

The European Connection Crisis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Workplace connection
matters more than ever.

So, why do the majority
of workers say they're
not getting enough?

It's an important question, even as our daily lives hint at glimmers of stability and normalcy. While some endeavors are coming back naturally, the last two years have laid bare just how much of an art and science social connection can be. The truth is, many of us are finding it tricky to remaster.

Science has helped us measure and quantify the benefits of social connection — improved cancer survival, decreased cardiovascular mortality, fewer depressive symptoms, and improved overall mental health, among others. There is significant evidence that social support and experiencing connectedness to our fellow humans shape and impact many vital aspects of our daily lives.

Connection may be personal, but it affects our working lives, too. **Ninety-six percent** of organisational leaders say they recognise the importance of relational skills for their employees. Yet, 3 in 5 employees across Europe say their organisation isn't doing enough to help them feel connected to their colleagues. In the new world of work and workplaces, with some employees back in the office and others moving flexibly around the clock or between countries, finding and maintaining connection is increasingly complex. Bridging this gap is now an organisational imperative — how connected workers feel to their colleagues plays an outsized role in everything from employee experience to talent retention.



The power of feeling connected to our colleagues

We surveyed 1,000+ workers across Europe, evaluated data from over 150,000 BetterUp members, and analysed 78 leading companies on Glassdoor to better understand what connection means to today's workers and what benefits the individual and organisation experience when it's properly cultivated.

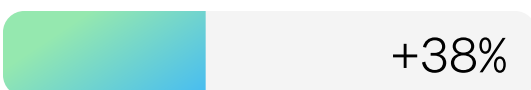
Importantly, we learned that connection at work now has two distinct features: 1) the size of our networks (that is, how many people we know or are connected to in an organisation) matters, but also 2) connection is about the feelings we experience within those networks, such as belonging, friendship, a sense of collaboration, and more.

We found that belonging to a **highly connected** workplace has distinct advantages. Employees are:

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



more likely to take calculated risks

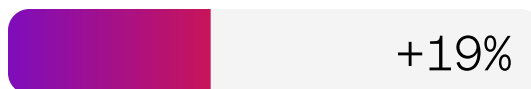


And that those **low in social connection** report higher adverse outcomes like:

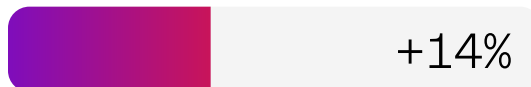
more burnout



more team conflict



more stress



What is driving such a massive disconnect between workers, and just how much responsibility do organisations have in addressing it? What happens if you can get connection right?

Connection has been declining for years

For over a decade, many in the health and science community were sounding the alarm about a new kind of public health crisis slowly percolating across the world — a loneliness epidemic.

The UK government identified loneliness and its detrimental effects as such, launching a loneliness strategy and appointing an official Minister for Loneliness in 2018.¹ This move was seen as an exemplary model by other European nations, whose politicians expressed similar concern about the threat of loneliness on the population.

Studies repeatedly confirm this concern, showing that social isolation negatively impacts our mental and physical well-being, job performance, creativity, decision-making skills, and more.

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.

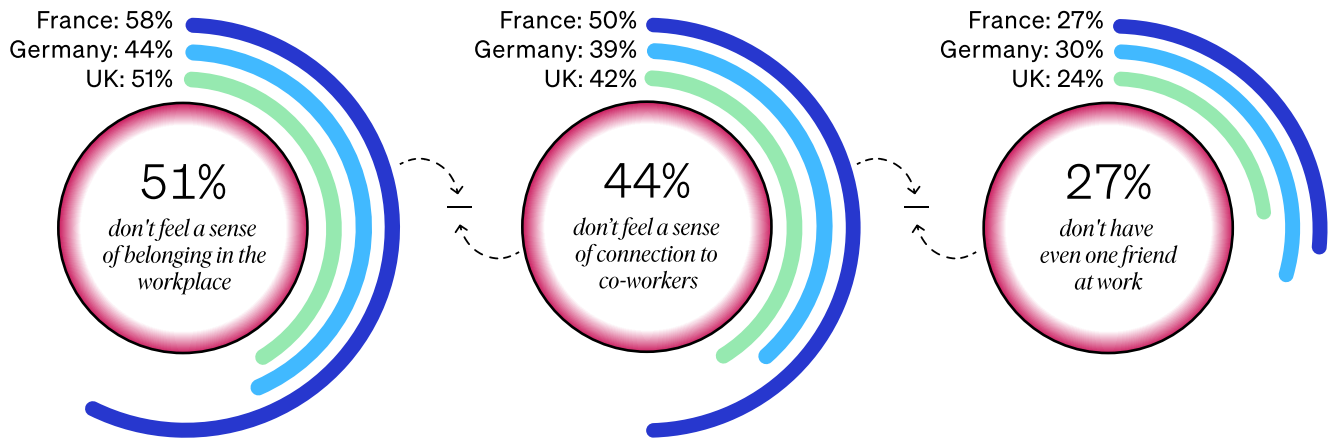
Having more interaction doesn't equal feeling a sense of connection, either. Despite one-click video conferencing and smart everything at our fingertips, just 31% of employees say they're satisfied with the level of social connection in their workplace.



Additionally, one might conclude that the answer is to bring everyone back into the office together full-time. However, our research found that in-office employees actually report lower levels of social connection and sense of belonging compared to their hybrid peers who spend at least 20% of their time working from home. They also express a stronger intention to quit.

¹ GOV.UK - Government's work on tackling loneliness, May 2022

Our data show alarming trends taking hold across the European workforce:



These stats should raise concerns for all leaders. A lack of social connectivity at work drives high (and costly) employee attrition and burnout and leads to reduced psychological safety, physical well-being, cognitive ability, and social thriving. Without connection to our peers, individual commitment craters, talent leaves, and teams lose their ability to innovate and effectively adapt to changing needs and working conditions. Organisations 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.**

“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

The connection status quo is gone

In the past, organisations could play more of a hands-off role in promoting employee relationships. By designing spaces tailored for connection, a subset of employees would naturally step into the role of cultural facilitator or social connector using lunchrooms, open offices, happy hours, and the like as the connective tissue in the modern workplace. However, the past two years exposed just how much we took this kind of organic social connection for granted.

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 that were meant to keep us in sync effectively extinguished the workplace small talk, spontaneity, random social interactions, and 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 — meant weakening our abilities to build and maintain networks with our colleagues, to be creative with them, or to have opportunities to practice empathy.

In turn, employees battled increased social anxiety, withdrawal, fatigue, and feelings of isolation.² They also lost access to fresh ideas and new perspectives that not only support work but make it more interesting and satisfying. In short, for many, the workplace of 2022 has become boring and monotonous. Whether you like your work or not, the days and weeks — and now years — blend together. We have fewer shared experiences with our colleagues to serve as touchstones in our interactions. And with less connection, we lose trust — in our organisations and each other.



With less trust, we are less willing to make an effort, and feel less committed. The majority (3 in 5) of European employees say their employers are not doing a good job of supporting social connection, and that lack of a helping hand is translating into lower effort by employees: 57% of workers in France, 47% in the UK, and 25% in Germany say they're not working hard to create quality relationships with their team.

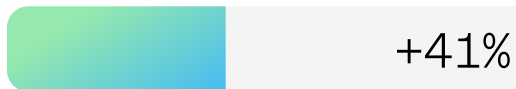
² Stanford University – Four Causes for ‘Zoom Fatigue’ and Their Simple Fixes, Feb 2021

Connection fuels employee well-being.

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, organisations 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. When that's successful, individuals see benefits of relationships like:

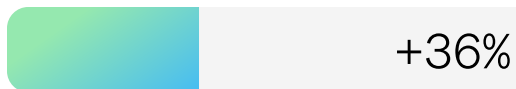
higher social connection



more positive relationships



greater life satisfaction



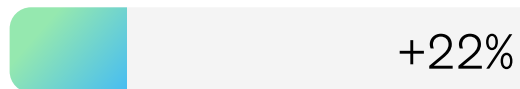
Experiencing more belonging also drives considerable impact

As professor and author Brené Brown noted, “fitting in is about becoming who you need to be 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 the connections you share with others so that you don’t fear that a mistake or choice will lose your place in the group.

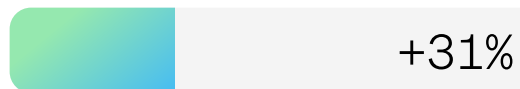


We found employees higher in belonging experience:

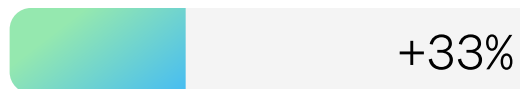
more resilience



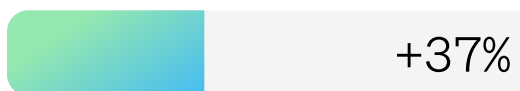
more engagement



more purpose and meaning



more job satisfaction





Almost none of us are getting the connection we want

Our data revealed that people need 5 friendly co-workers at work to feel connected, and more than 10 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.

Friends: 38% of the European 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.

People across Europe feel similar about the desire to be friends with colleagues. Those in the UK report wanting the most friendship at work (43%), while France (36%) and Germany (34%) follow closely behind.

Friendly: 46% of the European workforce say that they know their co-workers personally but mainly consider each other "friendly" rather than close friends. German (49%), French (46%), and UK (43%) workers are in close agreement about this desire as well. 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.

Professional: 16% of the European 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 with colleagues. This sentiment remains consistent across Europe, with French (18%), German (17%), and UK (14%) workers reporting a similar interest in professional work relationships.

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 a professional network or friendship, 31% of employees indicated that they want their employers to cultivate closer social connection.

There is a desire for closer connection:	
Ideal connection preference	Want closer connection than currently have
Professional	9%
Friendly	30%
Friends	41%



1 in 2 workers value connection more than money.

European employees felt so strongly about meeting their needs for connection in the workplace that nearly half (49%) indicated they'd be willing to trade some salary just to experience stronger ties with colleagues. The average pay cut? That depends on where people live.

Germans are willing to give up the most money, with survey respondents saying they would trade 10% of their salary for more connection. People in France and the UK follow closely behind at 9% and 8% respectively. On average, across Europe, 9% feels worthy of the trade, while in the US, people report 6% feels right.

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.

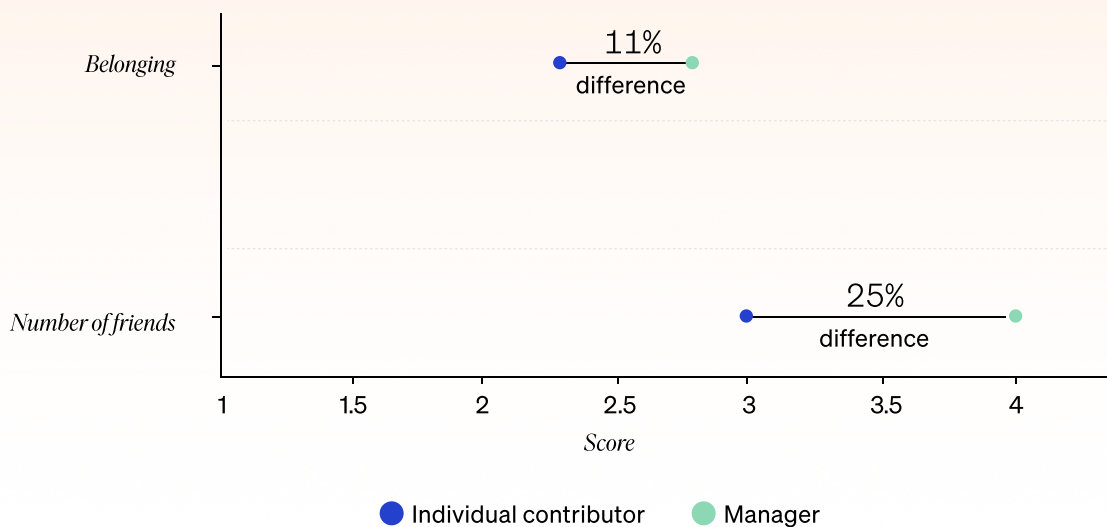


Managers feel well connected. But their direct reports are struggling.

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 also report putting in more effort to build relationships at work — 11% more than individual contributors.

Compared to individual contributors, European managers experience better outcomes in belonging and making friends. However, while managers may be satisfied with their level of social connection, members of their team may not be. Like many other areas of development in the workplace, managers play a vital role in fostering and facilitating these opportunities for their teams.

Compared to individual contributors, European managers experience better outcomes in belonging and making friends



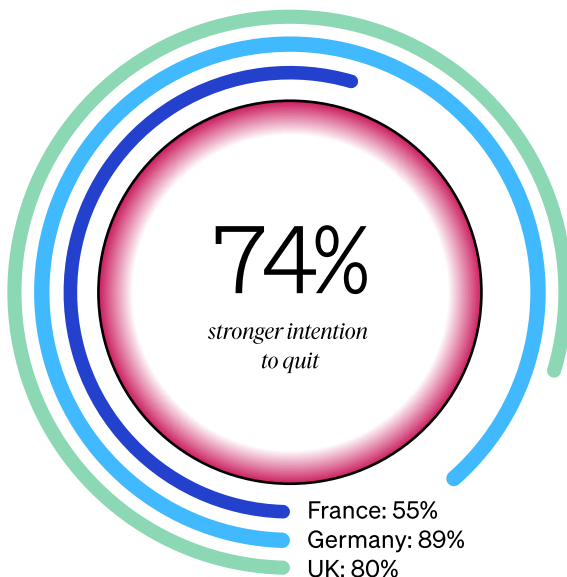
Organisations that get connection right will prosper

When leaders make social connection an organisational priority — and take active measures to facilitate it across the employee spectrum — they see higher performance, productivity, well-being, talent retention, and more. Connected organisations will have higher levels of adaptability, trust, and resilience to be agile in a changing world.

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. They may be more susceptible to burnout, a decline in performance, more absenteeism and presenteeism, and costly attrition.

Employees who identified as low in belonging have:



But it's not just retention that improves with better connection. Building a strong company culture that prioritises social connection also offers a competitive advantage for recruiting and hiring marquee talent: 62% of people who job search now say social connection is moderately to extremely important job search criteria, with French workers feeling the strongest about this need (84%) and almost half of both German and UK workers desiring the same (49%).

Strong connection also has a 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 organisations whose reviews signaled a strong prosocial culture (i.e. one that is positive, helpful, and promotes social acceptance) and level of interpersonal connection. We found that organisations that had the strongest signals of employee connection at work were above average in other ways too.



Take the next step

Learn actionable ways your organization can build a more connected and thriving workforce through a BetterUp demo.

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