



EMERALD POINTS

OVERCOMING WORKPLACE LONELINESS

Cultivating Belonging for a
Remote Workforce

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TUBA BIRCAN
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OVERCOMING WORKPLACE LONELINESS

Praise for *Overcoming Workplace Loneliness*

In a world dominated by multiple connections on social media, we face a stunning increase in people experiencing loneliness. This is a particular issue in the mass movement to remote work. This timely book is a much-needed research investigation into workplace loneliness. It is a must-read for leaders, HR professionals, and workers themselves.

—Ronald E. Riggio, PhD,
Kravis Professor of Leadership and Organizational Psychology,
Claremont McKenna College, USA

It is rare to find a study that is both relevant and balanced. This study offers the story of loneliness along with data to support the multiple causes and effects it has on our workplaces. In a world forever changed by the COVID-19 pandemic, aspects of our work environments once easily ignored are now laid bare for all to see. This book offers readers an opportunity to view workplace loneliness with new eyes and then reflect on how they might lead themselves and others to mitigate loneliness in the workplace.

—Chris Cartwright, MPA, EdD, Inclusion,
Intercultural and Global Leadership Assessment Consultant

*Through their extensive research and experience, authors Cenkci, Downing, Bircan, and Perham-Lippman have written a comprehensive, actionable, and much-needed guide to address the challenges of workplace loneliness and foster a sense of belonging in the remote workplace. *Overcoming Workplace Loneliness: Cultivating Belonging for a Remote Workforce* is a timely and relevant book; a must-read for leaders and members of remote or hybrid teams.*

—Dr Melody Rawlings,
Director of the Center
for the Advancement of Virtual Organizations,
National University, USA

Overcoming Workplace Loneliness: Cultivating Belonging for a Remote Workforce, authored by Ada Cenkci, Megan Downing, Tuba Bircan, and Karen Perham-Lippman, not only explores

loneliness at work but also commits to easing loneliness among remote workers. The book addresses two important and timely considerations: loneliness and belonging in remote settings, which makes it an ideal read for students and scholars in evidence-based regulation of workplace cognition, behaviours and emotions of loneliness under remote working conditions.

—Professor Mustafa Ozbilgin,
Chair in Organisational Behaviour, Brunel University London, UK

Authors Ada Cenkci, Megan Downing, Tuba Bircan, and Karen Perham-Lippman have written a timely, informative, and highly useful disquisition on overcoming workplace loneliness. Their work couldn't be more relevant and important to society. Cultivating employee belonging for the well-being of a remote workforce is an important need. This treatise is ideal as a pre-read for class discussion about a consequential topic in the world of work today. This is an excellent monograph for the academic world.

—Dr George Manning, Professor of Psychology,
Northern Kentucky University, USA

The authors have initialized research and provided leadership solutions to the immense issues of workplace loneliness and belonging in both the remote and traditional workplaces. Their research results and astute data analyses will be great assets to leaders in the workplace, family, and community. The author team has provided important research into the crucial areas of caring leadership and employee development.

—Dr Kent Curtis,
Professor Emeritus of Organizational Leadership,
Northern Kentucky University, USA

The content in this book is important and very timely to understanding how to navigate the rapidly changing work-environment in a way that brings us greater health and fulfilment. The study and findings make this an essential read for leaders.

—Helen Abdali Soosan Fagan, PhD,
Author of *Becoming Inclusive*,
Founder and CEO at Helen Fagan and Associates,
and Lecturer at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA

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Cultivating Belonging for a Remote
Workforce

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

Loneliness poses a critical and pervasive global challenge. As an illustration, in the United States alone, around 44 million adults, representing approximately 17% of the population, report feeling loneliness (Witters, 2023). Dr Vivek Murthy, the 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States, once remarked, “I trained in internal medicine, and I expected most of my time would be spent on diabetes or heart disease or cancer (...) What I didn’t expect was that so many people I saw would be struggling with loneliness” (Kristof, 2019, para. 6). Although initially astonished by the prevalence of loneliness among his patients, Dr Murthy later acknowledged the gravity of the issue. In May 2023, he issued a US Surgeon General’s Advisory on loneliness, underscoring the value of social connections for health and well-being and emphasizing the need to give loneliness the same level of attention and urgency as other serious health conditions (Rao, 2023).

Loneliness may be experienced in various life domains, including the work environment, where workplace loneliness (WL) emerges as a consequence of the psychological pain associated with perceived inadequacies in workplace relationships (Wright & Silard, 2021). The impact of WL on employee attitudes and outcomes is estimated to cost employers over \$154 billion annually (Bowers et al., 2022). Unfortunately, it is a common misconception that WL is solely caused by physical isolation and personal characteristics. However, our research has identified other contributing factors, such as ineffective leadership, cliques, inadequate onboarding procedures, and exclusionary behavior among team members. Accordingly, addressing loneliness in the workplace requires organizational intervention, rather than individual efforts.

In response to the significance of WL (an issue exacerbated by the increase in remote work), this book offers solutions to overcome it and create a sense of belonging. Belonging is a fundamental human need that, when not met, is known to cause loneliness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). This book offers a variety of methods to tackle WL with a specific emphasis on belonging because loneliness and belonging, which, although distinct concepts,

are closely related (Lim et al., 2021). Overall, the book emphasizes that preventing WL requires tailored approaches. Thus, organizations should pay close attention to their employees' needs and be flexible in their offerings to address WL.

Using a mixed-method design (collecting data with a survey and interviews) and a review of relevant WL literature, we offer a unique perspective on WL with a specific emphasis on remote work and social identity: Using a scoping review approach, Chapter 1 provides an extensive literature review of WL, suggests future research directions for WL, and draws comparisons between loneliness and related concepts, such as solitude, isolation, and aloneness. Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of belonging in the workplace, discussing social identity and remote work topics with relevant WL research. Chapter 3 details the mixed-method research design and explains the data collection process. Chapter 4 presents the quantitative data analysis results, describing the sample characteristics and statistical analyses conducted. Chapter 5 presents the qualitative sample characteristics and discusses the qualitative data analysis procedure and outcomes. Finally, Chapter 6 integrates and interprets the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases in relation to the research questions; key concepts and ideas explored in this book are summarized, and theoretical contributions and managerial implications for the mixed-method study are provided. Additionally, research limitations are acknowledged, and directions for future studies are suggested.

This book was written in response to the pressing concerns of WL and belonging in organizations. It aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic and emphasize the importance of fostering camaraderie and a shared purpose among employees as a way to address WL and cultivate a sense of belonging in the workplace. We believe this book will be a valuable resource for scholars and students interested in WL, particularly those in the fields of leadership, Human Resource Management (HRM), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and industrial–organizational psychology.

WORKPLACE LONELINESS

1.1. LONELINESS AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Humans are inherently social creatures. As such, relationship quality and sense of belonging greatly influence human lives. John Steinbeck's timeless novel *Of Mice and Men* offers profound insights into this theme through the character of Crooks, the only African American man on the ranch. Reflecting on the hardships he has faced, Crooks articulates the profound impact of loneliness, stating, "S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy 'cause you was black. How'd you like that? (. . .) A guy needs somebody – to be near him (. . .) A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you (. . .) I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick" (Steinbeck, 1994, p. 71). Crooks' poignant observations highlight the detrimental effects of loneliness on one's well-being. Extensive research has revealed the alarming consequences of workplace loneliness (WL) and social isolation, equating it to the health risks of smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad, 2017; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Additionally, Park et al. (2020) found that loneliness has been negatively related to several health outcomes, such as mental and physical health, sleep, and cognition. Acknowledging the gravity of this issue, a 2023 report on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation by US Surgeon General urges us to address its profound effects to health and well-being by raising awareness, destigmatizing loneliness, and implementing new policies and programs (Rao, 2023).

Recognizing the urgency of this health crisis, several governments around the world have also been taking measures to prevent loneliness. For example, the British government appointed a minister for loneliness in 2018. The Japanese government also appointed a prime minister of loneliness in 2021 (Robertson, 2022). Additionally, inspired by the United Kingdom's "Campaign to End

Loneliness,” in 2017, Australia formed a national collaboration of service providers and researchers under the “Ending Loneliness Together” (ELT) organization to reduce loneliness and social isolation within the country (Smith & Lim, 2020). Moreover, in 2020, the US government reauthorized the 1965 “Older Americans Act” with additional provisions to address the effects of social isolation and loneliness among seniors (Engelhart, 2021). Despite such efforts, loneliness remains an issue that is frequently ignored or stigmatized across the globe.

Defined as feeling alone despite longing for others, loneliness has been a concerning issue around the world (Younger, 1995). For instance, a cross-cultural study conducted by DiJulio et al. (2018) found that 22% of adults in the United States, 23% of adults in the United Kingdom, and 9% of adults in Japan often or always feel lonely. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the loneliness epidemic due to factors, such as pandemic related quarantines, social distancing, and stay-at-home orders. One multinational study found that 21% of participants reported severe loneliness during the pandemic, compared to 6% beforehand (O’Sullivan et al., 2021). A 2023 Gallup report on loneliness in the United States, on the other hand, revealed that loneliness levels reached 25% in March 2021 during the pandemic and have been on a decreasing trend since 2021. Despite this decline in loneliness, the report also pointed out that 17% of Americans expressed feeling lonely as of February 2023, indicating that an estimated 44 million American adults are lonely. These statistics highlight the significance of addressing loneliness even when social distancing measures are less common (Witters, 2023).

1.1.1.1. Loneliness and Related Terms

Psychologists have been studying loneliness since the 1950s. However, in the 1970s, research interest on loneliness substantially increased, largely driven by the influential book *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation* by Robert Weiss (1973). Over time, research on loneliness has proliferated, offering a wide range of empirical and theoretical studies that provide various definitions (Wright, 2005). One such definition describes loneliness as “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively” (Perlman & Peplau, 1981, p. 31). This definition encompasses the situations when the number of relationships is lower than what is seen as desirable, in addition to circumstances in which the desired level of intimacy has not been attained (Gierveld et al., 2018).

Often confused with related concepts, such as isolation, aloneness, solitude, and alienation, “loneliness” has some distinguishing characteristics from these. For instance, many theories on loneliness state that it is a subjective experience. Yet, among the terms often confused with loneliness, in contrast, two are more objective conditions, namely “isolation” and “aloneness” (Wright, 2005, 2009). For example, more objectively, “isolation” refers to the situation of having few people to interact with and a lack of social contact. In addition, while loneliness is an unpleasant and distressing experience (Perlman & Peplau, 1981), this is not necessarily true of related concepts. For instance, “aloneness” refers to a certain degree of wanting to be by oneself. Thus, one person may not feel lonely despite being all alone, whereas another can feel lonely even though being surrounded by other people (Bekhet et al., 2008; Wright, 2009).

“Alienation,” another term confused with, but distinct from, loneliness, refers to “subjectively experienced powerlessness to control one’s own work activities” (Pearlin, 1962, p. 314). Although a distinct concept from loneliness, as with aloneness and isolation, the undesired experience of alienation from coworkers may lead to increased loneliness feelings (Wright, 2009). “Solitude,” distinct from, yet also confused with loneliness, is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the situation of being alone, often by choice” (“Solitude,” n.d., para. 2). While loneliness, by definition, is an undesirable feeling, being alone or in solitude can have benefits, such as increased creativity, self-reflection, self-control, and concentration (Luanaigh & Lawlor, 2008; Silard & Wright, 2022). Thus, the theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich described the difference between the two as follows: “The word solitude expresses the glory of being alone, whereas the word loneliness expresses the pain of feeling alone” (Cacioppo et al., 2010, p. 453).

“Depression” and “lack of social support” are also related to, but distinct from, loneliness. Depression refers to the tendency to enter and remain in a negative mood state (Holtzheimer & Mayberg, 2011), while loneliness is characterized by a hope that everything would be all right, if the lonely individual could connect with the right people. Conversely, there is a tendency with depression to give in to the negative mood (Mushtaq et al., 2014; Weiss, 1973; Wright, 2009). “Lack of social support” is characterized by the availability of interpersonal resources, whereas a state of loneliness is characterized by a deficit of social relationships (Peplau, 1985), and thus, these concepts are distinctly different.

Overall, especially in daily usage, the terms reviewed here are often confused with loneliness. Therefore, we recommend researchers and

practitioners be mindful of the distinction between these terms and loneliness and to avoid using them (e.g., isolation) interchangeably with loneliness.

1.2. WL AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Loneliness can manifest itself in different areas of life, including the workplace. As noted in the Introduction, WL is “the psychological pain of perceived relational deficiencies in the workplace” (Wright & Silard, 2021, p. 1064). Despite WL research having grown in recent years, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when compared to other aspects of loneliness research, it is a developing scholarship area that remains under-researched.

WL also needs more attention from organizational leaders and HR practitioners. Even though today’s organizations have 24-7 technology that allows instant connectivity, many employees feel lonely at work, as indicated by Ernst and Young’s (EY’s) annual *Belonging Barometer 2.0* survey. The survey, conducted on more than 5,000 employees in companies across the United States, the United Kingdom, mainland China, Germany, and Brazil, revealed that 82% of respondents had experienced loneliness at work (Twaronite, 2022). Despite these statistics, practitioners and researchers have paid limited attention to loneliness in organizations.

Some organizations may not fully grasp the importance of social connections at work, yet humans are social creatures who seek out social connections to satisfy their need for belonging. In fact, for thousands of years, our ability to foster close bonds built on trust and cooperation has helped us to survive predators (Murthy, 2017), and this innate need for such connections remains. For many of us, the workplace is where we spend most of our time and have the most social contact with others. Even if there are very few one-on-one interactions during our daily work routines, a sense of belonging at work can still decrease our loneliness (Amico, 2017), among other benefits. Research indicates that employees who have a best friend at work are more likely to be engaged with their jobs, achieve high-quality work, be better at customer engagement, have greater well-being, and are less likely to experience an injury on the job (Rath & Harter, 2010).

Moreover, WL affects a number of employee outcomes and attitudes in the work environment, including job performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018), turnover intentions (Y. Chen et al., 2016), and creativity (Peng et al., 2017). The high levels of WL across organizations around the world combined with its effects on employee outcomes and attitudes make addressing WL essential

for organizations (Bowers et al., 2022; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Especially considering work environment changes after the pandemic (e.g., increased remote/hybrid work and more difficulty in attracting long-term talent), organizations would benefit from offering research-informed solutions. Next, we explore the literature on WL.

1.3. WL LITERATURE REVIEW

One aim of this book is to present a comprehensive review of the literature on WL. Firoz et al.'s (2021) systematic review article offers a comprehensive evaluation of WL research through 2019; however, the COVID-19 pandemic and related social isolation measures significantly impacted researcher interest in the concept, initiating a rapid increase in the number of WL studies. Thus, the number of studies published since Firoz et al.'s (2021) work clearly illustrates the need for a more recent review on WL: Firoz et al.'s (2021) study involved 29 articles (including conference papers). As explained in the following pages, this study includes 76 journal articles (excluding conference papers).

1.3.1. Method

To examine WL literature, a scoping literature review method allowed us to assess how it is studied and defined, summarize the research results, and identify gaps in the literature (Munn et al., 2018). The following research questions guided our review:

- How was the WL concept defined?
- How was the WL concept examined (e.g., WL scales utilized, sample characteristics, study variables related to WL)?
- What do we know about the WL topic based on extant literature?
- What are the future directions for WL research?

To answer these research questions, we examined WL peer-reviewed academic journal articles written in English. This review was focused on WL, while articles on related but conceptually different terms, such as “workplace isolation” or “workplace alienation,” were not included.

Studies we added to this review met the following inclusion criteria:

- Study was published in a peer-reviewed academic journal,
- Study was published in English, and
- Study clearly examined WL construct.

Criteria for exclusion:

Studies that did not clearly investigate WL were excluded (e.g., focused on isolation or general life loneliness). Moreover, articles that were a few pages in length, such as commentaries, book reviews, or letters to editors, were excluded.

We conducted the initial literature search on November 18, 2022, with the following keywords located anywhere within the articles: “workplace loneliness” OR “work loneliness” OR “loneliness at work” OR “worker loneliness” OR “employee loneliness” OR “loneliness in the workplace” OR “professional loneliness.” We searched for these terms through the Northern Kentucky University W. Frank Steely Library website. The library’s EBSCOhost platform searched multiple databases simultaneously through the EBSCO Discovery Services (EDS) interface. English language, peer-reviewed, and academic journal filters were selected along with “exclude dissertations” and “exclude book reviews” options provided on the EBSCOhost platform. This resulted in the following number of resources in the databases: APA PsycInfo (43), Business Source Premier (38), Academic Search Complete (30), Business Source Ultimate (26), Education Research Complete (21), ERIC (12), Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection (9), Academic Search Ultimate (2), and APA PsycArticles (2). These databases were selected based on our research questions and which databases were pertinent to the WL topic.

For a more comprehensive review, we repeated the same search utilizing the Scopus and ABI/INFORM Global databases. These searches were conducted separately and provided 378 and 65 resources, respectively. Hence, in total, 626 resources were located from these databases. After removing 176 duplicates (these were present within and across the databases), the search provided 450 unique items. The search process and the related results are depicted in Fig. 1.

As can be seen from Fig. 1, in Phase I, the article titles and abstracts were checked by the first author to see whether the inclusion criteria were met. In this step, the publications were classified as: included, rejected, or needed to be further examined. One hundred forty-seven publications were retained at this step, whereas 303 publications were eliminated for reasons, such as being related to life loneliness instead of WL, publication language different than English, and not being an academic journal article. Next, in Phase II, the full