Hyve

The power of human connections in a post pandemic world

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Why we need to get back to the new normal

Mark Shashoua
Chief Executive Officer,
Hyve

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Humans need connection. And the right connections, with the right people, deliver real impact.

The COVID-19 pandemic turned our lives upside down; the way we worked, networked, socialised and enjoyed family time was upended. Now, as we sit in the wake of this upheaval, I think it's fair to say many people are working through the ramifications and learning how to find balance.

We're passionate about creating game-changing impact for people and businesses, and for us, this is all about harnessing the power of in-person connections. It was something we wanted to dig into further, so we undertook some research of today's working population in the UK. In that, 58%[1] of respondents told us they now socialise less than they did before the pandemic, 52%[1] said they feel lonelier and 54%[1] said they have experienced increased feelings of social anxiety in their professional lives since the pandemic.

We're also proud to have partnered with Professor Barbara J Sahakian from the University of Cambridge's Department of Psychiatry to explore in more detail the role of social interaction in wellbeing, mental health and cognition throughout and following the pandemic.

Humans need connection. And the right connections, with the right people, deliver real impact. What Barbara highlights for us in this report is that the human need for connection and social interaction is hard wired into us. Our brains are designed for interacting with fellow humans and, like the other muscles in our body, if we stop interacting our brain function can deteriorate.

We now have a generation entering the workforce for the first time and encountering hybrid working as the norm, quieter offices as the usual. For them the watercooler moments, the informal networking, friendships and the cross-desk learning by osmosis are far less readily available. We also know there are many more people for whom the shift to remote or hybrid working was a change after ten, twenty, thirty years of work and who may have been sceptical at first but are now reluctant to give that change up.

The rewards of human interactions on workplaces, as Barbara notes in this report, are increased productivity and wellbeing at work. Boosting productivity is something repeated governments and generations of business leaders have grappled with and anything that can support increased productivity must be embraced. In creating a workplace of today, human interaction can't be left to chance.

The challenge of connection is one that shows through in polling too, where over half say they're more energised when they meet with colleagues, friends and family or network in person. Against this backdrop, leaders need to facilitate meaningful moments for teams and cross-industry peers to connect, to come together and energise each other.

In our industry, since the pandemic we've seen a huge rise in the number of teams we have signing up for events. The leaders who've come to the top industry event annually for decades are now bringing their entire teams with them. They recognise they offer a hotbed of learning, networking, and knowledge sharing that's valuable across levels, with an opportunity for teams to connect outside of a hybrid environment in a meaningful way an even greater draw.

At their best, events are platforms for change at which people have opportunity-filled conversations, gather insights from expert speakers and create connections that last well after the event has wrapped up. Combining the professional and the social, they stimulate our brains and create, for businesses, an unmatched return on investment. It's hard to predict the future – and as the pandemic has shown the unexpected and seismic can happen – but our need for connection and the value of networks is something that lasts, and which won't disappear.

For those leading teams, finding, facilitating and fostering moments of valuable connection that meet the needs of the business and the individuals must remain a priority. This report articulates with science what we at Hyve have always known to be true; that we create the most impact when we're together.

1 'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' answer responses combined.

60%[1]

worry about the **negative impacts** the lockdown period had **on their mind and life** longer term.

58%[1]

of respondents say they now **socialise less** than they did before the pandemic

52%[1]

say they have experienced increased **feelings of loneliness** due to the pandemic.

54%[1]

said they have experienced increased feelings of **social anxiety** in their professional lives since the pandemic

36%

say they now **view work as less important** to their life as a whole than they did pre-pandemic.

Just 18%

of respondents say the pandemic has **not changed** the way they approach their professional life.

29%

say remote / hybrid working has made them feel **less connected** to colleagues.

34%

say they now value **interacting with colleagues** on a regular basis in person, such as meetings or from sitting / working next to each other, more than they did pre pandemic.

49%

think **in person meetings** are most effective and build better relationships, with that rising to 61% among workers in Edinburgh, the highest proportion in the UK.

54%[2]

say they're **more energised** when they meet with colleagues, friends and family or network in person.

52%[3]

say the challenges associated with lockdowns and the pandemic (social distancing, remote working, etc.) have made them **more resilient**.

1   'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' answer responses combined.

2   'I feel a lot more energised' and 'I feel somewhat more energised' answer responses combined.

3   'Much more resilient' and 'Slightly more resilient' answer responses combined.

Note:
Polling of 2,012 UK workers aged over 18 who work 3 or more days per week. Fieldwork conducted on behalf of Hyve by Censuswide between the 24th May 2023 and the 31st May 2023. Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct which is based on the ESOMAR principles.

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The evidence from research makes it clear that it is important to return to our usual social activities and interactions, including social gatherings at work, to counteract these negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

With the World Health Organization statement that COVID-19 is now an ongoing health issue and no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern[1], we can look forward to getting back to all the things we enjoyed before the pandemic started. Many of us have been disappointed by cancelled holidays, lack of Christmas parties and networking events, no in-person professional meetings, and the inability to get together on a regular basis with colleagues at work as well as friends at home. From the street parties, community get-togethers and acts of volunteering during the King's Coronation, it is clear that people want to get out and celebrate, contribute to the wider community and meet with friends and family, in addition to socializing with familiar work colleagues as well as meeting new ones in order to widen their social circle.

As humans we are social animals, and our brains are designed for social interaction. For example, social development in the brain occurs as early as 1-5 years of age and continues to develop into early young adulthood[2]. In addition, it is critical for later cognitive development, including language, flexible thinking and problem-solving. Socialising in and out of work is beneficial for our wellbeing, mental health and cognition. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, we have been deprived of the opportunity to engage in the social events that we enjoy and that facilitate many of our social interactions. This has impacted negatively on our mental health and wellbeing[3-5]. We know that in middle aged adults, social isolation impairs cognition and in older adults increases the risk of dementia[6]. Whereas loneliness is associated with depression in both young and older adults[7]. There has also been an increase in mental health symptoms, such as anxiety, in young adults[4]. In addition, in young children, we do not yet understand the long-term impact caused by the pandemic lockdowns and the delayed social interactions.

Professor Barbara J Sahakian
University of Cambridge
Department of Psychiatry

While the use of technology for remote working and social interactions was necessary during these lockdowns, it was by no means ideal. The evidence from research makes it clear that it is important to return to our usual social activities and interactions, including social gatherings at work, to counteract these negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Fun events, particularly with others, from which we gain enjoyment have been shown to enhance wellbeing, learning and also productivity[8-10]. These social interactions are not only beneficial in terms of wellbeing and mental health, but they are also crucial for a flourishing society[11]. For example, work-related networking events facilitate the exchange of knowledge, foster collaboration and promote innovation[12]. Informal knowledge exchange and learning, including with individuals from diverse backgrounds, can lead to cognitive diversity and greater innovation[13-15]. Many business partnerships, academic breakthroughs and advancements have stemmed from social interactions and discussions at networking events and conferences[16].

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Artificial intelligence (AI) is changing the way we work and the nature of jobs. However, it is clear from a study I co-authored that humans are able to be creative, inventive and make complex decisions under uncertainty and currently there is evidence that humans are still better at doing this than AI[17,18]. Humans are able to use the knowledge we acquire throughout life in multiple contexts and situations, whereas AI is still relatively limited in these functions and therefore only able to outperform humans on one specific task, for example Alpha Go[19], rather than a broad range of tasks. This is in part due to the cognitive flexibility[20,21] that humans have, which is subserved by fronto-striatal brain networks[22]. To be creative and inventive, we often rely on others to complete novel ideas or to develop strategies for realising them, as well as to make the novel idea even better than the original idea. Frequently this comes with lively discussions from networking and social events and interactions, rather than structured meetings or email exchanges. This further highlights the important functions of conferences and social networking events, which are not only enormously enjoyable, but also improve wellbeing and are beneficial for the brain and cognition, particularly, problem solving, creative thinking and innovation.

Our brains require social interaction for development, in terms of honing our social skills, such as empathy and the ability to understand other people. In addition, interacting with others promotes activation in social brain areas, as well as providing feelings of wellbeing and enjoyment. Social cognition is developed early in life and continues into adolescence and adulthood[2]. Additionally, it forms the early 'building blocks' for other forms of cognition. Social cognitive skills are not only needed to interact with our friends and family, but also for successfully working in teams. Furthermore, these types of interpersonal skills are needed for a broad range of work activities, including high level negotiations in business or governments, but also in the service industry for promoting a positive experience for customers.

The human brain specifically evolved to support social interactions.

The social brain hypothesis[23] states that the human brain specifically evolved to support social interactions. There is already a lot of evidence in support of the social brain hypothesis. One study[24] mapped the brain regions associated with social interaction in approximately 7,000 people. It showed that brain regions consistently involved in diverse social interactions are strongly linked to networks that support cognition, including the default mode network (which is active during mind wandering and creative thinking), the salience network (which involves selective attention), the subcortical network (involved in memory, emotion and motivation) and the central executive network (involved in emotion regulation)[25]. Similarly, the brain has an entire class of neurons, known as mirror neurons[26], that are activated when an action is performed, but also when someone else performs an action. For example, when someone smiles at us, we are likely to smile back and mirror neurons are involved in this process. Furthermore, we know that there is a two-way street, in the sense that, environment, in this case social interaction between peers, affects the brain and the brain affects the emotional and behavioural responses to peers. The COVID-19 pandemic and specifically the lockdowns significantly restricted our ability to interact socially with others.

Given that the global pandemic lockdowns are unprecedented, we do not fully understand the long-term effects of the lack of peer-to-peer interaction. However, there is some data that suggests that mental health problems significantly increased during the pandemic lockdowns. A systematic review[3] identified 19 studies that examined

mental health symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that the prevalence of a range of mental health symptoms, including stress, depression, anxiety, increased during the pandemic. For example, depressive symptoms were reported in 14.6-48.3% of people during the pandemic, whereas the year before the prevalence was only 3.6-7.2%[3]. These negative effects were also found in undergraduate students, who had significantly increased levels of depression, anxiety and smartphone-addiction[4]. Indeed, the number of students who would be considered to have clinical depression increased from 30 to 44%, and for anxiety increased from 22 to 27%—those students who showed a comorbidity of both depression and anxiety increased from 12 to 21%[4]. A report from the charity Mind, found that one in four adults reported feeling mental health distress for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic[5].

The prevalence of a range of mental health symptoms, including stress, depression, anxiety, increased during the pandemic.

> Since people have not been regularly engaging in social discussion, the use of language and other cognitive processes, such as attention and memory, will be diminished. Activation of the social brain will strengthen and maintain connection.

The lack of social interaction can also lead to problems of social cognition. A study[27] I co-authored last year showed that during emotional face recognition, healthy adults had a reduced positive bias, compared to the normative data collected pre-pandemic. Thereby suggesting that the lockdowns had a negative impact on social cognition. Indeed, social cognition during the COVID-19 pandemic was related to how connected people were during lockdowns. In other words, those who kept in touch with others were less affected[27]. In addition, it is clear

that if an individual is isolated, for example, living alone and not confiding in others, then they may be suffering from chronic stress through relying on only themselves, with no one to help or with whom to discuss their problems. Chronic stress has a major impact on the brain and also on physical health, including the immune system. This may have been particularly severe during the early stages of the pandemic, when there was much uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the disease. Another factor may be 'use it or lose it', since people have not been regularly engaging in social discussion, the use of language and other cognitive processes, such as attention and memory, will be diminished[28]. Activation of the social brain will strengthen and maintain connections in the neural networks involved, in a manner similar to the memory brain circuit, with a neural network which includes the hippocampus. Another study showed that during the pandemic lockdowns social thinking and problem solving were reduced[29]. Importantly, this thought pattern was reinstated when individuals engaged in work. Social isolation has been linked to an increased risk of dementia and loneliness is significantly associated with symptoms of depression[6]. A similar relationship was also found in young adults, where both social isolation and loneliness were associated with depression, but the relationship between loneliness and depression was stronger[7]. In addition, there are several brain regions that were found to be associated with social isolation, particularly the hippocampus and the amygdala[6], which play an important role in social cognition. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns have had some immediate effect on our mental health, cognition and our brains. It is now time to remedy these problems and to establish good mental health and wellbeing and regain our enjoyment at home and at work.

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Social interaction and social relationships play a vital role in our mental health. One study showed that social relationships were key to recovering from mental health disorders[30]. A systematic review showed that social networks, social support systems and emotional support had significant protective effects for developing depression[31]. Although focusing on older adults, a systematic review also showed that social activity, social support and social networks were associated with better cognition[32]. One study actually suggested that social activities outside of the family may have a bigger impact on cognition[33]. Research has shown that having fun experiences are enhanced when engaging in those activities with others, especially with people we know or friends[8]. In addition, fun and enjoyment can lead to better job satisfaction and productivity[9], as well as aid in learning new things[10]. Adult learners and teachers both state that social engagement and interacting with others plays a vital role in learning[10].

> **Returning to work and indeed attending work functions and networking events is beneficial for our mental health and may help to mitigate the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

> **Work and employment have a beneficial role for wellbeing and can even facilitate recovery from mental health disorders ... interventions that focused on increasing the frequency of shared social activities between workers improved wellbeing and also performance at work.**

Studies have also shown that social activities such as volunteering can give a sense of meaning in life, promoting happiness, health and wellbeing. Individuals, particularly older adults, who volunteer regularly also have greater life satisfaction and reduced depression and anxiety[34]. In addition, kindness, altruism and empathy can affect the brain. One study showed that making a charitable donation activated the brain's reward system, including the ventral tegmental area, in a similar way to actually receiving money oneself[35].

A systematic review showed that work and employment have a beneficial role for wellbeing and can even facilitate recovery from mental health disorders[36]. Another systematic review examined interventions to increase wellbeing in the workplace and they reported that interventions that focused on increasing the frequency of shared social activities between workers improved wellbeing and also performance at work[37]. Similarly, a report by the World Health Organization also acknowledges the fact that work can promote an employee's wellbeing[38]. They specifically pointed out that carrying out activities and events in the workplace are particularly good for promoting wellbeing. This highlights the fact that returning to work and indeed attending work functions and networking events is beneficial for our mental health and may help to mitigate the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, getting back together with our friends and our colleagues is not only about having fun, it's also vital for our mental wellbeing. After a period of unprecedented mental health challenges for so many and with clear evidence of the benefits of social interaction, from improved brain function and cognition, such as enhanced problem solving, the importance of socialising and interacting together in person should not be overlooked. Getting back to some of our pre-covid social and work habits is a really enjoyable way to spend our time and, critically, it can improve wellbeing.

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Get in touch

Nikki Griffiths
Group Communications & ESG Director
nikki.griffiths@hyve.group