

# Why community matters *in the new world of work*



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# Introduction

*Connection.* It might not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think about organizational and business priorities today. Here's why that's about to change.

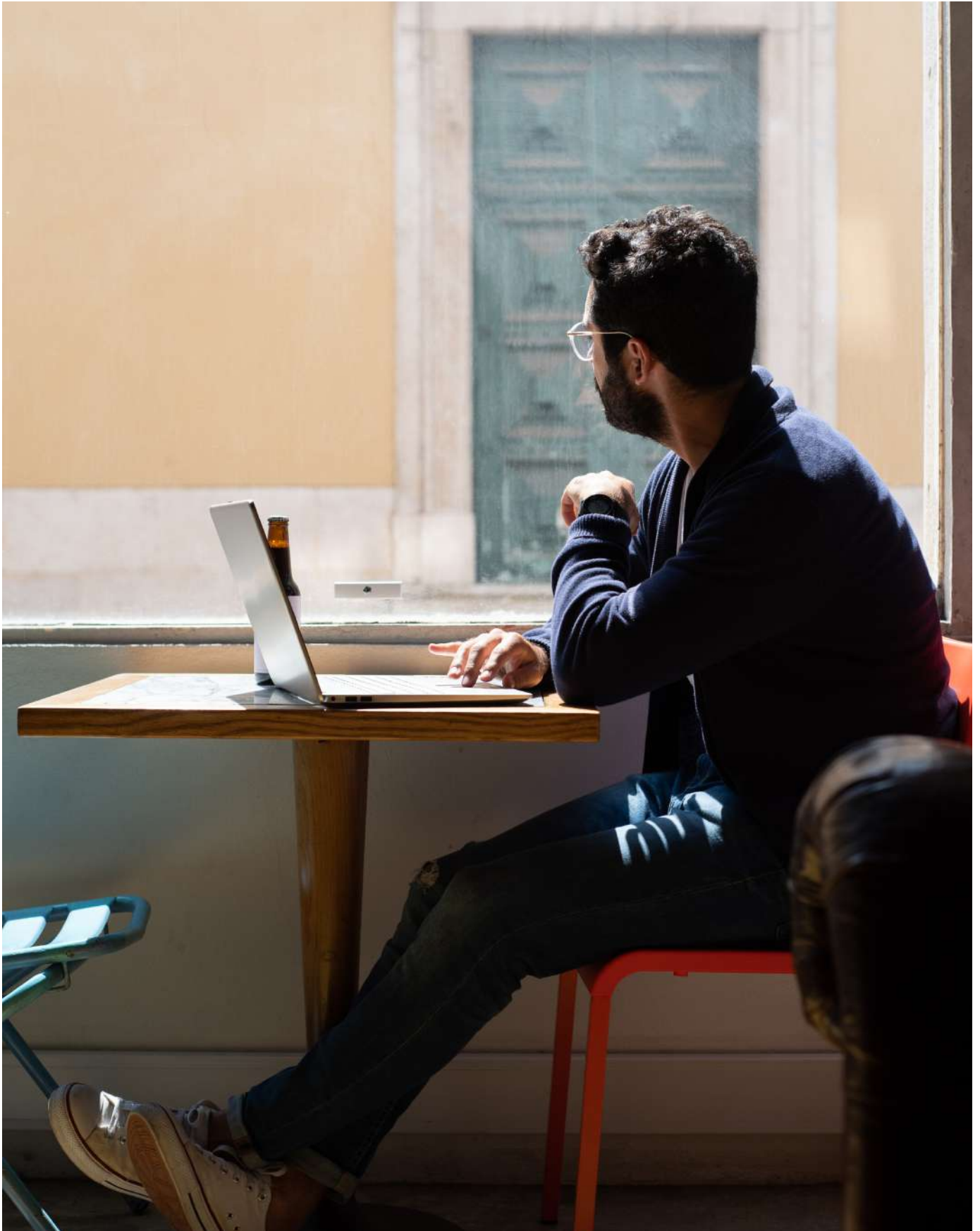
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**Senior leaders at top organizations have a lot on their minds.** Finding and keeping needed talent, anticipating and getting ahead of skills gaps, enabling more rapid and effective decision making, staying aligned but moving fast, and balancing today's productivity against tomorrow's performance. The frustration of *(still)* not having a good answer to the question of "what version of hybrid, remote, or in-person will meet the needs of the business and the workforce?" looms large.

Whether your concerns focus around the siloes multiplying across your functions, the overwhelming challenge of planning and forecasting against a supply chain upended seemingly every day, or the discontent and disengagement spreading across your teams, these challenges share much in common: The rapid pace of change and almost constant shaping and reshaping of the business environment.

The complex and evolving challenges and impossibility of clear-cut answers. The degree to which organizational success rests on the agility, resourcefulness, resilience, and fortitude of leaders and workers.

Addressing these top-of-mind concerns will require empowering and tapping into the power of people. Yet, the common contributing factor is the fact of an unwell, burnt-out, and distrustful workforce where people often feel disconnected from one another and their social institutions, including their places of work. Connection, or the lack of it, is both the root cause and solution. Across the workforce, **a connection crisis is brewing.**



## Workplace connection matters more than ever

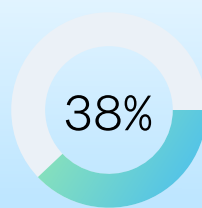
It might be tempting to attribute this crisis to the pandemic and believe that as people once again go back to schools and churches, restaurants, and celebrations (as they slowly are) the pervasive lack of connection felt by the workforce will resolve itself, too. It also might be tempting to think that the connection crisis resides outside the sphere of business. That just isn't the case.

**Workplace connection matters more than ever.** The problem isn't just that people have become isolated, but that companies need stronger connections with and among their people to have the committed, adaptable, resilient, and mentally fit talent they need.

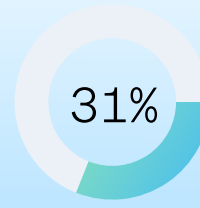
Most leaders would agree that relational skills are essential in today's workplace (*in fact, 96% of organizations say so*). But in the new world of work and workplaces, with some employees back in the office and others moving flexibly around the clock or the country, finding and maintaining connection is increasingly complex.

### Employees are dissatisfied with the connection at work

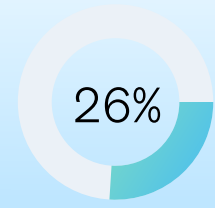
We analyzed 78 top companies on Glassdoor and found that **only**:



Are very satisfied with the workplace culture



Are very satisfied with the level of social connection in the workplace



Are very satisfied with the workplace focus on employee well-being & success

Being remote is isolating, but for some, so is being in person. Our latest research data shows that work arrangement isn't the obvious predictor of how connected workers feel and paints another picture.

More than half of the workers BetterUp recently surveyed said they want more connection than they currently get at work, and they believe their employer now plays a central role in facilitating it. Connection and community used to happen organically in the workplace.

Now, bridging these gaps are organizational imperatives. Our research shows that how connected workers feel to their colleagues plays an outsized role in everything, including employee experience and talent retention. We also found that a lack of connectivity at work leads to reduced psychological safety, physical well-being, cognitive ability, and social thriving among employees.

Our latest research can help you make sense of the connection crisis and chart a path forward.

Our research spans

78

*independently analyzed  
companies on Glassdoor*

4

*surveys conducted over the last three years*

3,000+

*US Workers*

150,000+

*BetterUp Members evaluated*



We wanted to understand better what connection means to today's workers and how individuals and organizations benefit when it's cultivated properly.

This in-depth research explores the connection problems workers face today, what it means to find community at work, and how it leads to better outcomes for individuals and their organizations. The research also sheds helpful and hopeful light on what organizations can do, including pragmatic, science-backed strategies to help people **build connection and create workplace community.**



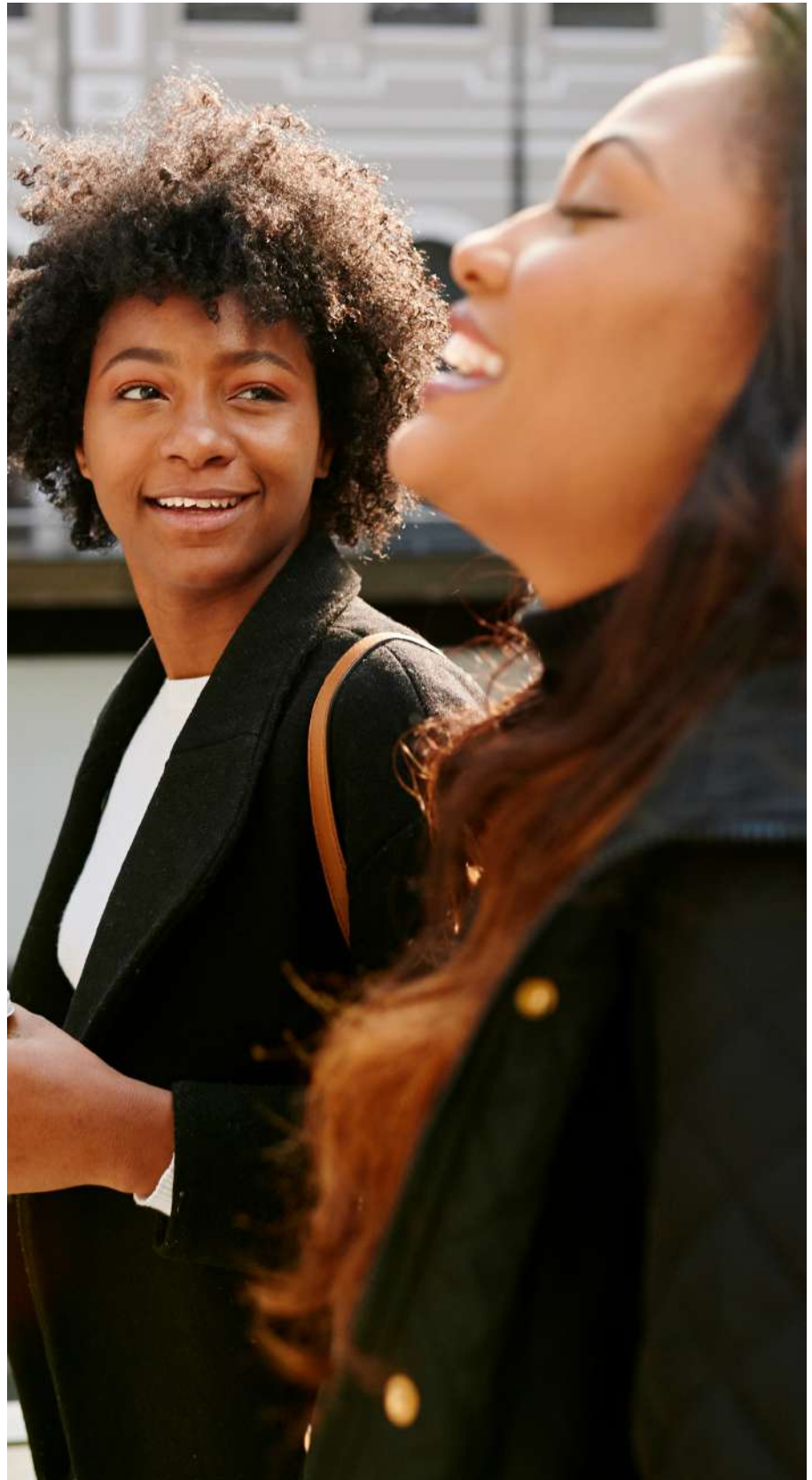
1.

Humans are  
built to connect



Since our earliest days, hunting and gathering in small groups, social connection and community have been vital to our livelihood and development as a species. Even in those early days of human life, cultivating a connection to others helped keep us safe, fed, and equipped to handle life's unpredictable challenges. Social connectivity was key to driving "cultural transmission and cultural evolution."<sup>1</sup>

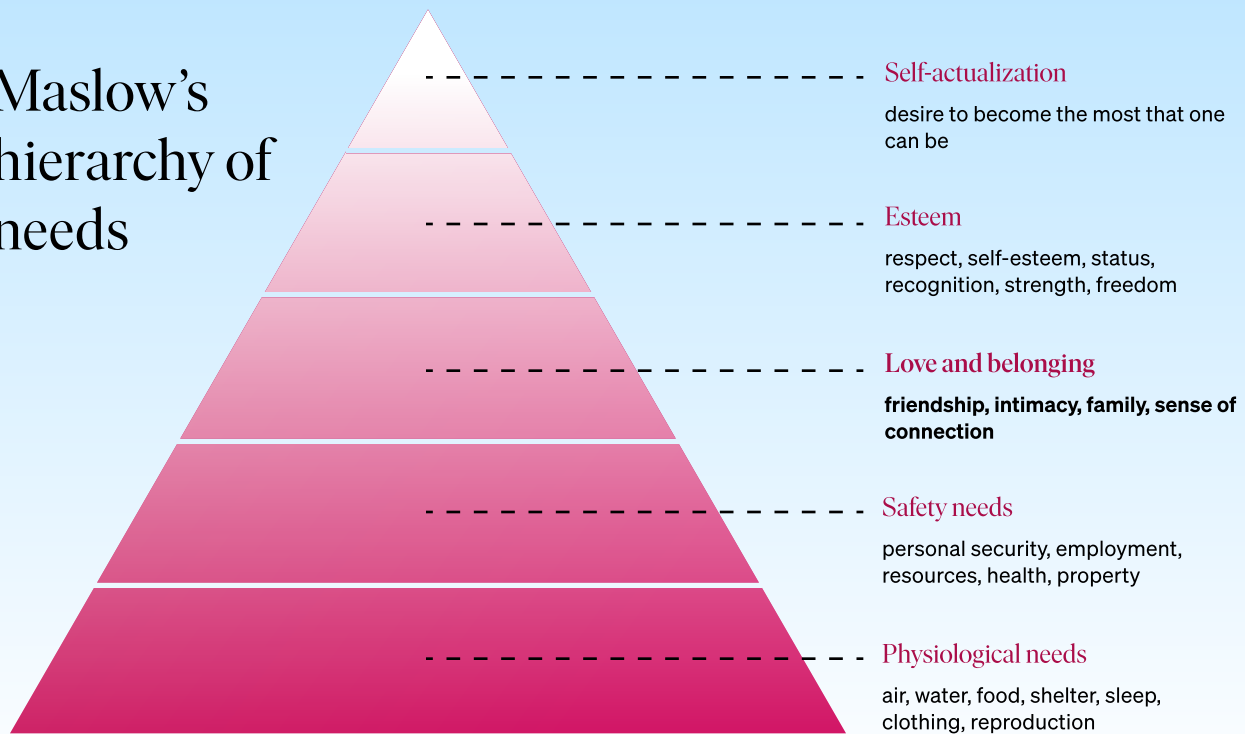
Millenia later, the world and how we connect have changed. Still, the benefits of social connection remain — it's good for our bodies, our minds, and our ability to make progress, collectively or individually. There is significant evidence that our physical health outcomes improve when we feel connected to others. A sense of connection helps our bodies more easily maintain a healthy weight and control blood sugar levels, and we experience better outcomes for cancer survival and cardiovascular disease.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> [Frontiers in Psychology, Anna Belfer-Cohen, Erella Hovers - Prehistoric perspectives on "others" and "strangers," Jan 2020](#)  
<sup>2</sup> [American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine, Jessica Martino, Jennifer Pegg, Elizabeth Pegg Frates, MD - The connection prescription, Oct 2015](#)



## Maslow's hierarchy of needs



Social connectivity also helps our well-being by decreasing stress and depressive symptoms, working to mitigate everything from PTSD symptoms to anxiety, and generally improving our mental health. Author of *The Happiness Advantage*, Shawn Achor notes in his popular TED Talk that social connection helps us navigate uncertainty: "The people who survive stress the best are the ones who actually increase their social investments in the middle of stress, which is the opposite of what most of us do. Turns out that social connection is the greatest predictor of happiness we have when I run them in my studies."

Social connection may be one of the most dynamic and vital aspects of being a human.

From the time we're born, we seek belonging within our communities and desire to have a place in the world. We crave connection and construct our lives around it. In our homes with family, in school with peers, in our social lives with friends, in religious groups, at work, and in any number of other environments, we cultivate relationships and seek belonging.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs described that feeling part of a group larger than oneself is an essential part of working toward self-actualization.

But maintaining close relationships with others isn't just crucial for health, happiness, and belonging.

Connection also powers our thinking, creativity, collaboration, and innovation — all are vital in today's workplace. It also keeps hybrid organizations from becoming a collection of siloes, or worse, islands.

*“Man is by nature a social animal”*

— ARISTOTLE

During the past two years, we've seen monumental shifts in how we work. We're all better able to appreciate how easily teams and individual contributors drift off and quickly lose alignment, which can undercut the impact of everyone's hard work.

While some tools and management practices can help realign, nothing can replace the informal human-to-human connections and relationships across teams that play a central role in knowledge transfer. Keeping this alignment is now more critical than ever for sensing and adapting in a fast-changing world.

**The reality is that how, when, and where we connect has been changing for years.**



## The gradual decline of social connection

A cruel irony of modern life is that while we know more about how important building social connections are, it's never been more challenging for us to create them. Even before the lockdowns and the resulting isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic, the quality of our social connections had been declining for years. Add up the blurred lines between home and work, the attention economy and social media grasping for our free time 24/7, and the feeling that time is in short supply, and we find that we're less willing or able to invest in building or maintaining social connection, not just in our personal lives, but at work, too.

At BetterUp, we've been tracking this decline in employee connection for years through our new BetterUp members who rate their levels of social connection when they first begin their coaching:

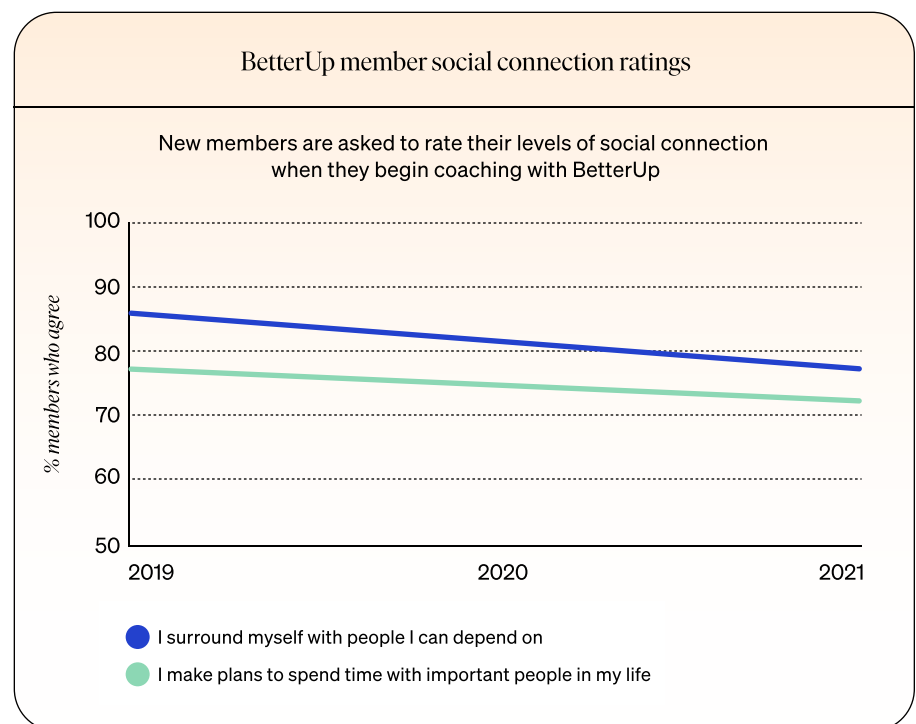
In fact, for over a decade, many in the health and science community have been sounding the alarm about a new kind of public health crisis slowly percolating across the world — a "loneliness epidemic"<sup>3</sup> in which increasing social isolation negatively impacts not only our mental and physical well-being, but also job performance, creativity, decision-making skills, and more.

We all face some lack of social connection and loneliness from time to time. We switch jobs, roles, or teams. We move to new cities, start new college programs, or enroll our kids in new schools. These changes can influence our membership (or lack of) in various communities and groups.

**But what happens when these feelings persist,** even as "normal life" returns and we're surrounded by others again? Even as the world turns back on, employees told us that personal lives aside, they want and need more connection in the workplace.

*"Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others."*

— THE DALAI LAMA



<sup>3</sup> Washington Post - There's a loneliness epidemic, and work is partially to blame, Oct 2017

It's easy to think that loneliness is defined by isolation, yet research, and our own experience, tell us this isn't true. We can be surrounded by people all day yet feel intense loneliness. If we don't have the opportunity to connect on a personal level, then others can't share similar values or see and appreciate our unique perspectives and contributions — this goes beyond feeling sad or physically isolated. We're not just looking for a crowd. What we crave is belonging. Experiencing the feeling that others understand and share our goals. Being able to share authentic bits of ourselves and our lives, or just sharing a knowing glance in a meeting with our peers. These moments matter. Feeling seen, heard, a part of something bigger than one's self.

As our commitments to other institutions weaken and workers re-evaluate their relationships with employers, connection at work matters more than ever.





## Defining connection to our colleagues

Through our latest research, we uncovered that, across the employee spectrum, **connection in the workplace** has two distinct facets that determine how connected an employee feels: 1) the size of our networks (that is, how many people we know or are connected to in an organization) matters. But more so, 2) connection is about the feelings we experience within those networks, such as belonging, friendship, a sense of collaboration, and more.

So when we talk about connection with our colleagues, we're really talking about these two facets that affect our experience of connection and belonging. While "quantity" of connection is important (network size, not necessarily amount of communication), the quality of our relationships is the secret sauce that makes us "feel" connected to others. In fact, we found that, while some workers are spending more time in meetings than ever before due to new working arrangements, increased interaction frequency isn't translating into increased levels of connectedness.



### Interaction is plentiful, but connection remains low

Remote work means a

**2X**

increase in time spent in meetings

Technology mediated communication is soaring:

- 2 in 5 use email constantly
- 1 in 5 use instant messaging constantly

*"The paradox of modern life is this: we have never been more connected and we have never been more alone."*

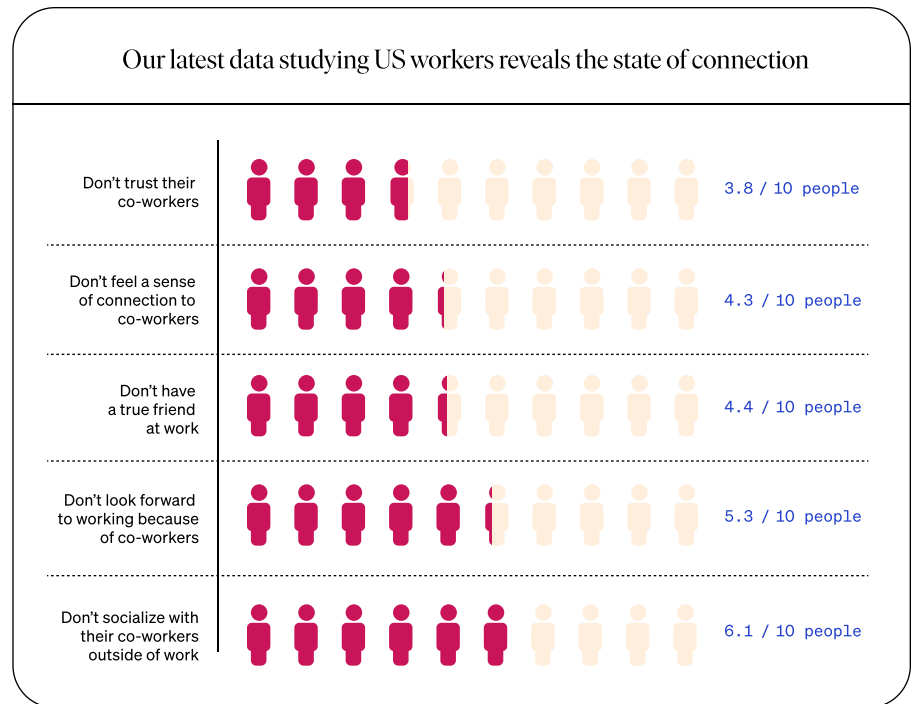
— MATT HAIG

Notes on a Nervous Planet

If technology can make interaction easier, why are we experiencing less connection to one another than ever before?

It's an important question, even as we catch glimmers of stability and normalcy in daily life. In part, the problem predates the pandemic. Just as technology wasn't helping people feel less lonely before, it alone cannot meaningfully fill the connection void today, despite being a bridge and lifeline during the lockdowns. The other part of the answer? We've lost the habit and the practice of connection. The last two years have laid bare just how much of an art and science social connection can be. As we emerge back into a world teeming with people — friends, colleagues, complete strangers — many of us find it tricky to remaster, and we could use a helping hand, especially in the workplace.

While 96% of leaders say they recognize the importance of relational skills for their employees, our independent analysis of 78 top companies on Glassdoor revealed that workers still struggle to reforge the connection path on their own. A vast majority of employees now believe that their employers share responsibility for promoting a workplace culture that prioritizes connection and relationship-building, and much remains to be done.



These insights should raise concerns for all leaders. As we'll reveal later in our more detailed findings, the lack of social connectivity workers now experience is driving high (and costly) employee attrition and burnout and resulting in reduced psychological safety, physical well-being, cognitive ability, and social thriving.

Without connection to their peers, employees' individual commitment craters, talent leaves, and teams lose their ability to innovate and effectively adapt to changing needs and working conditions. Organizations are less able to sustain performance or be agile in the midst of uncertainty. It's clear: **We're in the midst of a connection crisis.**



## What's at stake for your organization?

Connection is undoubtedly deeply personal, and while we've closely examined connection's impact on the individual, a lack also threatens broader teams, systems, and organizations, too.

*“Companies have the power to drive change at a societal level not only by strengthening connections among employees, partners, and clients but also by serving as an innovation hub that can inspire other organizations to address loneliness.”*

— VIVEK MURTHY  
US Surgeon General



### Decreased engagement

Without a sense of connection to our colleagues, work can feel monotonous, looping from day to day, lacking purpose and clarity. Our attention suffers, and so does our commitment. Some employees can push through these feelings temporarily to get work done, but prolonged bouts of weakened social ties make them more prone to burnout and declining engagement with the organization's goals. In fact, our data shows that individuals who experience lower connection in the workplace have 73% less engagement than their highly-connected peers.

### Higher rate of turnover

Employees who feel socially isolated or lonely feel less attached to their work, and their sense of belonging and dedication to the organization suffers, especially when it comes to talent retention. We found that **those with lower levels of belonging have a:**

**313%** *stronger intention to quit*

**176%** *higher likelihood to job search*

Additionally, through actual turnover tracking from 2020 to 2021, we learned that people with low belonging follow through with their departures — and had a 39% higher quit rate (which means they quit their jobs 39% more often) during this timeframe.

**Lagging performance**

Lowered social connection can also drive a general disinterest toward our jobs. Without bridging ties to a broader group or community of like-minded peers, we lose our ability to derive pleasure from our work, and quality sharply declines. We found that employees who report low levels of social connection are less likely to take calculated risks, have passion for their jobs, and have lower levels of growth mindset and goal attainment.

**Limited opportunity for upskilling**

A recent *Journal of Gerontology* (the science of aging) study found that experiencing loneliness can affect our memory and cognitive abilities, making learning and applying new skills more challenging, especially among men.<sup>4</sup> With a fast-changing and uncertain business environment requiring employees to learn new skills and adapt quickly, increased social connection enhances the likelihood that upskilling efforts stick. The decreased engagement with the organization mentioned above also comes into play with employees less interested in gaining new skills or willing to put in the discretionary effort to upskill and adapt.

**Less and lower quality collaboration**

We found that individuals who put a lot of effort into building relationships are more skilled at including others, communication, and collaboration than those who put in little effort. They also have significantly higher levels of trust in their co-workers and are more engaged in their work.

*“We see firsthand how leaders who are better connected with their teams cultivate shared ownership in creating more equitable, inclusive, productive, and connected work experiences.”*

— RAMONA ARORA

VP Talent Development at Dell Technologies

<sup>4</sup> Journals of Gerontology, Adelina Comas-Hererra, Emily Grundy - Social isolation and memory decline in later-life, Feb 2020

## The connection status quo is gone

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The workplace was once a significant source of connection in our lives. It was a place to bond, share our identities, and work toward common goals — as a community. And as we noted, community and connection are the fuel we need to help us achieve a sense of belonging and a feeling of purpose.

Organizations could play more of a hands-off role in promoting employee relationships in the past. Most modern offices were tailored for connection by default, allowing a subset of employees to step into the cultural facilitator role. They were the needles. Lunchrooms, open offices, happy hours, and the like were thread. These self-appointed “social spark plugs” served as bridging ties and connection points between different groups of employees who may otherwise never socialize. Social connection wasn’t something most organizations had to invest in; it flowed from working in a shared space, encountering one another in shared experiences, and letting human nature do its thing. The problem is, we took that kind of connection for granted. And just applying our old skills and behaviors in this changed world isn’t yielding the same results.





In the quick shift to remote and hybrid in the wake of Covid-19, leaders had to invest in tools and processes to make work work. Zoom appeared as a near-seamless heir to in-person meetings, but it was borne out of necessity, not preference. While we needed digital services to stay productive and accomplish work, connection was left behind. The tools used to keep us in sync effectively extinguished the workplace small talk, spontaneous, random social interactions, and nonverbal social cues we rely on to build and maintain relationships and understand one another on a deeper level. A lack of these opportunities — and facilitators to help enable them — weakened our ability to build and maintain networks with our colleagues, be creative with them, or have opportunities to practice empathy.

In turn, employees battle increased social anxiety, withdrawal, fatigue, and feelings of isolation.<sup>5</sup> They also lose access to fresh ideas and new perspectives that support work and make it more interesting and satisfying. In short, for many, the workplace of 2022 has become dull and monotonous. Whether you like your work or not, the days and weeks — and now years — blend together.

Even as many workers return to the office, overall, we have fewer shared experiences with our colleagues to serve as touchstones in our interactions. And with less connection, we lose trust — in our organizations and each other. With less trust, we are less willing to make an effort for anything work related and feel less committed.

With employees feeling overwhelmed personally and professionally, they aren't putting discretionary effort toward social connection. So, is returning to the office the simple solution for rebuilding connection? Not exactly. While 1 in 2 people told us that moments for connection with their colleagues have significantly decreased since the pandemic started, more than half of workers (52%) still say they don't want to go back into the office full-time, preferring some kind of hybrid work arrangement. And ironically, we found that in-person workers report experiencing less social connection than their hybrid colleagues (but more on that later).

1/3

Employees say they're not working hard to create quality relationships with their team

3/5

Workers say their employers are not doing a good job of supporting social connection

1/3

Employees feel that they don't know their teammates

<sup>5</sup> Stanford University - Four causes for 'Zoom fatigue' and their simple fixes, Feb 2021

<sup>6</sup> Employee Benefit News - How to mimic your in-person culture for the virtual world, Jan 2022



The allure of hybrid work arrangements isn't fading despite the trade-offs of fewer connection points and weaker relationships (on the contrary, we found it's growing).

But the shift out of the office for many has contributed to long-lasting effects on their social skills and relationship-building abilities. A survey published in *Employee Benefit News* found that most employees report feeling anxiety around making small talk with their co-workers and bosses, and 60% would like to work from home permanently to avoid social awkwardness.

The lack of social connection goes deeper than just work arrangement preference. Another outside study conducted by the *Journal of Primary Care and Community Health* found that lower social connectivity also correlates with race and income. Black workers, in particular, may pay the highest connection price, with nearly a 30% higher likelihood of feeling socially disconnected than other racial groups. Individuals with chronic conditions and disabilities were also significantly more likely to feel socially disconnected.<sup>8</sup>

The question for leaders now isn't "how do we bring everyone back to rebuild connection," but rather, "how do we help workers develop the skills and mindsets they need to rebuild social connection on their terms while offering the right opportunities to facilitate it?"

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*"How do we help workers develop the skills and mindsets they need to rebuild social connection on their terms while offering the right opportunities to facilitate it?"*

<sup>7</sup> Employee Benefit News - How to mimic your in-person culture for the virtual world, Jan 2022  
<sup>8</sup> Journal of Primary Care and Community Health, Molly Jacobs, Charles Ellis - Social connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic, Jul 2021

# 2.

Go deeper:  
Our detailed  
findings on the  
state of  
connection

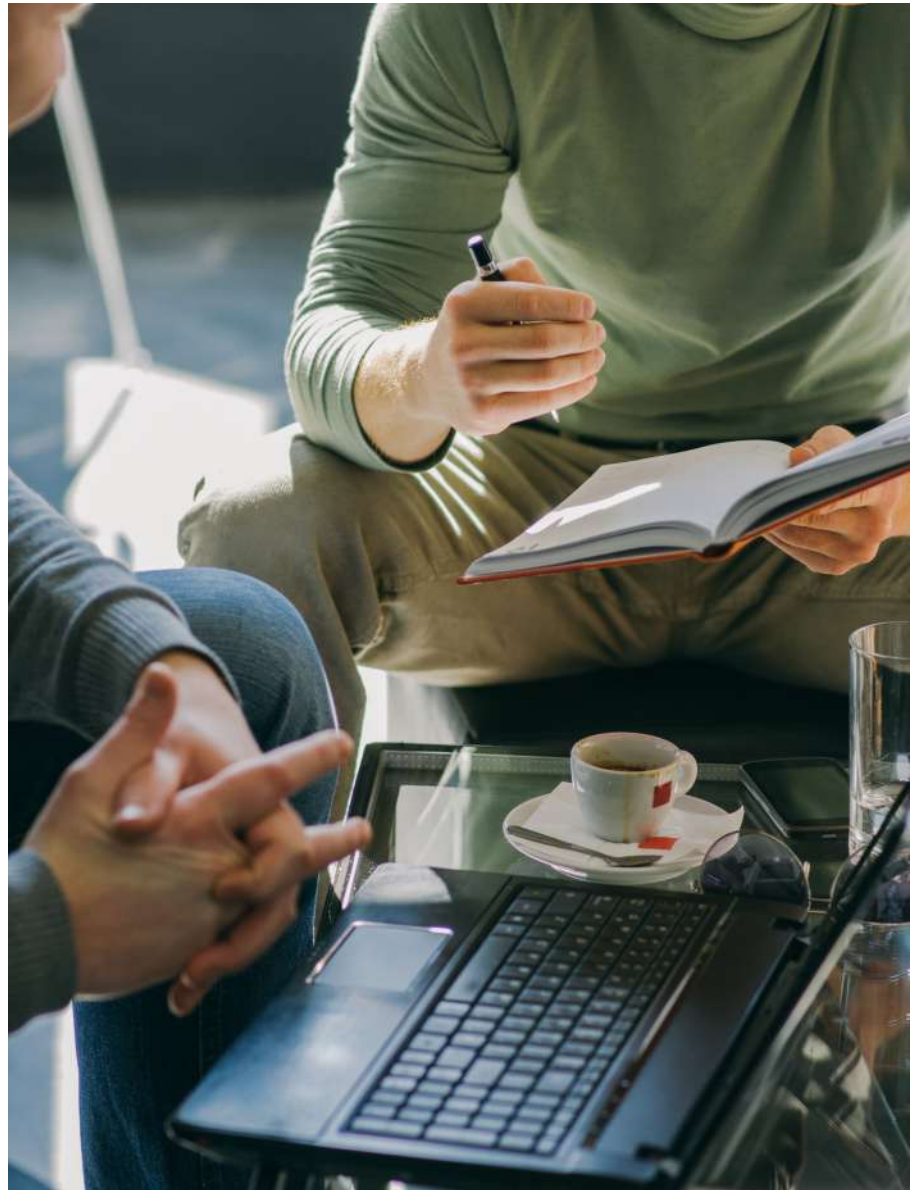


## Connection fuels employee well-being.

Highly connected employees with better quality work relationships contribute to a strong company culture that prioritizes trust and collaboration while fostering a sense of dedication, belonging, and psychological safety. These inputs are essential for us to be our most authentic and creative selves in the workplace. We found that when leaders can empower workers with the opportunities to build this kind of connection, workplace friendships and relationships lead to a greater sense of well-being and job performance.

### The power of building relationships at work

Compared to their peers, employees who report putting in the effort to build relationships in the workplace report experiencing several positive impacts. While effort is highly dependent on the individual, organizations can still play an active role by encouraging, rewarding, and helping employees build skills they need to build stronger relationships while cultivating the right spaces or structure needed to promote that effort.



Employees who report putting in the effort to  
build relationships experience:

↑36%

*greater life satisfaction*

↑59%

*more positive relationships*

↑41%

*higher social connection*



Cultivating relationships with others helps us think differently, analyze problems in new ways, learn from others, and access information and resources. Relationships also help us to expand our horizons, challenge our biases, and help us break free from limiting self-beliefs. **Employees who score high in effort for connection with others** see these benefits realized with:

**34%** *higher strategic planning skills*

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**34%** *greater goal attainment*

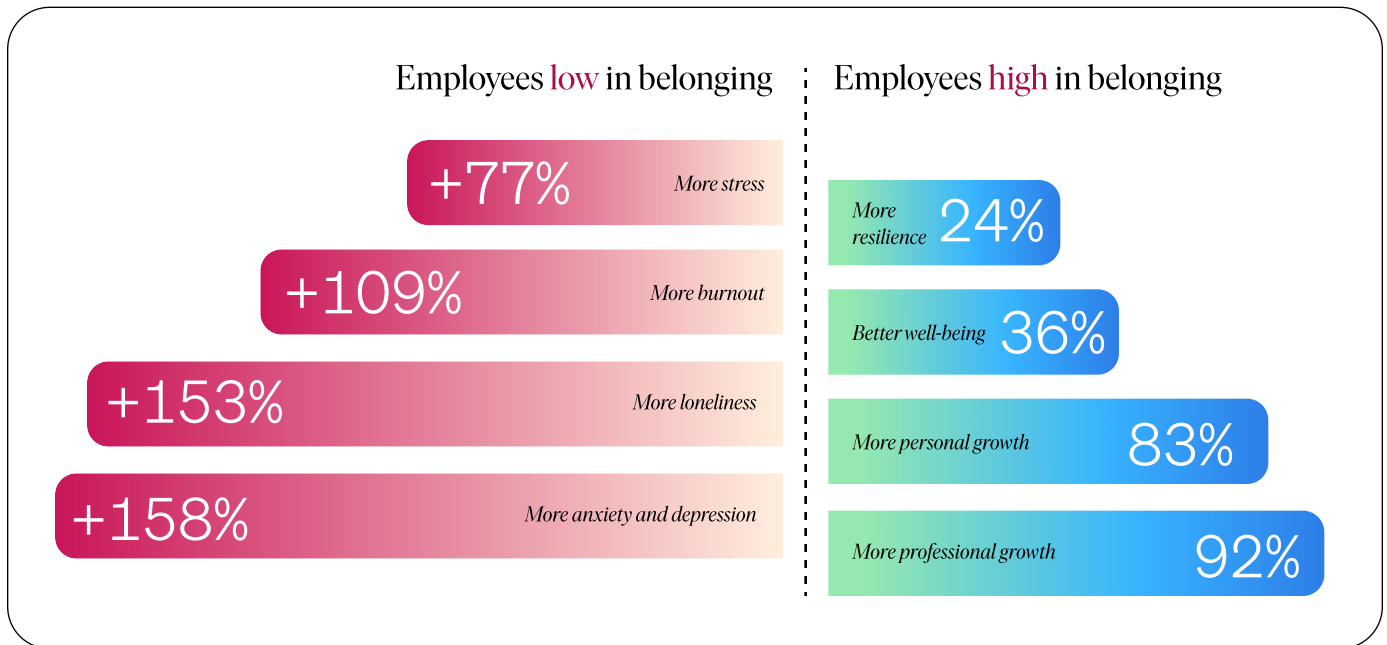
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**27%** *more job satisfaction*

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**23%** *boost in growth mindset*

The quality of our social connections depends on how enriching they are, not just on their frequency. However, effort does matter. We found that employees who go beyond just building positive relationships with their peers and instead **dedicate time to cultivating more friends at work** experience 41% more personal growth and 48% more professional growth.



### Belonging is still vital

As professor and author Brené Brown noted: "Fitting in is about becoming who you need to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are." Belonging means feeling seen and appreciated for who you are (both unique and ordinary) and valued, not just tolerated or included. Belonging also means feeling safe in the strength and variety of your connections with others. When you belong, you don't fear that a mistake or choice will lose your place in the group.

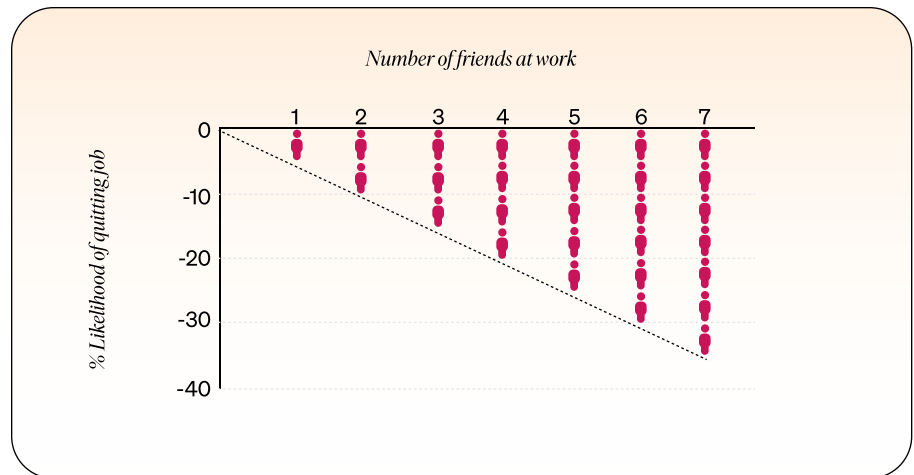
The level of connection employees experience drives personal performance and development and how forward-thinking and adaptive their teams become. Workers who have more friends engage more (by 32%), collaborate more (by 20%), and are more innovative (by 32%), and those who experience high belonging experience similar gains in those core areas as well.

A sense of connection to our colleagues also can keep us focused and working toward shared goals. These mutual aspirations and sense of shared purpose ultimately aid in an area many organizations continue to struggle with: talent attraction and retention.

## More connection helps attract and retain top talent.

Whether you consider it the Great Resignation, the Great Reshuffling, or something else entirely, it's clear that workers are on the move looking for better opportunities, especially those where employers prioritize their well-being. A recent Gallup survey revealed that many "leavers" cite their current employer's failure to "show an authentic concern for individual employee well-being" as the driver. We now know that core to experiencing that well-being is feeling a sense of belonging, inclusion, and connection to one's peers.

But more connection isn't important only to your current employees. We found that job seekers are also scrutinizing the social IQ of your company. Forty-five percent of individuals said that social connection is now moderately to extremely important in their job search criteria.



### Social connection is key to retaining and attracting top talent

Less socially connected workers may lack the motivation to persist past setbacks and sustain commitment for the long run. Faced with change, frustration, or unexpected challenges at work, they may be more susceptible to burnout, decreased performance, more absenteeism and presenteeism, and costly attrition. However, when individuals have more friends at work and feel like they belong, they're less likely to seek out greener pastures.

### Employees who have few friends at work have:

**71%** *stronger intention to quit*

**61%** *higher likelihood of seriously job-seeking outside organization*

### And those who identified as low in belonging have:

**313%** *stronger intention to quit*

**176%** *higher likelihood of seriously job-seeking outside organization*

Those numbers have staying power, too. We looked back on a nationally representative sample of US employees we followed through 2020 and 2021 and found that those with low belonging had a 39% higher actual quit rate during that time.



### Highly connected workplaces also drive reputational impact

What makes a great place to work or an organization worth recommending? We used natural language processing of Glassdoor company reviews to identify organizations whose reviews signaled a strong prosocial culture (i.e. one that is positive, helpful, and promotes social acceptance) and high levels of interpersonal connection. We found that organizations that had the strongest signals of employee connection at work were above average in other ways too.

Companies with  
high connection scores



32%

32% higher ratings  
than peer companies



14x

more likely to be named to  
a “Best Places to Work” list



25%

more likely to recommend  
the company to a friend



## Connection is key to driving performance and team success.

Combining Glassdoor reviews with data from employees of those organizations collected by BetterUp, we found profound advantages to cultivating a culture that values and facilitates connection among workers. **In the most well connected workplaces, respondents reported:**

**40%** *more social thriving*

**40%** *more authenticity*

**34%** *more empathy*

**30%** *more cognitive agility*

**27%** *more empowerment*

**11%** *more physical well-being*

These individuals were also less likely than their peers to struggle with stress (by 18%) and irritability (by 13%). The attributes above all contribute to employee well-being and tend to be leading indicators of overall job satisfaction and future employee attrition.



### Connection drives compassion and collaboration

The level of connection your employees experience can also have a ripple effect, compounding the impact on their teams. We found that quality workplace relationships help predict whether teams can navigate through uncertainty and change with vigor and embrace new ways of thinking and diverse perspectives:

### Employees of more socially connected workplaces report feeling:

**57%** *more genuine interest in exploring new perspectives*

**43%** *more co-worker effort to listen to the ideas of others*

**14%** *more care from their organization about well-being*

**10%** *more energy and passion for their work*

### As a result, teams within more socially connected workplaces are:

**52%** *more able to generate new and useful solutions when faced with challenges*

**38%** *more likely to take calculated risks*

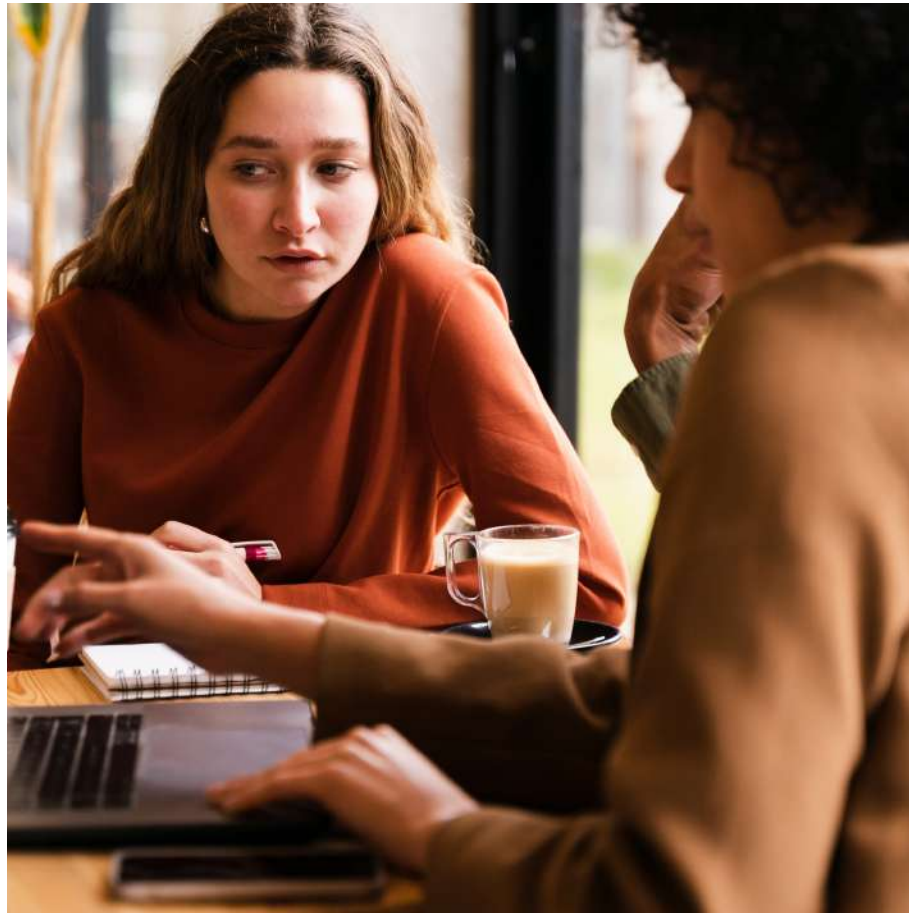
**17%** *less likely to experience conflict*



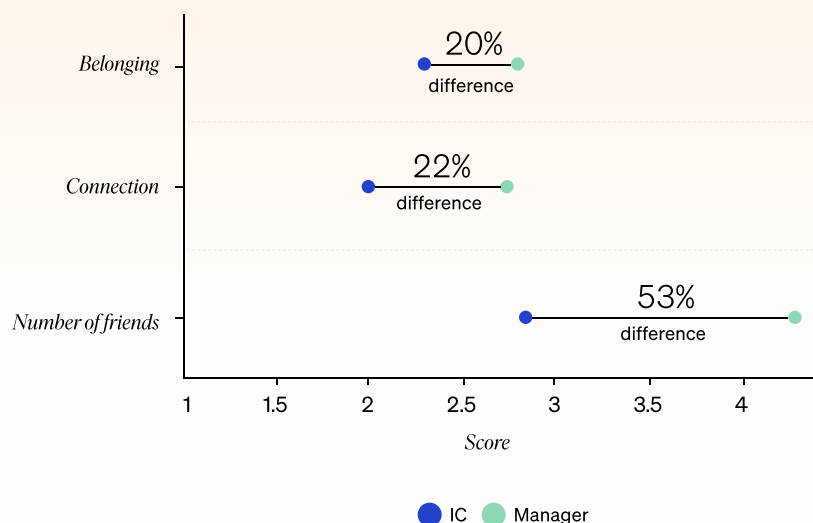
## Managers feel well connected. But their direct reports are struggling.

Managers are more socially connected than their direct reports, perhaps due to their work's inherently collaborative and communicative nature. More frequent opportunities to connect and build relationships by default through the day-to-day responsibilities of their roles, like weekly 1:1s with their team, onboarding new team members, and gaining greater exposure to upper management all contribute to a higher level of connection with their colleagues and teams.

Managers invest more in social connection relative to their reports (and see the benefits). Managers also report putting in more effort to build relationships at work — 21% more than individual contributors. Modeling this skill and helping team members prioritize it reinforces its value and may motivate more personal investment in social connection across the team.



Compared to individual contributors, managers experience greater:



### Employee outcomes improve when managers prioritize connection

However, while managers may be satisfied with their level of social connection, individual contributors were 25% more likely to say they want closer connections. Like many other areas of development in the workplace, managers play a vital role in fostering and facilitating these opportunities for their teams.

*“Creating a culture where employees feel like they’re valued or respected, they’re included, they belong, that’s what it all boils down to. Leaders who can create those environments are pretty game-changing for culture.”*

— ADAM MASSMAN

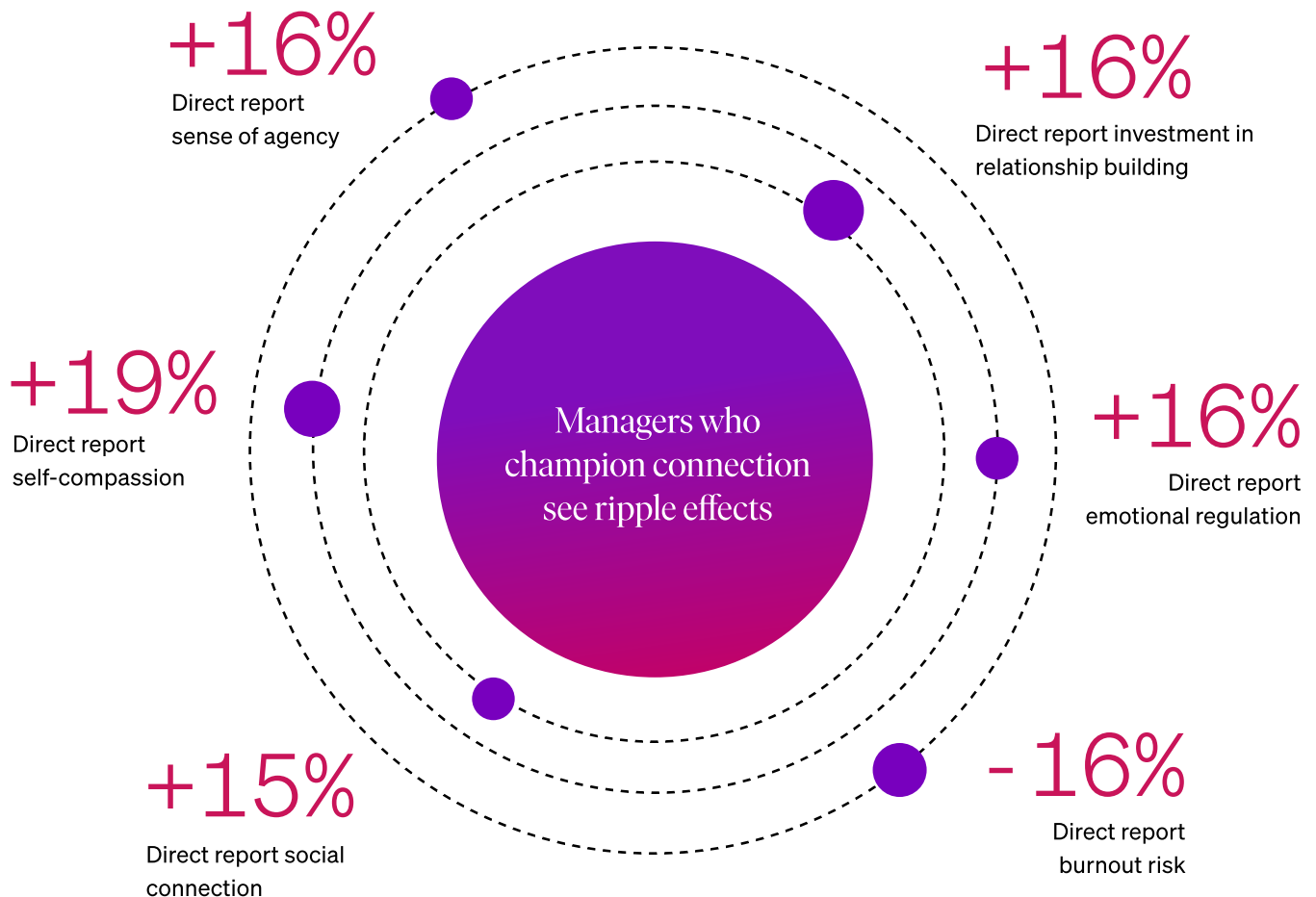
Global Head of L&D at JLL, BetterUp customer

Emotional regulation and stress management in turbulent and uncertain times are a must. But when managers promote relationship-building among their teams, it pays organizational dividends, too. **Employees who say that their managers prioritize relationship-building have:**

**31%** higher job performance scores

**27%** less interest in leaving their jobs

**13%** more purpose and meaning from their jobs



## 1 in 2 workers value connection more than money.

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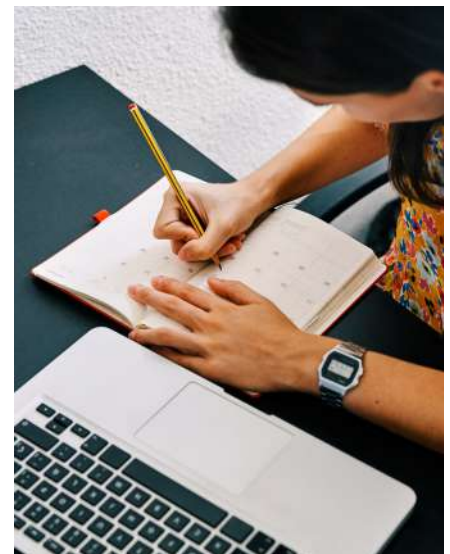
Employees felt so strongly about meeting their needs for connection in the workplace that the majority (53%) indicated they'd be willing to trade some compensation just to experience stronger ties with colleagues. The average pay cut? **Upwards of 6% of their salary.**

But money isn't all employees are willing to forego to improve the quality and quantity of their relationships. We also found that **for better social connection, individuals would make other important trade-offs, such as:**

- Having a narrower (but deeper) professional network
- Experiencing slower career advancement
- Having less time available to execute work
- Receiving less quality feedback about their work



It's worth noting that we're not advocating for employers to cut pay and stop promotions in exchange for a happy hour. Instead, the data clarifies that connection is anything but a "nice to have" at this point — as we noted, it has to be a key lever in any talent strategy. A culture of connection can be an advantage in a highly competitive talent market. And without it, your current employees may seek it elsewhere.





## Work arrangement influences connection needs.

It's tempting to blame low connection levels on having a dispersed workforce. After all, we did find that neither remote nor hybrid workers were experiencing strong relationships despite engaging in more meetings and interactions with colleagues.

One might conclude that the answer is to bring everyone back into the office together full-time. However, we found that only a fraction of the in-office employee population is content with their work arrangement and level of social connection, unlike their hybrid peers (who actually want more options for remote work) and remote peers (who we'll discuss on page 33, as they have their own unique needs).



### Companies with high connection scores

Work arrangement	Want less remote	Contented	Want more remote
In-person		32%	68%
Hybrid	21%	20%	59%
Remote	32%	68%	
Shifted to remote	21%	79%	

#### Defining work arrangement:

- **In-person:** These employees work in person, in the office or field
- **Hybrid:** These employees spend at least 20% of their time working from home, with an average of 54% of time spent at home
- **Remote:** These are full-time remote employees, and had started in their roles as a remote employee
- **Shifted to remote:** These are full-time remote employees currently, but had been working in person previously



### How work arrangement affects levels of belonging and connection

It seems counterintuitive that those in the office aren't thriving in social connection since they're surrounded by others all day. But the data paints a picture of a drastically changed in-person workplace. This workplace now lacks the dynamism and organic energy needed to foster connection and community, and deliberate intervention seems to be missing.

Glassdoor reviews revealed a trend that goes beyond just remote workers. Employees overall aren't even satisfied that connection is getting enough airtime from leaders as a priority today. We saw a 50% drop across the last three years in the frequency with which connection at work is rated by employees as a "pro" of their organization.<sup>10</sup> As a result, **those who report working in person more often than they prefer said they:**

- Feel lower social connection, lower belonging, and less cared for
- Are more likely to quit
- Feel more burned out and stressed
- Feel disconnected from their leaders and manager(s)
- Consider leaving their job 20% more than people working remotely or hybrid from their leaders and manager(s)

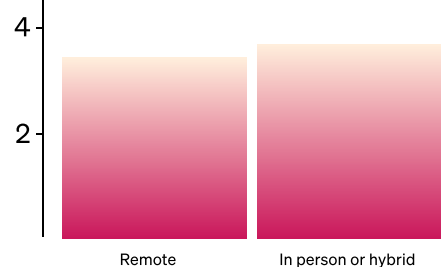


### The remote work connection penalty

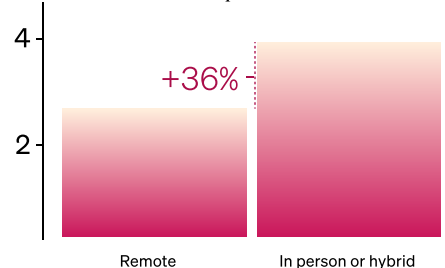
Remote workers — especially those who start a new position fully remote — face an uphill battle to build connection with their colleagues. It's not for lack of trying, though. Our research shows that remote workers actually exert the same level of effort as their in-person and hybrid colleagues yet experience a 36% smaller network size as a result. That's particularly distressing news for workers trying to assimilate into new roles and companies, though it's a challenge that is addressable through more deliberate and extended onboarding and reboarding.

### Same effort, worse outcomes

Effort in relationship building at work



Friendship network size



<sup>10</sup> For the 78 organizations included in this research.



### Just how much of a disadvantage are remote workers facing?

Compared to their peers, remote workers have:

1

*fewer friend at work*

35%

*loss in friend network size*

4

*fewer friendly colleagues*

14%

*lower social support from co-workers  
vs. hybrid and in-person*

17%

*lower perceived friendship  
strength vs. hybrid and in-person*

19%

*lower sense of belonging than  
in-person and hybrid employees*

### Could hybrid work be the answer to the connection crisis?

We've investigated several reasons why a complete return to the office won't necessarily help employees feel more connected, even if it were possible.

But we haven't fully dissected why and how hybrid workers seem to be finding their connection groove amid the turbulence the other groups face.

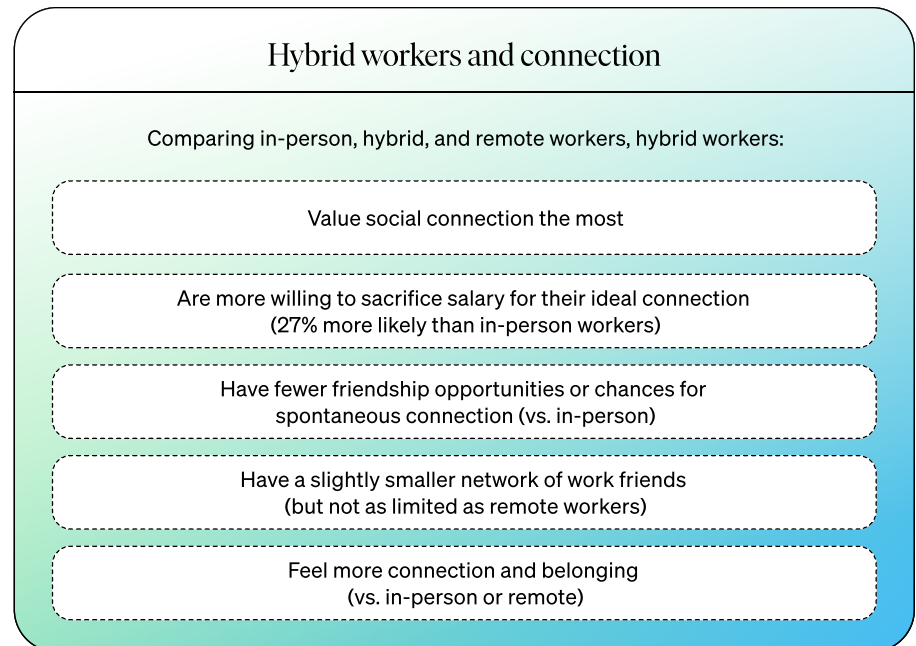
*“We’re giving employees the opportunities to choose whether they want to work remotely or in the office, and given this, we need to look at new ways to build community and culture, given our distributed workforce.”*

— ERINNE ARIAS

Former Global DEIB Program Lead at VMware,  
BetterUp customer

Hybrid work continues to grow in popularity for several reasons — it introduces choice, agency, flexibility, and balance into our daily work lives. In addition to creating space to be more intentional about how we work, it also enables us to welcome and engage in social interaction when we’re ready for it. If we know our weekly schedules in advance, in-person connection can be more deliberate and thoughtful; something to look forward to.

In the pre-pandemic office environment, a spontaneous happy hour excluded those who had evening family or caregiver responsibilities. But with hybrid work arrangements, scheduling and planning for social engagement in advance enlists greater commitment to participate and makes the resulting time together more enriching. Paradoxically, advance planning and scheduling can make the opportunities to cultivate friendships and relationships less obligatory and stressful.



It’s undeniable that hybrid work arrangements lack the organic elements that previously fueled workplace social connection. Working at home means fewer spontaneous moments — no bumping into a colleague in the elevator or sharing a coffee run to catch up on weekend plans. But hybrid work offers a unique advantage — those who want social connection can go into the workplace and seek it on their terms. While their network size may vary, hybrid workers don’t need to sacrifice productivity, focus, or work-life balance for strong relationships.

Even if your organization doesn’t have a hybrid model currently, the experience of hybrid workers offers invaluable lessons for how structure, intentionality, and employer intervention matter in facilitating connection.

3.

Take action:  
How to create  
connection across  
your workforce



## 1) Learn the different levels of connection your employees need.

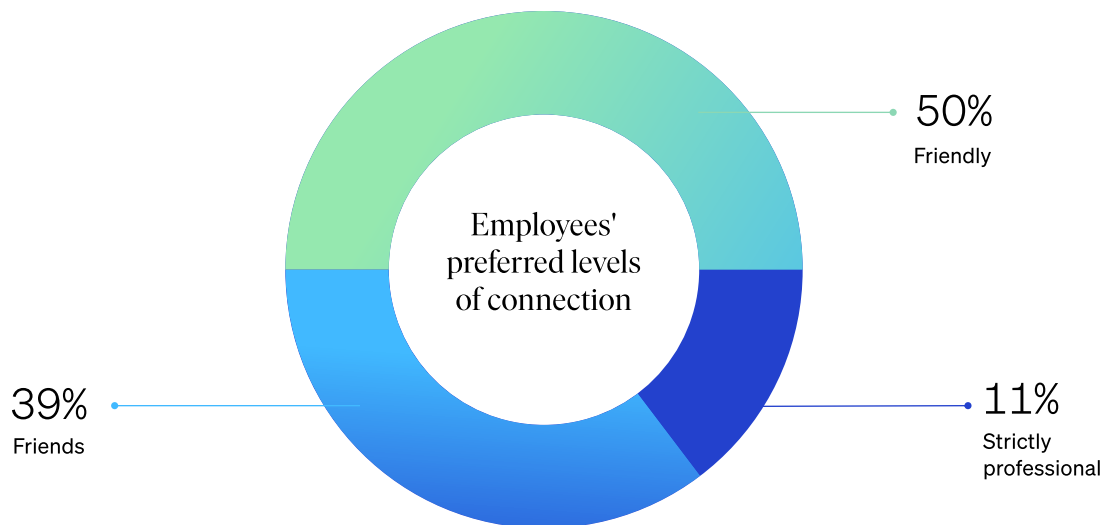
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Our data revealed that people need 5 friendly co-workers at work to feel connected, and around 7 to feel they belong. But, no workforce is a monolith. We know that people want and need different types, degrees, and amounts of social connection. What feels satisfying to one person might be lacking to another and overwhelming to a third.

As a result, leaders need to understand that facilitating connection isn't one-size-fits-all. However, our data show that people today overwhelmingly want to have more friends or friendly colleagues in the workplace.



Most employees fall into one of three groups when it comes to their preferred level of work-related social connection:



**Friends: 39% of the workforce** feel as though co-workers know about them on a personal level to the degree that they consider each other "friends." Co-workers take an active interest in each other's families, hobbies, interests, and personal desires in life. Friends at work go a level deeper than any other category and explore their hopes, fears, and worries.

**Professional: 11% of the workforce** say they keep their work relationships strictly professional. They don't spend time talking about their personal lives or sharing about their families because they feel that there isn't space, time, or need to share their inner worlds in the workplace.

We learned that across the board, the most well-connected people know about 10 or more people at work on a friendly level, while the least well-connected know just 0-2 people at a Friend/Friendly level. Whether they're looking for arm's length or a bear hug, 50% of employees indicated that they want their employers to cultivate closer social connection.

**Friendly: 50% of the workforce** say that they know their co-workers personally but mainly consider each other "friendly" rather than close friends. They occasionally share something about their inner world, such as a musing about a current event, but generally don't get too deep with their co-workers.

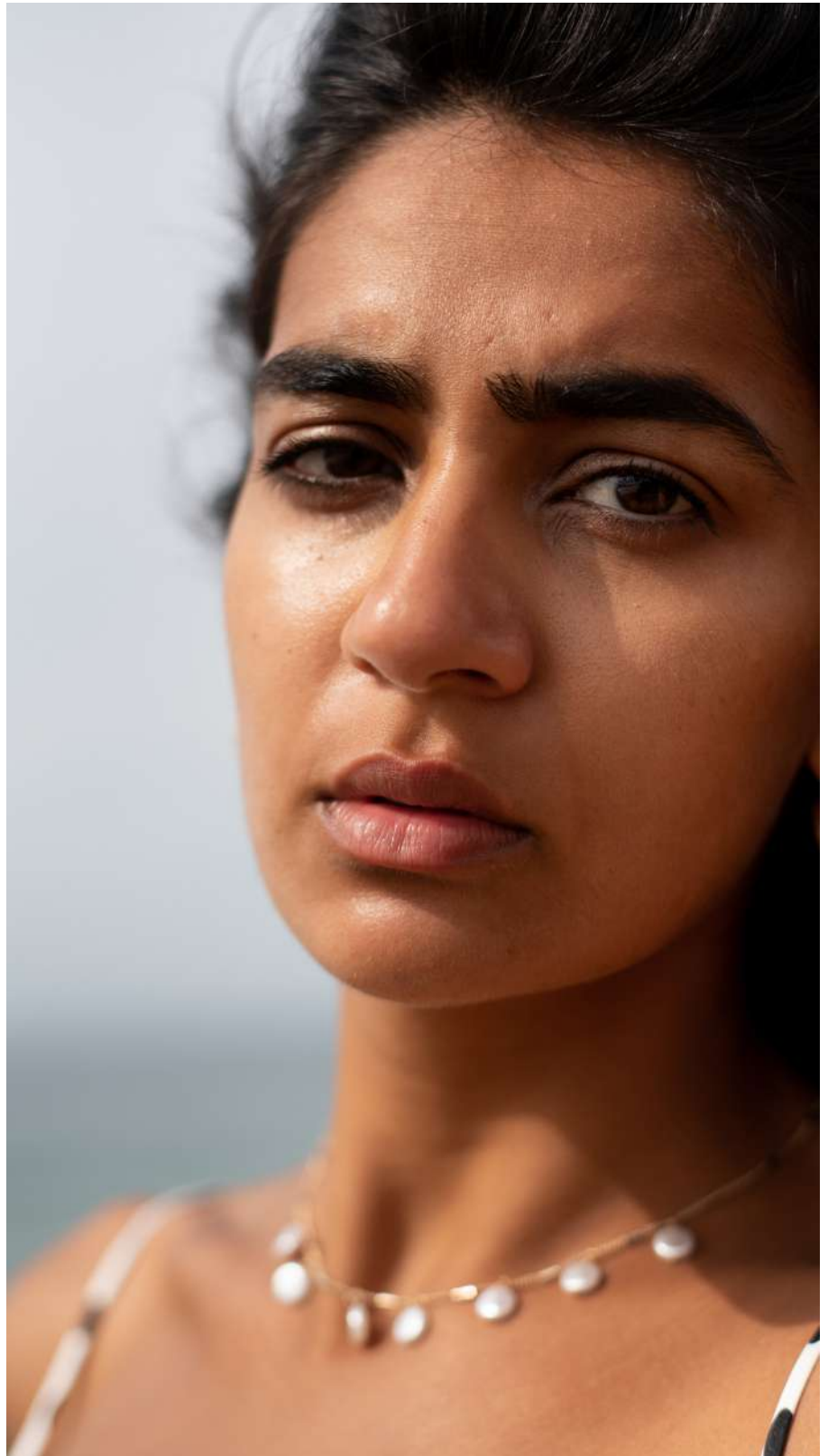
There is a pervasive desire for closer connection:

Ideal connection preference	Want closer connection than currently have
Professional	18%
Friendly	44%
Friends	67%

Setting aside the professional group for now, our research found that not satisfying the social needs of the Friend/Friendly group has consequences and can have a significant impact across your organization.

Why?

Because when actual connection falls short of the ideal for the two groups that comprise most of your people, a large portion of the organization is likely to notice and be affected by the shortfall. When Friends/Friendly individuals experience lower levels of connection, they feel less belonging, are less engaged and innovative, and are more anxious, depressed, stressed, and lonely. These outcomes have a negative, compounding effect across your workforce.





## 2) Understand what real connection looks like to employees now.

Only 2 in 5 employees said that their leaders were doing a good job promoting connection or even discussing it. We asked workers to rank the types of opportunities that leaders should cultivate more of to improve the amount and strength of connections within the organization. Their answers revealed the kinds of opportunities that mattered most to them and those that didn't for strengthening connection:



### *Top predictors of connection*

- Being **vulnerable**, letting people know the **real you**
- Spontaneous interactions
- Casual conversation and **fun banter**
- Sharing hobbies
- Getting to know someone on a **personal level**

### *Null or weak predictors of connection*

- Having a **shared background**
- **Venting** about leadership/job
- Interacting on **work topics**
- Having task dependencies at work

Here's what leaders can do to help:

### **Set shared goals**

For BetterUp members, we've found that managers promoting shared goals is key to cultivating solid social connections and team cohesion. When managers set shared goals and vision, they provide a clear roadmap and plan of action for their team, help employees understand how their work fits within the broader group, and allow each team member to feel, and truly be, more bought-in and invested in the results.





### **Foster open communication**

Our BetterUp member research confirms that when managers play a central role in facilitating open and vulnerable communication, employees see this effort and feel empowered to build the healthy relationships that drive belonging. When successful, numerous studies have found that relationship-building in the workplace directly impacts employee performance.

### **Make space for spontaneous interactions, and help create them when possible**

Spontaneity can be the stuff of connection magic, and it's extremely valuable as it allows us to share, learn, and grow with others without the structure and pressure of formal social engagements. As we noted, hybrid workers reported being twice as likely to have a decrease in spontaneous interactions vs. in-person workers, and remote workers are 71% less likely to have spontaneous interactions.

While it doesn't happen easily in a remote world, leaders must recreate and reconstruct the effect of spontaneity in virtual ways. Planning shared experiences that lead to cross-company interaction (like shared learning and social events that promote “cross-pollination”) can foster the conditions for social interaction to scale on a macro level. But other small efforts can impact individual workers, too, like promoting a shared team calendar to planning overlapping in-office days or even randomly pairing team members together for coffee chats.

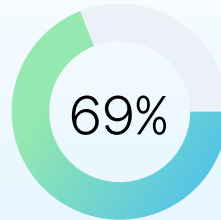
### Focus on enabling quality, not just quantity of connection

Across our data on social connection outcomes — belonging, relationship-building at work, perceived friendship at work, feelings of connection to co-workers — it was the quality of interaction, not the quantity, that primarily predicted levels of high connection. Whether in meetings, emails, or instant messages and team channels, creating space and time in the workday to discuss informal topics like family, hobbies, or weekend plans is linked to greater connection. On the flip side, the frequency of emails, the amount of meeting time, or the number of video and audio calls are not linked to closer social ties.

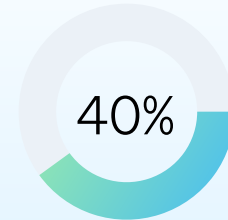
### Promote other approaches that fuel successful connection

We asked individuals about the ways they approach connection at work. Overall, we found notable rates of hesitancy or discomfort around virtual communications and introductions, with 1 in 3 people saying they don't know how to find people for friendly relationship-building at work today. Their answers shine a light on the opportunities for organizational intervention when it comes to designing learning and development programs and resources to support individual growth.

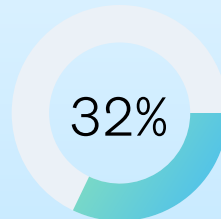
### How employees feel about communicating in a virtual world



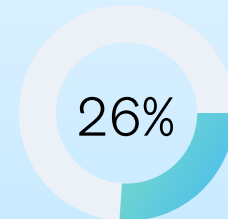
I think carefully about the frequency of my communications (sending an email, sending an instant message) so as not to bother others



I don't feel confident in making asynchronous virtual introductions at work (by instant message or email)



I wouldn't know how to find people that would make good "work friends" outside of my team



I worry that my communications may be interrupting the work of others

### 3) Try the five tactics employees say will help them build more connection.

Organizations shouldn't feel like their role in all this is to over-engineer connection. Connectedness for today's workforce results more from laying a thoughtful buffet than crafting a perfect pre-set, prix fixe meal. You provide the dishes, and employees can pick and choose what works for them. You're not out to prescribe a set course of interactions but to give options (in addition to some modeling and encouragement) to provide each of the three groups with means to satisfy their need for connection.



#### Employees are not getting the opportunities for connection they want:

**83%** Employees don't have "play" opportunities and fun events

**54%** Employees don't have in-person / virtual happy hours

**73%** Employees don't have in-person / common interest events

**78%** Employees don't have online groups / channels / communities

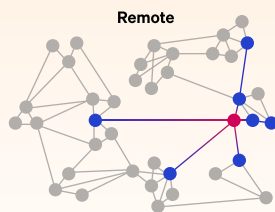
**40%** Employees don't have a culture of small talk during meetings

These aren't huge investments, and they don't require completely overhauling the way your teams operate. But they underscore how leaders must now take initiative, get involved themselves, and dedicate time, energy, and sustained enthusiasm to ensure they actually occur. And while leaders' participation and encouragement matter, they don't have to go it alone. Inviting others to help shape and sustain these important opportunities for connection makes them far more likely to result in positive outcomes.

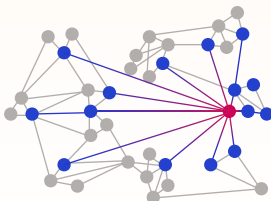
## 4) Make connection a priority from day one with onboarding.

Onboarding is crucial to setting every new employee up for success. It's also the best time to engage workers with your company culture and build social connections. Unfortunately, only 12% of employees surveyed by Gallup said their companies offered a great onboarding experience. Remote workers, especially, are feeling that pain. Our analysis found that workers starting new full-time remote arrangements may have the greatest disadvantage for experiencing belonging, and by a wide margin.

Not having worked in office means a smaller network



Shifted into remote \*



61% more bridging ties

\* These employees started in office with their organization but shifted into a remote working environment



However, we learned that when leaders shaped onboarding programs to support more social connection (instead of just focusing on company policies and work tasks) and designed programs that prioritized connection between their colleagues, **new hires experienced:**

**279%** *larger friendship network*

**55%** *more connection*

**47%** *more belonging*

Richer, more connection-oriented onboarding can be longer, stretching over a period of weeks, and include formal check-ins and additional activities over an extended period of months.

The idea is to not only build a feeling of connection to the company and its goals and culture, but to form more cohesive cohorts of new hires that give them an opportunity to build deeper relationships with others, even those outside of their core team. These connections will carry well past onboarding and help shape and influence broader company culture. Assigning a buddy or mentor during a new hire's onboarding can also help to formally jumpstart at least one relationship.

For all of these reasons, some companies may also consider a re-boarding program for existing employees, especially if the working arrangements have changed significantly across the organization.

11 Gallup - Why the onboarding experience is key for retention, Apr 2018



## 5) Promote a coaching culture across your organization.

On the one hand, it's vital to acknowledge that the role of people managers has transformed through the pandemic into one with a soaring level of responsibility and complexity. Communications, alignment, team building, talent development, well-being monitoring, and more fall under the manager's purview. On the other hand, because of, not despite these responsibilities, managers have the most direct influence on employees' experience.

When managers can learn and strengthen the skills and mindsets needed to promote more social connections among their teams, their people flourish. The first step toward that growth requires embracing more of a coaching leadership style. Teams often rise and fall on a manager's leadership style. The best leaders tend to act more as a coach than a typical manager and model the behaviors and mindsets they want to encourage.



A coaching leadership style helps empower employees to question, learn, challenge, and grow as individuals and team members. A leader who acts as a coach is inspiring and creates a safe space for employees to share their ideas, experiences, and concerns. These are all crucial elements of promoting belonging and inclusion and lay the foundation for direct reports to build relationships and experience greater connection. Further, when managers act as coaches, they model an approach to work and learning from feedback and practice that ripples outward, creating a broader culture of coaching across the team.

**The direct reports of managers who champion connection are:**

**35%** *more effortful in relationship building*

**52%** *more likely to be seen as confident in the workplace as a result of their words and actions*

**14%** *more likely to make others feel as if they are seen and valued*

Here are some key mindsets and behaviors that coaching-oriented managers use to help inspire their teams and drive more social connection:

### **Promote belonging**

Wharton professor and author Adam Grant said, "It's not enough for people to be included. They need to feel that they belong." And that extends beyond our personal lives. Belonging matters in the workplace, too. As a result, what managers say and do has an impact on whether employees, and they play an active role in creating an inclusive work environment and promoting a sense of belonging within their teams.

Recognizing that belonging cannot be given or dictated, that it is felt by the individual, managers can still lead by example by making belonging part of the team conversation. For example, managers can explicitly state that belonging is a priority and talk to their team about what belonging means to them as a leader.

Creating a culture of belonging takes attention and maintenance. Managers should regularly open up the conversation and invite team members to talk about what makes them feel welcome and included, as well as what gets in the way of belonging, and brainstorm ways to foster greater belonging. Feedback about what gets in the way of



belonging, and brainstorm ways to foster greater belonging. Feedback about what gets in the way of belonging may be better gathered in advance asynchronously, and anonymously if the team is large enough, rather than expecting team members who don't feel belonging to share that openly.

Managers can also talk about belonging in 1:1s to create space for individuals to articulate any

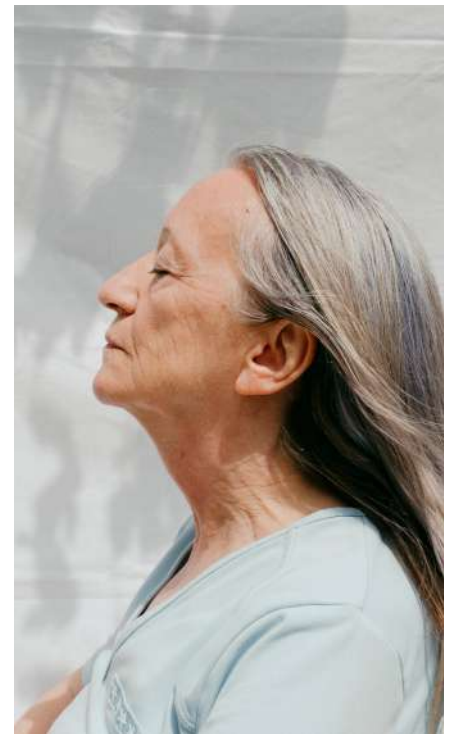
barriers to connection or belonging. Even if the solutions are imperfect, asking the questions with genuine intent and discussing them with team members collectively and individually can make employees feel seen and heard and increase a feeling of connectedness.



**Prioritize relationship-building, especially among dispersed teams**

Our ability to effectively build relationships is shaped by a complex set of inner and outer factors, from beliefs we carry about ourselves and others to the degree of safety or acceptance in an organization. Managers can make building relationships easier by getting to know what matters to their direct reports and what support they need. Going beyond the surface level communication and practicing vulnerability — like acknowledging their feelings and sharing them with their team — goes a long way in modeling healthy behaviors that employees will feel more comfortable engaging with.

Relationship-building and connection also don't have to exist as something separate from the work itself. Managers shouldn't overlook the value of assigning work-related collaboration to help foster relationships within and across teams. If a project could benefit from more perspectives or input, assign two team members to collaborate on it. Our tendency, especially now with so many working remotely, is to work on discrete tasks, each completing our own part in a way that fits our personal schedule and preferences. Collaboration in the time of remote work and flexible hours may feel inefficient and awkward, intrusive on our schedules, and possibly unnecessary.



Yet, it's also a way to build relationships, to learn from each other, and to create some of the productive friction and energy that is missing in our work lives today. We can achieve connection through work, not just at work.



### **Foster alignment and strategic planning**

We already noted how shared goals and outcomes drive more connection for employees, but better alignment and planning have other positive organizational impacts. When managers align individual efforts and processes to create clarity and a shared vision among employees, they increase the sense of purpose and create a cohesive, motivated team equipped to achieve organizational goals. Several studies found that employees who feel directly aligned with their company's purpose are 3x less likely to look for a new job and have increased performance.<sup>12</sup>

Strategic planning is another important skill for managers and goes hand-in-hand with alignment because it creates a shared roadmap to the future for all team members, helps anticipate blockers, and develops contingencies. Although planning has taken new shape in increasing uncertainty, direct reports say that managers with high strategic planning skills help them feel lower stress and higher focus in their work as a result.



<sup>12</sup> Josh Bersin - 5 things to consider in a red-hot job market, March 2021



# 4.

## About our data and research methodology

# Methods

This report was developed using data from three different datasets and a number of associated studies, all collected and conducted by BetterUp, Inc.

## Study 1: Survey Study of US Professionals

### Sample

Three unique samples of data were collected by BetterUp behavioral scientists from full-time employees in the United States using Prolific and Amazon Mechanical Turk sampling services. Demographic characteristics were approximately nationally representative, with participants spanning industries and geographies.

The primary survey used for insights in this report was collected using Prolific between February 17, 2020 and February 24, 2022 and consisted of 1,013 employees across the US. Participants who met the following criteria were included in the final study: (1) being at least 18 years old, (2) working full time (at least 35 hours per week), (3) being currently employed, and (4) not being self-employed. All survey respondents provided consent to participate in the study and have their data used for research purposes. The two additional archival survey studies were used to provide a small

portion of data points shared in this report. In one of the studies, BetterUp used Prolific to survey a longitudinal sample of individuals, once in March 2020 and once in March 2021. The final data source was a survey collected by BetterUp using Amazon Mechanical Turk in January 2020 and February 2020.

### Survey Items

This set of participants was surveyed on a variety of items that included personal and professional demographics, psychological characteristics, and behaviors. Survey items included those for demographics, work experiences, and current circumstances, which were largely adapted from open data resources provided by the United States Census, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Rand American Life Panel. These items included, but are not limited to, measures of gender, education, race, industry, job function, organizational tenure, and team size. Wherever possible, existing, validated, and published scales were used. Existing scales measured constructs of work meaningfulness, loneliness, social support at work, workplace friendship, positivity resonance, collaboration, stress, depression and anxiety, burnout, and personality. Turnover rate was calculated by tracking actual job turnover for study participants in the longitudinal sample during the period of March 2020 to March 2021. BetterUp's validated Whole

Person Model assessment items were used to measure social connection, relationship building, engagement, and manager behavior. In addition, several survey items were generated by behavioral scientists at BetterUp following best practices in survey design for workplace friendship preferences, connection ideals, network characteristics, and other concepts.

## Study 2: BetterUp Members

### Sample

The second dataset was compiled from 150,000+ BetterUp members who granted approval to use their data for research purposes. In accordance with corporate security and privacy policies, no identifying information, nor demographic information was compiled. Data were collected from July 2019 through February 2022.

### Survey Items

The cohort was surveyed on a variety of items that compose BetterUp's Whole Person Assessment (WPA). Surveys are administered to members when they first use BetterUp services. Members also participated in 360 assessments in which the member's colleagues, direct reports, and supervisors were surveyed about their perception of the member's behaviors on select subdimensions of the WPA, as well as additional measures of

individual and team effectiveness. Direct reports provided assessments of their managers, and these data were used to understand how manager behavior can impact direct reports.

### **Study 3: Web scraping for organizational level data**

#### **Sample**

The third data source comprised publicly available web data from the company review platform Glassdoor, which was scraped and run through natural language processing tools to create numerical scores based on language frequency and sentiment. These data were merged with BetterUp data to create insights about organizations through a combination of company review data with behavioral data from employees inside those organizations. Merging Glassdoor data with BetterUp data resulted in an organization-level sample size of 78 organizations.

#### **Items**

Glassdoor open-ended reviews of employee experience at the organization, the pros, the cons, and overall quantitative “star” ratings were used, as well as aggregated behavioral scores of employees at those organizations who are Members of BetterUp.

## **Analyses**

### **Results**

Data were analyzed by researchers at BetterUp, Inc. Descriptive and inferential analyses were used. Subgroup analyses assessed differences between employment circumstances (e.g., managers vs. individual contributors, industry) and behavioral differences (e.g., high vs. low connection) using t-tests. Correlation and regression analyses were used to examine relationships between variables and determine direction of relationships.

Significance testing was used to determine whether group differences or slopes were statistically significant (at the  $p < .05$  level). All results submitted to significant testing are significant under this definition, otherwise they were not included.

Conversion of significant results to percent differences between high and low groups was often applied for ease of interpretation. References to high and low scores refer to a grouping based on quartile breaks of a continuous measurement. High (low) brackets may refer to the top (bottom) 25% of scores.

Control variables were used wherever appropriate to statistically control for confounding variables. Frequently used control variables included: team size, gender, age, parental status, relationship status, personal income, organization size, whether role required contact with others, work levels (IC vs manager), tenure, and industry.

This research used observational data, meaning there was no randomization or experimental manipulation of the variables measured. It remains undetermined as to whether a change in one variable actually caused the change in another. For example, people who have more belonging were observed to have significantly lower rates of turnover. One explanation is that lack of belonging results in greater likelihood of leaving. But, it may also be that if a person intends to stay at an organization, they then put in more effort into cultivating belonging there (e.g. reverse causality). However, the relationships observed reflect significant patterns in human behavior and experience that are highly unlikely to be due to chance alone and as interpreted in this report align to theories of human behavior.

# 5.

## About BetterUp



Founded in 2013, BetterUp® is a human transformation company that dares to innovate the future of work by helping people and businesses grow personally and professionally to reach peak performance and maximize their potential, through coaching, content, community, and cutting-edge AI technology. BetterUp is the inventor of virtual coaching, with the world's largest network of over 3,000 Coaches offering support in 46 languages across over 90 countries. Trusted by more than 380 organizations including NASA, Google, Snap Inc., Hilton, Warner Media and other leading Fortune 1,000 companies, BetterUp delivers on three key impact areas – Mental Fitness, career & leadership development, and social connection – inspiring people everywhere to live with greater clarity, purpose, and passion.

Investors include Wellington Management, ICONIQ Growth, Lightspeed Venture Partners, Threshold Ventures, PLUS Capital, Salesforce Ventures, Sapphire Ventures, Mubadala Investment Company, Morningside Group, SV Angel, Freestyle Capital, Crosslink Capital, and Tenaya Capital. BetterUp's Science Board is composed of leading researchers in the fields of positive psychology and human performance including Martin Seligman, Adam Grant, Shawn Achor, and Quinetta Roberson. BetterUp has been recognized in the Inc. 5000, Fortune's Great Places to Work, and People Magazine's Companies that Care. To learn more, visit [www.betterup.com](http://www.betterup.com).



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