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Wise@Work

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*How to Combat Loneliness in the Workplace:
The Power of Communities*

WISDOM LABS

How to Combat Loneliness in the Workplace: The Power of Communities

with

CORY SMITH

ABOUT **CORY SMITH**



Cory Smith, CEO & Co-Founder of Wisdom Labs, has spent over 20 years aligning purpose, entrepreneurship, and social good to create companies that have positive impact for people and the planet.

At Wisdom Labs, Cory and his team believe a multi-faceted approach to mental, emotional, and social wellbeing in the workplace is the best way to achieve scalable behavior change. Wisdom Labs' tools and programs combat loneliness by building social connection, building resilience to stress, and reducing burnout. This leads to improved performance, engagement, and reduced turnover in the workplace.

Previously, Cory was CEO of Impact Hub Bay Area, CEO of the Social Capital Markets (SOCAP) Conference, the first Innovation Fellow for the City of San Francisco Mayor's Office, Co-founder and CEO of Webcast Solutions (acquired by StarMedia/France Telecom) and Co-founder of MediaCast, the first on-location webcast company.

Loneliness comes from a lack of high-quality social relationships and it's becoming an epidemic.

Workers are increasingly reporting feeling lonely more often, and there are more people living alone and single today than ever before. In a recent study, 22% of millennials reported that they have zero friends. Of course, loneliness isn't any fun, and there are actual health issues that arise from being lonely. Some studies are showing that the health risks of loneliness are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness can reduce immunity, affect sleep, and increase risk for burnout.

Dependence on technology is partially to blame, but there are other factors contributing to this rise in loneliness as well. Flexible work policies that allow people to work from home are beneficial in many ways, but they also contribute to lack of social interaction. In the office, open workspaces are also having the unintended effect of isolating people from one another.

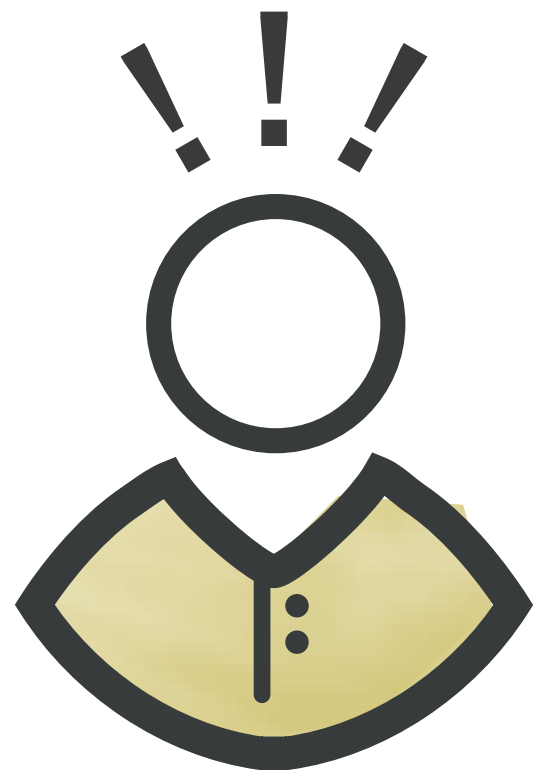
Lonely people report lower job satisfaction and switch or quit jobs more frequently, affecting productivity, engagement, and creativity.

At Wisdom Labs, Cory Smith and his team believe the only way for individuals to successfully combat loneliness requires true behavior change. A multi-faceted approach to mental, emotional, and social wellbeing in the workplace is the best way to achieve this in a scalable way. Wisdom Labs' tools and programs combat loneliness by building social connection, building resilience to stress, and reducing burnout. This leads to improved performance, engagement, and reduced turnover in the workplace.

★ **We're interested in your insights on loneliness and its effects on the workplace. Let's start by level-setting on the definition of loneliness. How did we get to this point that many are calling a "loneliness epidemic?"**

CORY SMITH Loneliness comes from a lack of high-quality social relationships. People may say, "I've got more people that I'm connected with than ever before on social media and online," but when the quality of those social relationships is low, we see loneliness.

It's true, especially for the millennial generation, where loneliness is becoming an epidemic. If we break down the reasons, one is the rise of and dependence upon technology in general, which has moved us away from face-to-face, in-person connection. There are more people than ever living alone and single, and that also increases the risk of loneliness. In a recent study, 30% of millennials reported that they feel lonely, and 22% reported that they have zero friends.



★ How are workplace factors contributing to loneliness?

CS At work, flexible work policies and working from home, while beneficial, can have the opposite effect on people since they reduce social connection. There are a lot more virtual teams than there have been in the past, partially due to technology. The classic “hanging around the water cooler” or going to get a cup of coffee together at work is where a lot of social connection and social support happen. When you see that go away, loneliness happens. The pace and the amount of work that people are doing has also increased, which is keeping us from connecting one-to-one more than ever before.

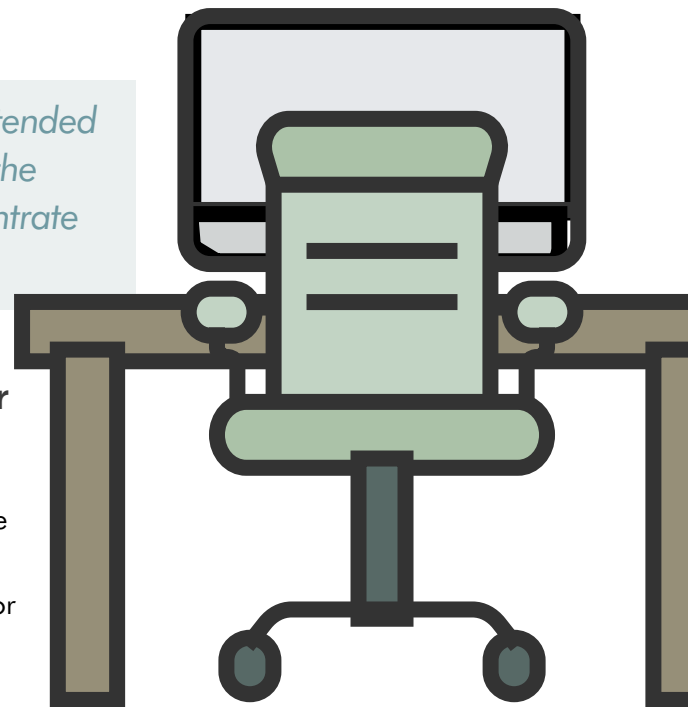
Open workspaces can actually end up having the unintended effect of isolating people from each other. You’re all in the same room, but you’ve plugged into headsets to concentrate better on work. In the process, people are missing out on all the conversations that are going on around them and losing the opportunity to connect with others.

All of this boils down to modern work norms making “weak ties” less possible. Research shows that there’s value in what’s called “weak ties,” or interactions with people who you might not be as close to. We interact with a wide network of people on a daily basis, but most social psychology literature is primarily focused on interactions with close friends and family. This research talks about connecting with people throughout your day that you may not have any formal relationship with. That could be the barista that’s serving you coffee; it could be someone you work with. By having a positive interaction, especially looking for places of shared positive emotion, that can greatly reduce your sense of isolation and loneliness.

Open workspaces can actually end up having the unintended effect of isolating people from each other. You’re all in the same room, but you’ve plugged into headsets to concentrate better on work.

★ What kind of effects can loneliness have on your health, and how is that affecting the workplace?

CS Some studies are showing that the health risks of loneliness are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness can reduce immunity, affect sleep, increase levels of anxiety, and increase risk for burnout. Those are some of the health issues.



When it comes to work, people who are lonely report lower job satisfaction, more frequently switch jobs, and have a higher likelihood of quitting their job. So it really is something that all types of businesses would be smart to address right away.

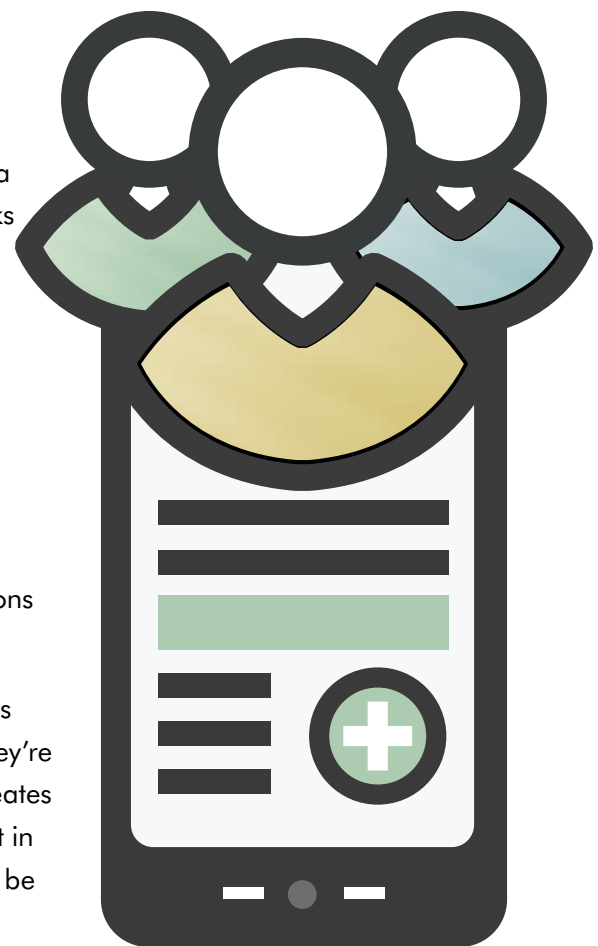
That also affects things like productivity, engagement, and creativity. If a certain group of people are lonely and having a problem connecting into teams, that obviously affects how well people collaborate together and work together as a team.

★ What is Wisdom Labs' approach to combating loneliness in the workplace?

CS Since loneliness stems from a lack of meaningful connections at work, we decided that the best approach would be to create a safe space where employees could voluntarily come together each week. Since stress and burnout are top of mind for most in the workplace, learning and practicing skills to navigate these challenges is a valuable theme and use of employees' time. In doing so, it also creates a natural environment for participants to get to know each other and support each other by creating community around this shared purpose of staying resilient. This is the essence of Wise@Work Communities.

Wise@Work Communities is a peer-led mindfulness program held in your office and facilitated by a member of your team, with support from us at Wisdom Labs. Here's how it actually looks: The Community Leader books a conference room for half an hour per week, every week at a time that works best for the team. They invite their colleagues to come together. They play one of our videos, which includes a science-based lesson around a topic such as self-awareness, emotional fluency, or social connection. Then the group does a short mindfulness practice together around that particular topic. After that, we bring it all together by integrating the learning related to that specific workplace by having a short group discussion. We do regular group video check-ins with Community Leaders to see how they are doing, what came up last week, and prep for what's coming up in the upcoming weeks. We make ourselves available to them if they have questions at any time or if anything comes up around a particular topic.

In addition to the weekly 30 minute group sessions, individual participants have access to our Wise@Work app so they can practice the skills that they're learning in that half hour all throughout the week at their own pace. It creates this wonderful environment where people have an opportunity to connect in person but to also practice on their own. That combination has proven to be really powerful and helpful for people.



It creates an opportunity for people to interact with each other in a real way, for people to bring their whole selves to work, for them to deepen connections with others, and to share stories together. It's a chance for colleagues to realize commonalities and increase empathy and compassion with others. When you put all those things together, the learning and working together, you really get to the heart of combating loneliness at work. It's helping people to not only connect, but to learn the skills that will be helpful to them in the workplace.

Building community in this way is one of the best ways to build new habits and create sustainable behavior change, our approach at Wisdom Labs with all of our products. The Wise@Work Communities participants all have access to the app, and for those organizations who want to create a complete 360 degree environment to support behavior change, we also provide Spaces and Labs. Wise@Work Spaces turn any location into a mindfulness space, and Wise@Work Labs provide in-person training and development on particular topics with our expert faculty.

★ Are your programs science-based?

CS Yes, the way that we start every one of our Communities programs, and also all of our learning programs on our Wise@Work app, is with the science first. It could be about a specific topic such as neuroplasticity and how it works or research around a particular topic related to mental, emotional, or social wellbeing. We always start with science.

We do this not only because we think it's helpful for people to know what the latest science is, but it also really allows me to know what I'm doing and it orients me. So my head, if you will, is satisfied that this is going to be an effective use of my time. And then when we focus in on the practice, that's an opportunity to really do just that, practice.

★ Can you walk me through the types of topics covered in a Wise@Work Communities session?

CS Sure, one example might be the science around fixed mindset and open mindset. In that science-based lesson we'll talk about what the research says, the benefits of each, and follow up with a shared meditation related to that particular topic. Then the discussion might be about examples of fixed mindset or open mindset at that particular company.

Other topics we cover include: Managing stress and overwhelm, building empathy and compassion, self-care, preventing burnout, collaboration and conflict management, integrating mindfulness into various activities of the workday, emotional Intelligence, and compassionate and mindful leadership.



★ What is the most important thing for employers to understand about combating loneliness in the workplace?

C S Loneliness is a serious crisis that's growing, and we're used to throwing digital technology at this problem to try to solve it. However, digital technology is one of the issues creating this problem in the first place.

We're really excited about our Wise@Work Communities program because it's bringing people, real humans, together to learn, practice and connect together. This lets them know that they can bring their whole person to work and that the company values them as whole people, not just as a functional cog in a wheel. Millennials and the upcoming Gen Z workforce care especially about this, and so not only is it good for the person, it's awesome for attraction and retention of talent.

Loneliness can't be solved digitally. While digital solutions can be a great complement to a multi-faceted approach to more social connection, you actually need to come together and create a solution that has this in-person component to it.

In the workplace, that solution also needs to be able to scale. Our Wise@Work Communities clients have found tremendous value in infusing this into the culture and creating connection at work. We're working with companies like LinkedIn, which started with a pilot of two or three communities and a community of leaders in the US and now have scaled globally to teams all around the world. Now they have a network of communities which is strengthening ties within the organization.

We feel heartened that we have something that can connect and get to the root cause of loneliness by bringing people together, but can still scale in a beautiful way globally, now that we've proven that with many different companies. 🦉



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