mental and physical health and can have profound long-term consequences for individuals. This impacts productivity and, in turn, affects business performance.

- The normal social interactions from within the workplace are significantly reduced due to remote working, leaving many employees without suitable ways to deal with the impacts of isolation. This is also exacerbated by ongoing restrictions in some geographies.

Recommendations

CIOs focused on leadership who want to help their people improve their well-being must:

- Design or redesign remote working practices carefully, by paying attention to ways of working, workloads and performance measures that support and engage employees.

- Assess employee well-being through a focus on relational dynamics of individuals with line managers and team colleagues.
Introduction

“Humans are obligatorily gregarious ... The average person spends nearly 80% of waking hours in the company of others ... and their survival depends on their collective abilities, rather than on their individual might.”¹

With the rapid rise of remote working as a result of the pandemic, it is likely that this way of working will remain as a core part of the way businesses and employees work² into the future. Now is the time to rethink what remote work looks like in order to be truly fit for purpose.

Remote working reduces many “normal” social interactions people may have — from regular commute buddies, to greeting security on entering the building, and chatting with colleagues over coffee. This loss of in-person social interactions impacts a person’s neurology in many subtle ways.³ Add in personality traits, like extraversion and neuroticism (sometimes referred to as emotionality and the experience of feelings), and the picture becomes even more complex. The impact of this on employee welfare can lead to greater feelings of isolation, which will, if not addressed, impact mental well-being. Given the potential amount of remote working likely to be seen for the foreseeable future, this impact is likely to become the next employee welfare issue that needs addressing.

Isolation is not a new problem, and it is one that has been well-researched.³ Scientists have studied a range of work situations, from astronauts to Antarctic researchers, but also other populations such as the incarcerated, the elderly, and those such as the immunocompromised, who have to self-isolate. The research points to a range of negative consequences unless interventions are in place. Isolation can lead to depression and anxiety, lethargy, cognitive impairment and sleep quality, as well as physical health problems.⁴

Recent research findings also indicate that employees adapted well to remote working initially,² with productivity remaining stable and, in some cases, better than prepandemic measures. How much of this is due to the novelty of adaptation, we’ll only know over time. However, research prior to the pandemic points toward well-established productivity improvements from remote working practices for many organizations.⁵

- Design interventions that implicitly and explicitly address the challenges of remote working and the potential for isolation.
- Use office environments (depending on restrictions) as spaces for gathering for key IT events, such as project initiations, collaboration and innovation events, as well as regular team meetings and check-ins.
As remote work continues to be the norm for now and for some time into the future in certain geographies, cracks in the way work is being done and the stresses imposed are starting to show. Research also points to overwhelming support for remote work to continue in some form. If this is to remain as a key way of working, then there is an increasing need to start to look carefully into how work is done and the mental and physical implications of this.

CIOs and leaders, in general, have a role to play in understanding and addressing the psychological challenges of remote work, in order to create a work environment where employees can thrive. For CIOs, this means moving beyond just the technology and its deployment to look at the user experience and how it can be used to enhance workplace interactions.

Analysis

Remote working is not new, but it has gone from around 4% of the working population in countries like the U.K. and the U.S., to over 40% of the office workforce as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic response. This shift has been particularly noticeable in relation to knowledge workers, especially IT workers.

So what do CIOs need to do in relation to their employees, and how can they influence the broader organizations to support this (see Figure 1)?

**Figure 1: Four Types of Intervention to Address Isolation**

**Four Types of Intervention to Address Isolation**

- **Line Manager**: Focus on the one-to-one relational dynamics.
- **Organization**: Upgrade welfare, support and engagement initiatives.
- **Team**: Focus on creating positive, healthy team dynamics.
- **Individual**: Encourage the adoption and use of a range of individual interventions.

Source: Gartner 727787_C

**Focus on One-to-One Relational Dynamics**

Primarily through the line manager, but not exclusively, emphasis should be placed on building a strong and ongoing line manager relationship. This can be done through:

- **Meaningful Conversations** — Equip line managers with coaching skills and the skills to develop rapport and build meaningful conversations. This can be developed through a variety of various
skills-based training programs. Meaningful conversations are ones that are about the “whole person,” not just the work persona. They are conversations where we learn about employee challenges outside of work, such as family issues, personal interests or ambitions. For example, “What is going on for you at the moment?” or “How has the pandemic affected you and your family?”

■ **Regular One-to-Ones** — Encourage regular one-to-one sessions with employees, ideally weekly, but at least every two weeks. Besides being meaningful and about the whole person, one-to-ones should still give space for career conversations. They should also reinforce a sense of belonging for individuals and encourage the belief that they matter to the team and the organization.

■ **Welfare Referrals** — There should be processes in place whereby managers can raise concerns and seek intervention support for employees they may be concerned about. CIOs should make sure all managers do a refresher on mental health benefits and organizational processes that can support employees.

■ **“Skip-Level” Conversations** — These should be encouraged where there is a risk of isolation. Combat isolation by letting employees know that the management chain above their own manager cares about them. These sessions could be run as one-to-ones, but are probably better as small groups over a virtual lunch. The focus here is to seek to normalize the challenges being faced.

**Organizational Interventions**

CIOs should seek to establish, augment or ensure that a number of organizational initiatives and interventions are used to the full in addressing employee welfare. These include:

■ **Employee Assistance Programs** — Make sure that EAPs are fit for purpose and include both occupational health and mental health provisions by providing feedback to HR (or whoever is responsible for sourcing EAP services) around needs and requirements. Also make sure managers within IT are fully aware of the services that are available for their staff.

■ **Welfare Counselling** — Beyond EAP and for larger organizations, look to establish greater access to counseling services.

■ **Mental Health First Aid** — In the U.K., there is increasing growth in the training and support of mental health first aiders in some organizations. Look to establish something along these lines throughout the organization. 8
Team Interventions

Many of an individual's day-to-day interactions within an organization are likely to be within his or her own team. So, focusing on some interventions here can be particularly impactful:

- **Mentoring** — Support mentoring across the organization. Develop, encourage and promote mentoring as a way for colleagues to support and help each other through the challenges of organizational life. Recognize the role as being important to everyone's career. Include mentoring as a corporate social responsibility activity, e.g., mentoring local school children.

- **Corporate Social Responsibility Activities** — Giving individuals the challenge of focusing on someone else can help them engage more fully and avoid some aspects of isolation.

- **Team-Based Learning and Development Opportunities** — These can include the use of business simulation games for multidisciplinary teams from across the organization. This can be gamified to bring a little more energy to the exercise. It can help people broaden their networks within the business, as well as develop border business awareness. There are also a number of other "agile" learning perspectives and opportunities (see [Renew Your Business Faster With Agile Learning, Flip COVID-19 Downtime Into a Strategic Reskilling Opportunity](#) and [Continuous Learning Delusion Imperils Your People and Enterprise](#)).

- **Regular Team Meetings** — Frequent team meetings are key to sustaining employee engagement. Frequency will depend on many variables, including the nature of work and team geographies. However, one of the advantages of the remote work environment we have at the moment is that it does give greater scope for regular virtual meetings.
  - Meetings should follow a number of best practices in the virtual workspace (see [Improve Remote Work Effectiveness by Rising to These Top 10 Meeting Challenges](#)) and include a mix of light agenda items, as well as a more serious focus. For example, you can use quizzes and games to test business knowledge or knowledge of peers.
  - Think about rotating the role of chair around the team.
  - Also rotate time zones for scheduling meetings for diverse geographic teams, and make it mandatory vs. optional for some.
  - Create some innovative activities, e.g., individuals and teams can create short videos about their project updates, and in the appropriate meetings review those. That will give those that are feeling isolated something to do and will inspire engagement.

- **Reflections Sessions** — The initiation of regular check-in sessions around these three reflective questions, which can be used on a personal and business level:
- What has gone well?
- What has not gone so well?
- What differences are needed?

- **Buddy System** — Institute a buddy system, pairing newer team members with established team members. (Especially important with new hires!)

- **Virtual Lunch and Learn Sessions** — Get team members to share knowledge and experience by creating a series of virtual lunch-and-learn sessions where team members can share specific lessons with other team members.

- **Virtual Coffee Breaks** — Get individuals to take at least one virtual coffee break a week to catch up with colleagues.

- **Virtual Team Building** — Use favorite online games as a way of interacting more.

- **Virtual Business Book Clubs** — Get people to read and engage on a range of diverse topics through exploring top-selling business books.

- **Collaborative Events/Challenges** — Establish a few key collaboration events across the calendar to work on issues such as change, innovation or process improvement, where team members can focus on more strategic questions. This allows teams to step away from the operational for a while, and in doing so, get to interact in a different manner.

- **Work Design** — Much of what goes on in teams has traditionally happened in open-plan offices and has been implicit in the activities in teams. In the virtual/remote team, these more social and informal activities need to be made more explicit and designed in. For example, virtual open-door sessions, where people can drop-in for a chat or core work hours such as 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. where people are expected to be available.

- **Office Space** — Where pandemic restrictions allow, consider the careful use of face-to-face working. This could be for collaboration/innovation sessions, design sessions or welfare-related matters (safe spaces to work), which can't be as easily done remotely, or are less effective.

**Individual Interventions**
There is, of course, a lot that the individual can do to “self-help.”
**Well-Being Apps** — Businesses can subsidize well-being apps like Calm or Headspace for meditation, or fitness and yoga apps.

**Mood Tracking** — Provide simple mood-tracking check-ins — using message systems and simple emojis — allowing people to check-in with peers and team leaders, or even more sophisticated team mood-tracking apps or biofeedback.

**Well-Being Resources** — Offer widely publicized company well-being resources with regular features on key mental health issues, and regular updates around EAP. For smaller firms, this could be as simple as taking news feeds from well-being websites (e.g., Welldoing.org or Psychologies.com)

**Self-Awareness Resources** — Self-guided questionnaires and resources supported by the organization.

**Summary**

These are just some practical examples that many organizations already do. But with the advent of more remote work, greater emphasis needs to be put on these in a more explicit and targeted way to support people through the challenges of now and those ahead, in terms of employee well-being.

**Evidence**


8. *Become a Mental Health First Aider*, MFHA England
Learn more.
Dig deep.
Stay ahead.

Learn how Gartner can help you reset your business strategy.
gartner.com/en/thereset

Become a Client
Get access to this level of insight all year long — plus contextualized support for your strategic priorities — by becoming a client.
gartner.com/en/become-a-client
U.S.: 1 800 213 4848
International: +44 (0) 3331 306 809

About Gartner
Gartner is the world’s leading research and advisory company and a member of the S&P 500. We equip business leaders with indispensable insights, advice and tools to achieve their mission-critical priorities today and build the successful organizations of tomorrow.

Our unmatched combination of expert-led, practitioner-sourced and data-driven research steers clients toward the right decisions on the issues that matter most. We are a trusted advisor and an objective resource for more than 14,000 enterprises in more than 100 countries — across all major functions, in every industry and enterprise size.

To learn more about how we help decision makers fuel the future of business, visit gartner.com.