

CASE STUDY

Social Connection and Allianz
Australia Insurance Ltd



Allianz contacted Swinburne and Australian Red Cross in May 2020 because we are working on practical, evidence-based methods to help people to connect with each other. Allianz were interested in opportunities to tap into existing research to 'boost' social connection thinking and activities within its flexible working policy and in light of staff working from home during COVID 19.

Following some initial discussions, Allianz teamed up with Swinburne Social Innovation Research Institute (SIRI) and Decade of Action's Ebony Gaylor (formerly Head of Community Mobilisation at Australian Red Cross) to lean into SIRI and Red Cross research about Social Connection. The aim was to use evidence about social connection to codesign - with Allianz staff and leaders - to generate knowledge and tools relevant to Allianz culture and existing policies that would support Allianz employees to maintain and enhance their connectedness with each other and with the company, especially during COVID.

Being connected has the important outcomes of generating feelings of belonging, giving ready access to other people for help, knowledge and support and brings physiological and psychological benefits, including from release of 'happiness hormones' such as serotonin and dopamine^{1,2,3}.

Regarding work and workplaces, there is considerable evidence that social connection is a significant factor contributing to employee wellbeing and is associated with higher productivity, creativity and job satisfaction, and with lower absenteeism and staff turnover^{4,5,6}.

What did we do?

- Scoped relevant evidence and theory about social connection and work/workplaces.
- Presented materials to a group of Allianz leaders, plus key Innovation and Human Resources leaders.
- Generated discussion about what Allianz staff had done to stay connected during COVID working at home.
- Used this material to codesign a pack for Allianz training and as an ongoing knowledge resource.

What interesting things did we find?

Allianz leaders we spoke with were concerned about social connection. This was partly due to heightened discussion of social isolation in the media during COVID 19, but leaders had thought about the significance of social connection even before the pandemic; for example, one leader who generally worked remotely discussed how she would really boost social interaction on the occasions when she was at one or more workplaces - using all opportunities for incidental meeting, striking up new conversations with people in the lift, etc. During the pandemic, people leaders had heightened awareness of supporting staff to keep connected and were on a constant level of alert to be doing enough and to have strategies that fit with different team members and their circumstances.

Leaders were interested in social connection because they were aware of its relevance to ongoing wellbeing of staff and productivity. However, more strongly - there was a discussion that while attending to social connection had previously been something that 'just happened' relatively passively, during COVID it became an aspect of work that had to be actively built into leadership. People leaders had to actively find time during their workdays and weeks to attend to team members as individuals and the team as a whole, identifying the right set of activities to keep people connected. Considerable innovation took place as managers and their teams tried out ideas and initiatives for keeping connected.

During a facilitated session, Allianz staff were able to link back the initiatives they created to principles about social connection from evidence and theory, such as:

- Including everyone to make them feel they belong and build their identity as an important part of the team.
- Reinforcing work identity by meeting in small, larger and individual regular meetings with teams and individuals.
- Doing small acts of kindness such as support over the phone or offering help.
- Having chat and banter as well as 'serious work talk' because informal banter is significant to building team identity, connection and belonging.

Feedback from facilitated sessions involved a knowledge pack and tools for social connection.

What key issues emerged?

Some key issues emerged from discussions that link social connection into other ongoing issues for remote and flexible working.

1. Remote working throws out 'normal' routines at work and there was a need to: a) establish what is acceptable within the team (how much flex?, can I take time out for a walk during the day? Do I need to be always available? Can I have times of solitude and concentration?); and b) structure days, weeks and months so that people felt in control of their work/leisure, could signal their availability/ unavailability to colleagues and build in for different types of social connection.
2. Building in and allowing time for banter and social chat into start and end of work meetings or having casual team socials is important for keeping up connection beyond work issues only.
3. There was benefit from thinking about the different 'kinds' of work time that need to be built in, including social time, solitude time, phone time, online time and so on. Building in days and times that were online-meeting-free was important to wellbeing. That is, it is important to have both concentrating/work/solitude time; and connection time. These distinctions can make social connection time even more significant and useful.
4. When staff could meet up, really using this time effectively to socially interact is significant (along the lines of recent research on 'bursty communication'⁷).
5. It is difficult to build in for connecting in new people

and for incidental meeting, though not impossible and different managers had built in initiatives such as mentoring for new people and organising cross-team socials.

6. Leaders needed to build in a discourse that social connection is important, valued and valuable and part of work. It is not a frivolity or indulgence. Indeed, it is a new capability required of leaders to understand how to keep their team connected, and to implement appropriate measures.
7. Leaders and team members need to build in for social connection, making it a part of the schedule rather than the more random events it was in the past.

Conclusions and what happens next?

There have been lots of anecdotal pieces about connection/disconnection and isolation during the pandemic, but they tend to be speculative or ad hoc and do not compare 'single case observations' with the evidence base. There is considerable, though dispersed, knowledge that can inform about how to harness social connection to boost corporate productivity, but we have not found any evidence internationally where corporations purposefully harness social connection theory and evidence to enhance worker wellbeing, while supporting productivity. Consequently, Allianz are to be commended on their innovative initiative to unite evidence with staff experiences to design an approach to social connection at work that fits with Alliance culture, existing policy and ways of working.

While a new pack of materials has been produced for Allianz, its impact remains unevaluated so we cannot, at this time, state what impact – if any – it made, and if it meets needs or changes behaviour and thinking.

Social connection is a vital but overlooked issue in and for the workplace. As with much that seems innately human, it is taken for granted during 'normal' times, but comes sharply to the fore during crises that isolate team members from each other.

There is some strong theory and evidence that can help work teams to be more socially connected and a larger, robust version of the work that we undertook with Allianz would be valuable to codesign, implement and test the power of social connection on worker wellbeing, identity and productivity.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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