Workplace loneliness – an epidemic?

The effects of COVID-19 have inarguably brought concerns about mental health to the foreground. In many respects feelings of loneliness are a foundation of poor mental health. Loneliness itself can be defined as a feeling of social isolation or emotional distress when one's social relationships are not what is expected.

The 2018 Australian Loneliness Report found one in four Australians reported feeling lonely each week and further:

- Many Australians – especially younger Australians – report anxiety about socialising.
- Thirty per cent don't feel part of a group of friends.
- Lonely Australians have worse physical and mental health, and are more likely to be depressed.

The flow-on effects of loneliness can be devastating:

- Loneliness increases the risk of experiencing depression by 15.2%, and in turn being depressed increases the likelihood of being lonely by 10.6%
- Loneliness increases the risk of experiencing social interaction anxiety by 13.1%, and in turn being anxious about social interactions increases the risk of being lonely by 8.6%

In effect, being social isolated and experiencing loneliness can lead to a cyclical spiral into depression and other forms of psychological distress.

The impact of loneliness on health also varies based on age. In the Loneliness Report, younger adults reported higher levels of social interaction anxiety and depression compared to adults over 35 years of age. Adults aged between 18-25 reported more depressive symptoms than other adult groups.

When you sharpen the focus on loneliness at work the number are even more stark. The (2019 Loneliness report by Reventure, surveyed 1,010 employed Australians aged 18-65. It found that 40 per cent of Australian workers feel lonely at work, 38 per cent of lonely workers report making more mistakes and 40 percent of lonely workers feel less productive. Furthermore, 36% of lonely workers reported being sick more often.

Loneliness is a global epidemic and some nations have acted promptly – the UK has, for instance, appointed a Minister for Loneliness and announced the first ever 'Employer Pledge' to tackle workplace loneliness."

In the Australian workplace context, whilst there appears to be a growing focus on mental health the extent to which organisations have the skillsets to support employees suffering distress due to loneliness remains unclear. COVID-19 has shown that many employers can pivot quickly to implement the technical infrastructure to enable employees to work from home – however, without clear actions to retain genuine employee connectedness to colleagues it is possible that such pivots may also serve to increase employee feelings of loneliness and psychological distress.