

Gen Z Employees Are Feeling Disconnected. Here's How Employers Can Help.

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Summary. New research by the mental health organization Sapien Labs shows that half of young people worldwide have experienced mental health decline and a deterioration of their “social self” in the wake of the pandemic. In this article, the author provides concrete... [more](#)

Amidst rising inflation, crippling student debt, unaffordable housing, rounds of layoffs, a lingering pandemic, and a looming recession, many young workers have reached a breaking point.

New data from Sapien Labs' Mental Health Million Project, which surveyed 48,000 young adults age 18–24 across 34 nations, reveals that mental health struggles among younger generations have accelerated and worsened throughout the pandemic. Data published in Sapien Labs' May 2022 Rapid Report, "The Deteriorating Social Self in Younger Generations," shows that nearly half of young adults experienced mental health decline during the pandemic's second year, and that the ability to relate to and interact with others has been seriously impaired in over half of young adults across the world.



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The disintegration of the “social self” in young people should be a wakeup call for workplace leaders. As the report notes:

[T]he ability to relate to and interact with others effectively has been crucial for human cooperation and the building of our modern world...It is also only through repeated interactions with others that we build the friendships and other relationships that establish our place in the social fabric. From feeling detached from reality to avoidance and withdrawal and suicidal thoughts, these symptoms represent the extreme of disconnection from or a failure to integrate into the social fabric.

It is imperative that leaders and managers do more to connect and support young employees in these volatile times, not only as a means of engaging the next generation of talent, but as an

investment in a collaborative future. Here are four commitments your company can make to support an increasingly vulnerable generation.

1. Put mental health front and center

According to LinkedIn, 66% of Gen Z want a company culture built on mental health and wellness. Dr. Emily Anhalt, PsyD, cofounder and chief clinical officer of Coa, the online gym for mental health, told me that leaders must walk the walk — if leadership is not prioritizing their mental health, no one else will either. Wellable Labs' 2022 Employee Wellness Industry Trends Report found that 90% of employers reported increasing their investment in mental health programs, 76% increased investment in stress management and resilience programs, and 71% increased investment in mindfulness and meditation programs.

A culture built on mental health and wellness goes beyond offering a meditation app; it infuses mental health throughout the organization through policies and programs that take care of your people. Dr. Anhalt recommends making sure your benefits plan covers things like therapy, or a stipend for mental health services. She also recommends hosting mental health experiences like Coa's therapist-led emotional fitness class and gathering frequent feedback about what employees need to show up as their healthiest selves.

Putting mental health front and center might look like offering competitive pay (commensurate with rising inflation), paid time off and expanded family leave policies, childcare subsidies and services, elder care support and parent support groups, and additional compensation for ERG and DEI-focused work. It also might mean doing more to address employee burnout and exhaustion: doubling down on flexible work policies, testing a four-day week pilot program, establishing "Friday rest days," "Meeting Free days," and "Do Not Disturb hours," ensuring that employees have more time to rest and recharge.

2. Make onboarding a community-building exercise

Employee onboarding is your opportunity to showcase what a culture of mutual support and well-being looks like to new recruits. In a survey by BambooHR, over 80% of employees who rated their onboarding experience highly continue to hold their organizations in high regard, have higher role clarity, and feel strongly committed to their jobs. For many young employees, onboarding might be their first or second experience ever in a professional setting. It is incredibly important, especially in a remote or hybrid workforce, that onboarding establish a container of mutual support. Onboarding is less about delivering information about your company, and more about allowing new employees to get to know each other and ask questions in a safe and supportive setting. Onboarding isn't the time to talk through a 234-page training manual. Onboarding is a community-building exercise where employees can make a new friend.

Onboarding might involve a shadowing exercise, where new hires shadow a co-worker for a day and see how their colleague actually does their job; a speed-friending exercise, where new hires meet managers across the organization; a personal purpose exercise, where new hires gain a better understanding of their personal goals; or a play exercise like improv, where new hires get comfortable trying new things and laughing in front of each other. One example of an unconventional but highly effective onboarding activity, offered both in-person and virtually, is Late Nite Art: a collaborative learning experience involving live art and music that incorporates risk-taking, deep conversations, and collaborative problem solving. Companies like Headspace, Southwest Airlines, and Accenture have used Late Nite Art to help employees go outside their comfort zone and get to know their colleagues in a meaningful way.

While virtual onboarding can be done successfully, it requires even more attention to designing for human connection. With alarming new data showing young employees' increased

loneliness and deteriorating “social self,” companies should consider the benefits that come from in-person onboarding and the monumental value that a strong first impression can have for Gen Z workers.

3. Support young talent with coaching

According to Glint’s 2021 Employee Well-Being Report, having opportunities to learn and grow is now the number one factor that people say defines an exceptional work environment. An essential tool for learning and development is cross-organization mentorship and sponsorship, which makes it easier for next-gen talent to secure personal and professional development and promotion opportunities.

One successful example is DoorDash’s Elevate Program, a career accelerator designed specifically for women of color. Participants, known as “fellows,” engage in a six-month cohort experience that includes one-on-one coaching sessions with an external executive coach, career workshops, attendance at leadership meetings, and executive sponsor meetings with C-suite members. Within six months of completing the program, 38% of fellows earned promotions, a significant increase compared to their non-Elevate peers. As Gayle Allen and Bie Awah write in Harvard Business Review, a career accelerator program’s success depends on getting genuine buy-in from senior leadership and managers.

Another way to support young talent is peer coaching, “a process in which two colleagues help each other reflect on experiences, offer support, build skills, and match their work to their sense of purpose.” In its 2022 Workforce Purpose Index, the peer coaching platform Imperative found that nearly half (46%) of those surveyed said they are finding it difficult to make work friends, and more than half (57%) said their managers are not helping.

In a peer coaching program with WebMD Health Services, written up in Strategy+business, 150 employees took an assessment to help them discover what gives them a strong sense of purpose.

Peer-coaching platform Imperative then matched people with similar purpose drivers across the organization. The pairs of workers met every two weeks for an hour-long conversation over video with prompts that asked them to engage in deeper conversations regarding their experience and well-being. Imperative's data shows that the overwhelming majority of participants (89%) in such programs develop meaningful connections. According to Andrea Herron, head of people at WebMD Health Services, and Aaron Hurst, CEO and cofounder of Imperative, peer coaching has helped participants build relationships *beyond* their paired peer coach, encouraging participants to take actions that help build relationships with others on their team and employees outside of their own team or department.

4. Trade screen time for connection time

Sapien Labs' report notes that pandemic-era declines in "social self" mirror an acceleration of a trend that began in 2010, and research by psychologist Jean Twenge and her colleagues shows this trend strongly correlates with the growth of smartphone usage and social media.

The implications of these findings are alarming, since the pandemic has ushered in the necessity — and popularity — of remote and hybrid work, requiring more even more screen time for young workers (and workers of all ages). On the one hand, the vast majority of Gen Z employees (77%) prefer flexible work policies; on the other, they miss in-person face-to-face connection and feel like they are missing out on potential mentorship and career development opportunities by not being in physical proximity of their manager or coworkers.

For an example of trying to strike a balance between a flexible work arrangement and in-person connection, see Airbnb's recent announcement that employees can live and work from anywhere (and still be paid the same salary), as well as expect to gather in

person every quarter for about a week at a time. In-person, offline gatherings are critical — especially for new employee onboarding and team retreats. Monthly, quarterly, or annual team retreats at office hubs or offsite locations should prioritize team building and human connection activities over PowerPoint shares and executive strategy presentations.

According to Cigna, employees who say they have colleagues they like eating lunch with, or have a best friend at work, or have more phone calls and in-person conversations with their coworkers are less lonely on the UCLA Loneliness Scale. Leaders should remember the power of picking up the phone and calling their team members (over sending an email, messaging them on Slack, or scheduling yet another Zoom meeting), and whenever possible, make time to see colleagues for coffee, lunch, or a walk. Taking five minutes at start of your weekly team meeting to do a well-being check-in (and listening to how people are doing and what they need) matters. Employees who feel like they can “leave work at work” are seven points less lonely on the UCLA Loneliness Scale. When in doubt, think about ways you can help employees spend less time on their screens and more time connecting face-to-face with their friends, family, and community.

In these overwhelming times, if you want to attract, retain, and engage young workers, and workers across generations, you must put human connection first.

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Adam Smiley Poswolsky is a keynote speaker on fostering belonging and human connection in the workplace. He regularly speaks at Fortune 500 companies and has spoken at Stanford University Graduate School of Business and the Haas School of Business at University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *Friendship in the Age of Loneliness: An Optimist's Guide to Connection* (Hachette, 2021).

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