Best (work) friends: Weighing the worth of workplace besties - HR Magazine

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Executive Summary

This article, published in HR Magazine's November/December 2025 edition, addresses the growing crisis of workplace loneliness and its implications for employee engagement, productivity, and retention. The central argument is that organisations have systematically eroded informal human connection through remote and hybrid work, hyper-productivity cultures, and digital communication tools, creating measurable business costs. Key evidence includes KPMG's Friends at Work 2.0 survey, which found 45% of employees report feeling isolated at least some of the time — up from approximately 25% the previous year — and that 87% of respondents considered friendship-enabling cultures critical to their decision to stay. A Harvard Business Review report is cited linking loneliness to costs of up to $154 billion annually for US companies. The article presents practitioner case studies from Trafalgar House and Fluent Commerce, illustrating embedded approaches to building connection — including structured check-ins, new joiner buddy systems, and social belonging metrics. The conclusion drawn is that retention strategies of the future will require connection to be designed into core employee lifecycle processes rather than treated as a supplementary wellbeing programme.

Key Insights

1. KPMG's Friends at Work 2.0 survey found 45% of employees feel isolated at work at least some of the time, a significant increase from approximately 25% the prior year.
2. A distinction is drawn between 'strong-tie' relationships (inner circle support networks) and 'weak-tie' relationships (cross-departmental acquaintances), with both considered necessary for organisational health and individual wellbeing.
3. Workplace loneliness is framed not merely as a wellbeing concern but as a systemic business risk, linked to burnout, declining productivity, and attrition — with cited costs of up to $154 billion annually for US companies.

Practical Takeaways

- Fluent Commerce's approach of embedding social connection into structured work events — such as a Global AI Innovation Day combining cross-team collaboration with skills development — is presented as more effective than performative social events like virtual happy hours.
- Trafalgar House's model of integrating connection into existing work rhythms (team meeting check-ins, manager coaching, new joiner buddy systems) rather than adding standalone social programmes is presented as a replicable organisational practice.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article draws on a named, recent proprietary survey (KPMG Friends at Work 2.0) and a Harvard Business Review report, lending some empirical grounding. Multiple practitioner voices from different industries add breadth. The strong-tie/weak-tie distinction reflects established sociological theory, though it is not attributed to its academic origins. Limitations: The article is primarily composed of quoted opinions from HR practitioners and consultants, without independent verification of the claims made. The $154 billion cost figure is cited from a Harvard Business Review report without methodological detail, making it difficult to assess reliability. Jonathan Thorp's affiliation as CEO of a 'workplace connection consultancy' introduces potential commercial bias, as does the inclusion of an HR software provider (HiBob) spokesperson. The article does not present counterarguments or acknowledge any risks associated with over-engineering social connection in the workplace. The jump in isolation figures (25% to 45%) is striking and warrants scrutiny — the KPMG survey methodology and sample size are not described. Overall, the piece reads as advocacy journalism dressed in data.

Organizational Practice

Trafalgar House (pensions administrator) embeds connection into team meeting structures through personal check-ins, coaches managers in active listening, and pairs new joiners with informal buddies from day one. Fluent Commerce (order management system provider) replaced virtual social events with a Global AI Innovation Day — a 24-hour cross-team product development challenge — and tracks social belonging through a wellbeing and engagement heatmap designed to identify low-belonging pockets correlated with attrition risk.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader directional shift in how organisations are framing retention risk — moving from compensation-centric models toward relational and belonging-based factors as primary drivers of employee commitment. The use of social belonging metrics and attrition prediction through engagement heatmaps indicates an emerging practice of quantifying culture investment for ROI purposes. The framing of connection as an infrastructure problem rather than a programme problem suggests that performance management systems may increasingly be evaluated on their capacity to surface relational health data alongside traditional productivity indicators.

Validation Status: passed
