



A Guide for Leaders

Advancing Social Connection
and Addressing Social Isolation
& Loneliness through Work

Research alerts us to the significant impact of social isolation and loneliness (SIL) on workforce success, including reduced productivity, increased healthcare costs, sick days, absenteeism, and turnover [1,2]. Cigna estimates the ramifications of these issues cost our national economy \$406 billion annually [2]. For employers, the number of workdays employees miss due to loneliness equates to a cost of \$4,200 per employee [2]. Leaders across the organization - especially executives and division or department leaders (particularly those in the domains of Human Resources and DEIB) - can implement policies and practices to shape their organizational culture as well as collaborate with external stakeholders to influence industry standards. Leaders, therefore, have tremendous opportunities to foster social connectedness and address social isolation and loneliness throughout their organizations as well as influence industry and societal change.

Social Connection: A Smart Investment

Fostering social connection and related experiences of trust, belonging, and social support can mitigate the aforementioned costs and result in significant gains for employers. A BetterUp report found that encouraging employees' sense of belonging can increase job performance by 56% and reduce job turnover and sick days by 50% and 75%, respectively [3]. Effectively, boosted productivity would increase profits by over \$52 million, reduced turnover would save around \$10 million, and fewer sick days would equate to \$2.5 million in worker output - per 10,000 employees, per year [3]. Companies certified for their social responsibility and employee well-being practices outperform non-certified S&P 500 companies, with "stock values appreciated by 325% compared with the market average appreciation of 105%" [4]. Many recommended policies and interventions require organizational shifts but little to no additional funding. Switching to the evidence-based interventions mentioned in this report holds promise to reduce expenditures and/or produce greater benefits, thereby increasing returns on investment.

What Leaders Can Do: The Approaches

The following list includes some of the most compelling evidence-based and promising approaches to address social isolation, loneliness, and connection (SILC) through the workplace. [\[Read the full report here.\]](#) While most focus on employees and the benefits they may receive from these interventions, this report recognizes that leaders themselves experience SIL. However, unlike coworker dynamics, leaders' authority role creates an inherent distance from their employees - making it unlikely for leaders to experience the same benefits of certain approaches unless tailored to their unique experiences [5-9]. More research is needed to develop solutions for leaders.

The Approaches

Relational Development and Emotional Intelligence (EI) Skills. Leaders can provide their employees with benefits and opportunities to build skills that can both *remedy* and *prevent* experiences of SIL. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is one effective intervention proven to reduce loneliness and related factors, such as stress, depression, and anxiety [10–16]. Additionally, EI skills increase prosocial behavior and employees’ perceptions of social support, making EI skill-building a promising strategy for improved work connections [14,17–21].

Family Supportive Supervisor Behavior (FSSB). Supervisors’ interactions with their direct reports are among the most powerful influencers of employee well-being. Examples of FSSB include encouraging work-life balance practices, openly communicating with them, and collaborating on schedule creation. This improves employee psychological health and well-being, reduces turnover, and increases organizational commitment [22–24]. Additionally, FSSB allows workers to strengthen their relationships with peers and family members [25]. Further research can provide a greater understanding of how this promising practice might directly impact SILC and may be adapted to support leaders as well.

Worker Autonomy. Granting employee autonomy is critical to enabling the formation of work relationships and connections. On one hand, close supervisor monitoring and restrictive schedules can reduce coworker interactions and make employees feel less competent, trusted, and connected at work [26,27]. On the other hand, social events at work can provide important forums for employee connections but mandating participation can negate their benefits [28]. Offering workers a greater level of autonomy can increase levels of social support from coworkers, reduce feelings of loneliness, and improve employee well-being.

Workplace Design. Altering workplace design to align with employees’ use of their workspace and promote a positive, healthy organizational culture can lead to greater social connection and support [29]. Suggested alterations include break rooms, quiet spaces, nap rooms, and outdoor spaces [29–31]. These features provide opportunities to interact more with coworkers face-to-face and create an environment where employees can feel an increased sense of meaning and community [29].

Advocacy. Advocating for and setting policy priorities that address social connection, isolation, and loneliness through work have the potential to create systemic change that benefits not only employees but society at large. National advocacy groups like the [Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness](#) (CESIL) convene cross-sector leaders to spur policy and societal change. CESIL members include consumer groups, community-based organizations, mental and behavioral health advocates, health plans, and private sector innovators.

For a detailed analysis of these solutions and more, read our full

[SOCIAL Framework: The Work, Employment, and Labor \(WEL\) Sector report here.](#)

Resources

- [Office of the Surgeon General Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being Report](#)
- [HERO Addressing Social Determinants of Health for Employers: Awareness, Accountability, and Action Guide](#)
- [Cigna 2020 Loneliness and the Workplace Report](#)
- [Harvard/MIT Work and Well-Being Initiative Employer Toolkit: Work Design for Health](#)

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