

Active Social Engagement in Remote Working Environments

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ABSTRACT

Many companies have moved to a Work From Home model, where employees spend little or no time in an office with their peers. This model works well for hiring and retaining talented staff, especially as fewer people are willing to relocate, but can lead to feelings of disconnection and isolation. Gone are the days when we would meet in the break room to catch up with our coworkers over a cup of coffee or enjoy the donuts someone brought to celebrate Friday. These interactions allowed us to see our coworkers as more than just resources, but also as human beings with joys and struggles of their own. Today we use tools like email, Teams, or Slack to communicate, but conversations tend to focus on work, and our coworkers turn into just a pair of hands behind a keyboard. Engaging employees on a social level builds team bonds and personal connections. It helps us to understand each other, and from that understanding comes increased compassion, kindness and collaboration. However, it can be difficult to get people to interact on a more personal level, especially for global teams. Presented here are some benefits and challenges to social engagement for remote workers, as well as methodologies to increase engagement.

INTRODUCTION

As the Work From Home (WFH) model is becoming more prevalent, it brings with it advantages and challenges. Some advantages include being able to hire talented workers without relocation, eliminating daily commute time and increased productivity. There are also challenges, like setting up a home office with equipment and high-speed internet and ensuring that firewalls and other protections are established. Much time, effort and money are spent on these tangible items and companies have policies in place to ensure that their employees have the physical tools necessary for their tasks.

But what about the nontangible items, like personal interaction, team building and “face time” with management and other departments? These non-technical activities that come so easily in an office setting need to be explicitly encouraged when work is moved to a home office.

The social impact of WFH is often overlooked but plays a crucial role in keeping employees engaged and satisfied. Working from home can foster feelings of isolation, disconnection from teams and company culture, and depression. A concerted effort must be made to continually engage employees who work from home.

There are many ways to encourage social engagement, some of which depend on the composition of the team, but many others that do not. Some are simple activities that take a minimal amount of time and effort but have a large impact. Others are more involved to organize and implement, but the results can be amazing!

CURRENT STATUS OF WFH EMPLOYMENT

While Work From Home (WFH) has been in practice for many years in some industries and positions, COVID-19 caused a shift toward remote working when working in an office in close proximity to others was not feasible. This particularly impacted scientific and technical positions, which had a more than 30% increase in remote workers between 2019 and 2021 (Pablonia and Redmond, 2024). While these numbers have decreased slightly as some companies are moving towards a hybrid approach where employees are in the office several days a week and work from home the others, Upwork estimates 36.2 million Americans will work remotely in 2025 (U.S. Career Institute, 2022).

WFH provides many benefits to employees; some people will not consider an opportunity if it does not allow remote work. Others will change jobs looking for more flexibility, with some professionals willing to take a reduction in salary to work remotely.

From an employee's perspective, there are many benefits to working from home, and while these may differ between industries, there are a few that seem to be universal (Figure 1).

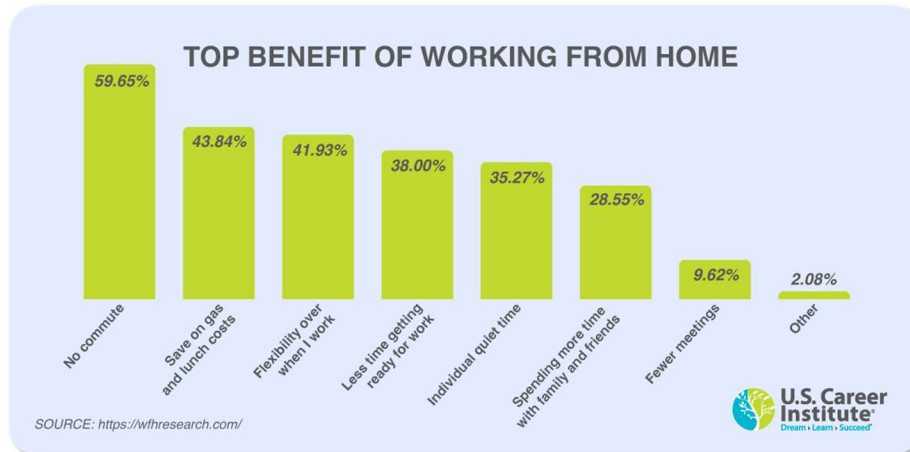


Figure 1. Top Benefits of WFH

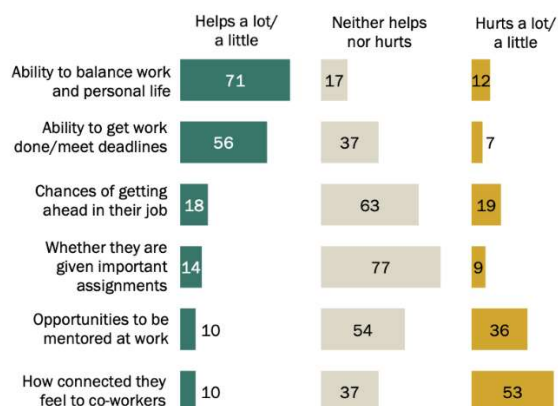
Employees also report improvements in overall health as compared to working in an office. At home, employees can make healthier food choices, work in some work out time, and not lose time commuting, all of which contribute to reduced levels of stress.

CHALLENGES OF WFH ENVIRONMENT

While WFH offers many benefits, it also presents its share of challenges. Some of the challenges employees face are career related – are you getting enough “face time” with your manager, are there opportunities you are missing, can you still move your career forward? In addition to career-related challenges, WFH presents challenges to the ways we work together, specifically when it comes to social interaction. A survey conducted by the PEW Research Center finds that while the top positive change when work from home is implemented is in work-life balance, the biggest loss is connection (Figure 2).

Most teleworkers in the U.S. say working from home helps them balance their work and personal lives

Among employed adults with a teleworkable job who work from home all/most/some of the time, % who say this work arrangement ____ with each of the following



Note: Based on workers who are not self-employed. Adults with a teleworkable job are those who say, for the most part, the responsibilities of their job can be done from home. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. workers conducted Feb. 6-12, 2023.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2. Comparison of In-office vs. WFH Attitudes

Specifically, when it comes to social interaction, a study was performed at Microsoft to assess the impact of WFH on software development teams. In a survey of over 600 software developers asked directly about social interaction, the results clearly indicate that all types of social interaction decreased when work is moved from an office to home (Figure 3).

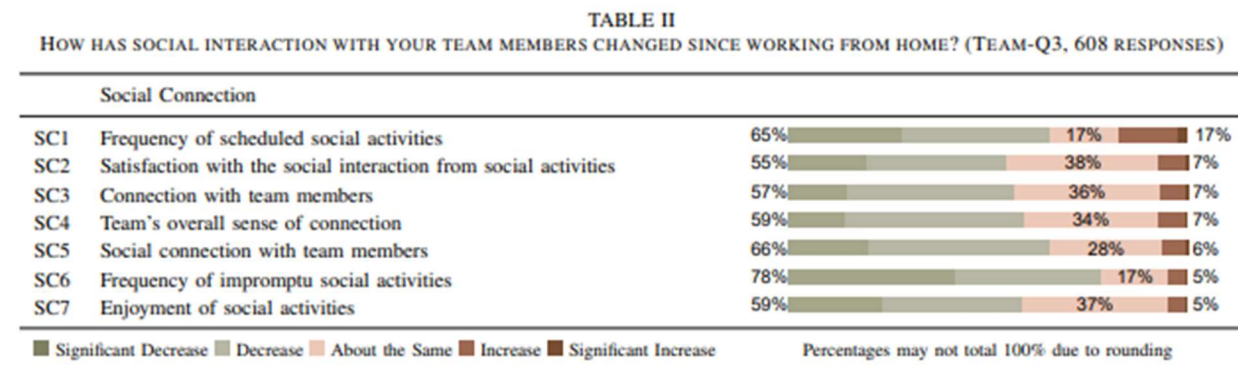


Figure 3. Changes in Social Interaction

LACK OF CONNECTION

Feeling connected can be hard in life in general. Working from home can isolate you from more than your peers. Without going out into the world you may have no opportunities to connect with anyone. Humans are pack animals; we are inherently social and have a strong drive to live in groups. When you are isolated, you are at a higher risk for mental illnesses, like anxiety and depression, as well as physical illnesses, like heart disease and cognitive decline.

Connecting to your teams and peers is critical. You connect over emails to share information. You connect over Teams to send a quick question. You connect in virtual meetings. These connections are important, but tend to be work related, or in a professional context.

But what about personal connections? When you were office-bound, there were opportunities every day to chat with your peers and coworkers, whether it was meeting at the coffee maker for that first jolt of caffeine and talking basketball scores with the others doing the same, having lunch in the break room to talk about everything and nothing, or celebrating birthdays or other important events over a cookie or piece of cake. Your colleagues became your friends. You saw your co-workers every day, and they were part of your life.

LOW MORALE

Merriam-Webster defines MORALE as “the mental and emotional condition (as of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty) of an individual or group with regard to the function or tasks at hand” (Merriam-Webster, 2025). Good morale helps you get through the stressful situations you deal with on a daily basis.

Low morale can be due to a variety of causes. It can be difficult to be enthusiastic if you feel your team is not supportive, or your management doesn't recognize your efforts, or your company is going through changes that may affect your position. Low morale leads to an “it's not my problem” attitude. It erodes loyalty, especially during company changes. If you don't feel as if your company will be loyal to you during changes, you are less likely to stay when a better offer comes along. Low morale is infectious, leading to less successful teams.

FEELINGS OF ISOLATION

Programming is generally a solitary task, even in an office setting. It takes concentration and disruptions to your train of thought can be frustrating. Even if you work in an office, at your desk, with your earphones blasting music and never speaking to anyone during the day, just being among other people gives us a

sense of community. And even if that solitary office worker doesn't intentionally interact with others every day, there will be unintentional interactions to remind them that they are not alone.

When you work from home you don't automatically get these opportunities for interaction. Depending on your situation, you may not interact with anyone face to face at all in the course of a normal day. Your world shrinks to your house, then your office, then your desk. It takes an intentional act to expand that world back to where you feel the connection to your fellow humans.

When you feel isolated at work, it spills over into the rest of your life; if you feel isolated at work, chances are you feel isolated in general. This sense of isolation can trigger depression or anxiety that only gets worse with more isolation.

METHODS TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT

There are many ways to improve engagement within and outside of your teams. It is important to remember that there are different levels of engagement, and engagement can look very different depending on the goal. Creating a strong team will need a different approach than creating bonds outside of the team. For the highest benefit, you need to consider not just connecting with your immediate team but with others outside of your team or department. The more engagement, the more connection you can build, the better the results.

“NICE TO MEET YOU”

“Nice to Meet You” are meetings with random people from outside your specific team. The goal of these meetings is to encourage conversation among people who may not normally interact. These are small group meetings, six or seven people at most so everyone has a chance to speak and share. The first key to success for these meetings is to create a fun atmosphere; good icebreakers include games like “Never Have I Ever” or “Pancakes vs Waffles”.

“Never Have I Ever” is a game where you create a list of activities or experiences and everyone shares where that fits in their world. Some examples of prompts are:

- Never have I ever seen a horror movie
- Never have I ever met a famous person
- Never have I ever ridden a rollercoaster

“Pancakes vs Waffles” is a voting game. You begin with a list of items for comparison. The first two are presented, e.g. pancakes and waffles. The team debates and tries to convince the others that their choice is the best and then everyone votes on which to keep. The majority vote wins and that item is compared to the next item on the list. The items should be of various types: pancakes, waffles, puppies, potatoes, cars, movies, etc. The discussions around whether pizza or puppies are better are hilarious!

Some important things to remember:

- Set the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting – the biggest rule is NO WORK TALK
- Choose prompts/items that will encourage discussion
- Arrange the prompts so the first is something you can speak to, for example, for the rollercoaster prompt, maybe you've had an experience where you went on one, hated it and will never go back, or went to an amusement park and rode all the coasters, or lost your glasses on a ride. This will get the conversation started and set the tone for the meeting
- Reach out gently to anyone who seems shy or intimidated
- Know your audience; in today's global workplace there are many cultures that have different lived experiences. You will have better discussions if you choose prompts that are relevant to everyone. For example, “Show and Tell” is a very American tradition; some of you will remember these as the highlight of younger school days, but it is a foreign concept to those who attended school in India
- Encourage everyone to be on camera. Hearing someone's voice is good, but actually being able to

see them is so much better!

- Follow the meeting with an email thanking everyone for participating; if you can add a detail from the meeting, like 'now we all know that Joe is passionate about comic books' it reinforces the message that everyone is seen and heard and appreciated

“SOCIAL HOUR”

“Social Hour” meetings are exactly what they sound like, a chance to gather and be social, and are effective for larger groups. These simulate the gatherings that occur in an office, gathered in the break room over donuts or a birthday cake. It is a chance for the larger group to connect and get to know each other a bit.

The activities for this type of meeting are not as deep or complicated but need more time for preparation. Two suggestions are “Two Truths and a Lie” or “Name that Person”.

The concept of “Two Truths and a Lie” is for everyone to list three things about themselves, two of which are true, and one a lie, and the rest of the group gets to pick which they think is the lie. The items should be things that the rest of the team may not know, or that make you unique. In order for this to work, everyone has to submit their three items, and they have to be combined into a presentation. Mine might be “I have 7 tattoos”, “I once had a pink dog”, and “I play the violin”. Even if no one guesses correctly, the “pink dog” will certainly start a conversation!

“Name that Person” gives everyone the opportunity to share a favorite picture of themselves and gives the others the chance to correctly guess. This also requires everyone to send the requested pictures and then combining them. It is wonderful to see pictures of your coworkers and be able to put a face to a name. Some variations on this could be pictures from younger days, or a favorite item, or family.

Some important things to remember:

- Prepare early – it takes time for everyone to send the requested information
- Follow up with non-responders – sometimes they just need a bit of extra encouragement
- Set the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting – the biggest rule is NO WORK TALK
- The tone will be set at the start of the meeting – consider having the first picture be of a person you know to be comfortable speaking up

“SPOTLIGHT ON...”

“Spotlight On...” is different from the previous activities in that it is not a meeting, but rather a way to highlight one person in more detail. The idea behind this exercise is to gather various bits of information about work, family, etc., in order to make a single page flyer that is like an introduction. You can make these as specific or as general as fits your team. There are many survey tools available; Microsoft Forms (Display 1) works beautifully. Some great topics that encourage connection:

- “What I do” -- Basic work information, like department, team and role
- “Where I live” – Location, including a description, weather, local attractions
- “About me” – Family, favorite entertainment, favorite foods, hidden talents, passions, life goals
- “Final thoughts” – Piece of advice or favorite quote, one word that describes you best

Where I live:

5. My home location: *

What city, state and country do you live in? What are some distinguishing features (i.e. coast, mountains, deserts)?

Enter your answer

6. Weather near my home:

When you look out your window, what's happening outside? Do you get different weather in different seasons? What is the temperature? Is it sunny, cloudy, hot, cold, rainy, snowy?

Enter your answer

7. Attractions near my home:

What are some places to visit near your home? (e.g. amusement parks, zoos, national parks)

Enter your answer

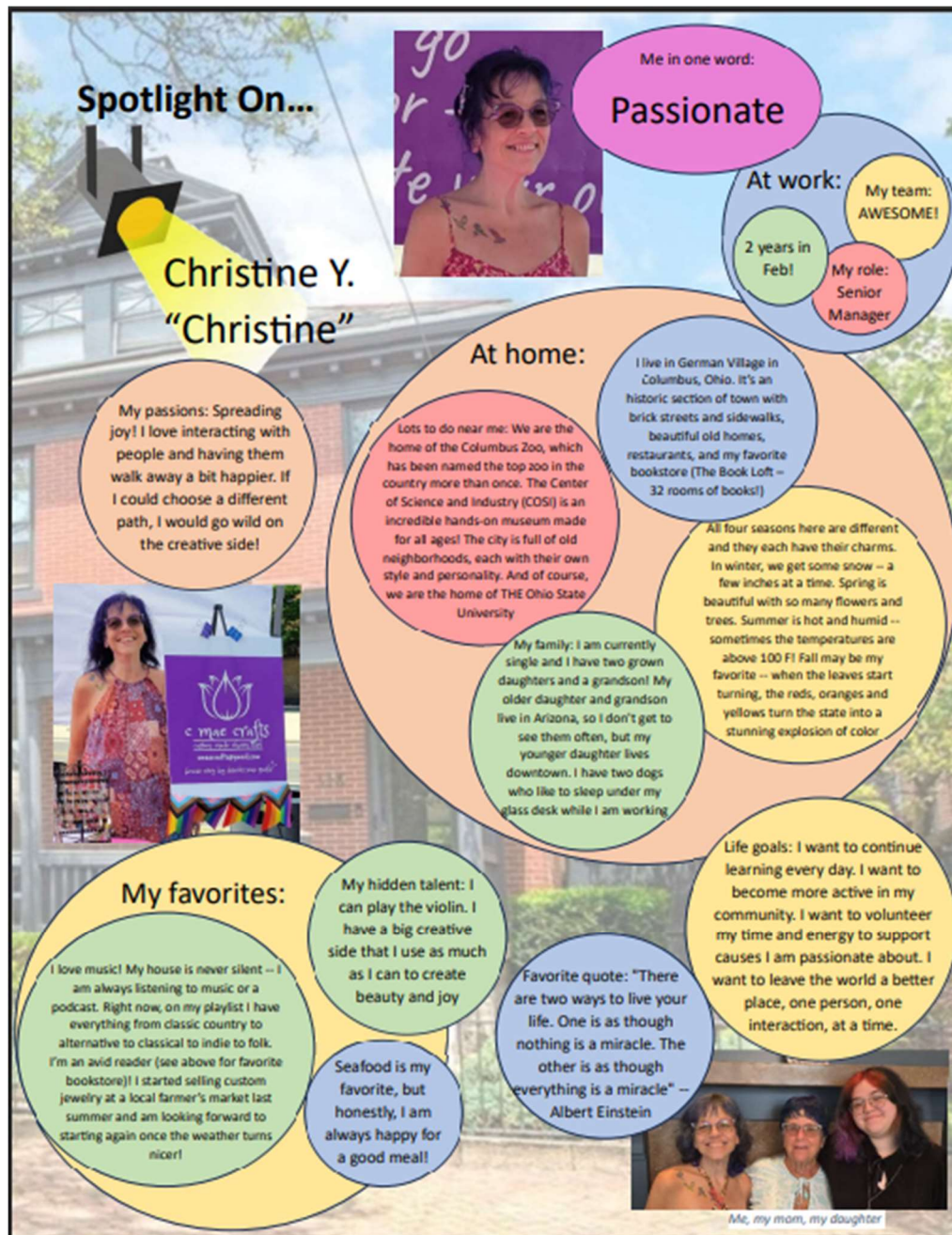
Display 1. Example of “Spotlight On...” Survey

In addition to this, adding a picture makes it even more personal.

Some important things to remember:

- Ask questions that need descriptive answers; don't use yes or no questions!
 - Depending on the size of your group, send only one or two flyers per week
 - Send the invitation to participate to the one or two people you want to highlight; don't send requests to everyone at once or too far in advance
 - Prepare early – it takes time for people to complete the survey and send a picture
 - Have fun with the flyer! It should be more than a list of responses
- Consider creating a flyer for yourself as the first one to be sent out – this gives the team an example

of how to approach completing their survey (Display 2).



Display 2: Example of "Spotlight On..." Flyer

TEAM ACTIVITIES

As well as having meetings and surveys to get to know your team on an individual level, providing team activities encourages a different type of connection. Having a team picnic in an office atmosphere is easy and provides that time to build bonds. Sharing lunch with the person in the next cubicle is a matter of walking to their desk. Remote workers are often scattered throughout the country and world, making the opportunity for in-person gatherings untenable. In this case, providing opportunities for your teams to bond looks different.

Team competitions can be an effective means of encouraging teamwork and can provide other benefits as well. Organizing a team step challenge or concurrent event also contributes to overall health and sense of commonality.

Step challenges are one of the easiest team competitions to organize and track, and as smart watches become more prevalent everyone has a step counter on their wrist. You can use a simple spreadsheet to track progress, with the team members adding their step count at the end of the week. You can establish milestones and send current standings to the teams as encouragement and offer awards for the top teams (and of course, bragging rights). Not only are the teams competing with each other, but within the teams the members will encourage each other and build a sense of team spirit. And every step taken makes you happier and healthier!

Planning concurrent events for the team can also encourage bonding. No matter where the team members are located, choose a time that works for everyone and plan an hour outside. Have a meeting, or not. Take pictures of your outside space to share with the rest of your team, or not. Take some time to appreciate that the rest of your team is sitting under the same sun. Or plan on everyone seeing the same movie and then spend some time talking about it – it provides something common to discuss and build upon.

HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

Holidays are the best days of the year; they are times to gather with family and friends! And while holidays and festivals differ throughout the world, there are commonalities. A feast is a feast no matter what is served, and dancing and singing are customs most everywhere. Even if the holiday is foreign in its meaning, everyone understands sharing food. Even within the same culture everyone celebrates differently as traditions get passed down from generation to generation.

Sharing pictures and traditions gives an insight into other cultures. It is incredible to see a family picture with everyone dressed in their best outfits, smiling at the camera, taking joy in each other and their celebration, or covered in bright powder with smiles on their faces where you can almost hear the laughter in the background.

Great conversations happen when people talk about things that are special to them. And learning about different cultures helps people understand each other better, not only within a team, but also in life outside of work.

Like the “Social Hour” method, everyone needs to send a picture or two, so some advance work is required. Time is also needed to organize the pictures into a presentation. But the effort is certainly worth the reward!

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION

So many ideas... It has to be easy to pick one and implement it, right? Not necessarily. There is a cost to everything, whether it is time or resources, that needs to be considered. Support from upper management is critical in order to get that time and those resources as well as the time the team members need to participate. There also needs to be interest within the team; you can build excitement using creative teaser emails and reaching out directly to the team members who are more reticent. You can also use incentives to help engage the team, whether it be a small gift card, some company swag, or even a certificate and bragging rights.

TIME

Depending on the activity, you will need different amounts of time and effort. Some are easy and quick, like the step challenge. Preparation time is minimal; you will need to set up a tracker in a spreadsheet for everyone to enter their steps and send an exciting email with the rules. Maintenance time is also minimal. You will need an hour per week, maybe, to check the step tracker and send an email with current standings and to call out a few people, like the top walker, or the person who walks over 100,000 steps per week (and yes, this did happen). Add some encouragement, and you're done for the week. At the end of the challenge, it will take a couple of hours to finish up, to finalize the tallies and send the email.

Other activities, such as “Spotlight On...”, “Social Hour” and “Holiday Celebrations” involve more time and effort. These require more preparation, as you need to gather information from team members and then organize it into a flyer or presentation. Sometimes you will need to follow up to encourage someone to complete the survey or send pictures. Using a survey application or templates can reduce the time and effort you will need.

There is more time required from the team members as well. The survey may only take ten minutes for some, while others take an hour to really consider their responses. The meetings themselves are also time the team is not working on their assignments; however, the hour spent in the meeting is well worth the break from assignments.

RESOURCES

This too depends on the activity. Before any activities, you need a resource to define and plan the program. This “Social Engagement Team Lead” gets approval from management, including any prizes or incentives to be given. Once approval is given, the next step is to plan the activities. The better the plan, the easier it will be to implement.

Now come planning the activities themselves. A resource (can be the Team Lead or another team member) is needed for the preparation work. This may be sending surveys or emails for pictures, creating a presentation to use during the meeting or a flyer to send, following up with non-responders, and scheduling.

When it is time for the activity, you will need a resource to lead the meeting. They should be able to engage with the audience, encourage everyone’s participation, and fill dead time as needed (and there will be some).

MANAGEMENT / TEAM BUY-IN

Support from management is crucial. In the end they are the ones that decide if the time and resources are available, and if the team members can take time to participate. It’s even better if management joins and encourages team participation. If you have a “Spotlight On...” introducing the managers it gives the team an opportunity to see into their lives, especially as not everyone has the opportunity to interact with them on a regular basis. And if their picture in the “Social Hour” is particularly silly, even better – it’s great to know the people you work for can be more fun than you ever imagined.

The teams also have to be interested in participating. It can be difficult to convince programmers who went into programming in order to minimize their interaction with others, that these activities are valuable and even more importantly, FUN. You can generate interest and excitement with good marketing, like teaser emails or the promise of prizes. Reach out to the people who aren’t interested; there will be people who do not want to participate, and that’s okay, but there are some who are just a bit frightened, and for these people a little encouragement will often get them to join in the fun. You may also find that after the first activities you will get more interest as teammates share their positive experiences and encourage others to participate!

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

It is important to be aware and sensitive to cultural differences. Some differences are apparent, like different holidays, but some are more subtle. For example, having a prompt of “Never have I ever gotten a tattoo” with an Indian team will fall flat since tattoos are not part of their culture. A better prompt for this team is something like “Never have I ever eaten bitter melon”; this will get plenty of comments, as this is a food that people either love or hate, and everyone has their own recipe.

Different cultures also have different practices and expectations when it comes to speaking up in meetings or sharing personal experiences and information. Be sure to respect boundaries, but sometimes a bit of encouragement goes a long way.

BENEFITS OF INCREASED SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

So, what do you get out of the time and effort you've put into increasing social engagement? Was it worth it? What solid improvements have you seen?

Feeling disconnected from co-workers was the most prevalent downside among remote workers, as shown in Figure 2. All these activities build connections, not only to your direct co-workers, but also to people on other teams and potentially management.

BETTER COLLABORATION

It can be difficult to work as a team when you know nothing about your teammates. There is the fear of judgement – is this a stupid question, or something you should already know? If you reach out for help, will it seem as if you don't know how to do your job? It can feel intimidating.

But what if you knew that while this coworker is an expert in one area, they know nothing about your area of expertise? Your coworker is not an expert in everything, and neither are you, nor is anyone for that matter. Having that bit of information makes it easier for you to ask questions and get past the fear of judgement.

In addition, when your team has diverse skills, and are not afraid to ask questions of each other, they can learn from each other and play off each other's strengths. This kind of collaboration helps teams run smoothly and be more productive. You are also helping your team to grow their skills and providing them the opportunities to move forward in their career.

INCREASED MORALE

If poor morale leads to dissatisfaction in the team, how can increasing connections make a difference? When your team connections are strong, the "we are all in this together" feeling makes you want to do more and better for yourself and your teams. Good morale leads to increased loyalty which reduces the number of people who leave the team. It creates confidence within the team; just knowing someone will have your back if you stumble makes it easier to try. Good morale is infectious and makes you enjoy coming to work and become invested in the work you are doing. And the long days don't seem as long if you are excited about the tasks you are doing and you have a team of enthusiastic supporters.

FEELINGS OF CONNECTION

It is clear that making connections can be hard in daily life, and it is even more difficult in a remote work environment. In the office, you had a chance to get to know your peers; Vijay has two young children, Sally commutes an hour both ways, Juli has six cats, and such. You see them as people, with outside lives that include joy and pain, triumphs and struggles – just like you. So, if Vijay is late, you can sympathize – he had to take his daughter to school and traffic was awful. It's the personal connection – the one that helps you see others as not just a resource, but as a complex person who has so much more to offer than just a pair of hands on a keyboard.

The more you share your life, the more you find you have in common, the easier it is to connect. You can connect over a love of skiing, or movies, or kids, but you may not be aware of your commonalities until you are given the opportunity to interact with others on a personal level. When you start to connect, you start to care; it's hard not to when you really get to know someone.

CONCLUSION

Social engagement can be difficult even in office settings and is even more challenging for remote workers. However, it is a critical part of creating healthier and happier teams, who work collaboratively and support each other.

When you have happy teams, the results are astounding! A happy team will come together and work late to get that deliverable done because they all want to succeed together. They will ask more questions and grow their skills. People will want to be on the team and will not be as tempted to look for other positions. Maybe they will even refer others to the company, noting that you have a great atmosphere of social engagement!

There are many ways to increase engagement; what you implement depends largely on your goal. You can address engagement at a personal level, within a team, outside of the team and even with an entire department or company. You can implement one activity or multiple, although it is best not to have too many activities at once.

Final thoughts and advice:

- Start with one activity, like “Spotlight On...” where team members don’t need to speak to a group
- Adapt as you discover what works and what doesn’t – there is no one-size-fits-all solution
- Encourage team members who may be shy or intimidated
- For activities that are more interactive, choose your first person carefully as they will set the tone for the meeting
- Participate as a team member as well as the lead – people want to know you too!
- Make it fun!
- Whatever you choose to do, be sure to thank everyone who participated!

You will not regret the time and effort you invest in building connections!

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