

THE NEXT PANDEMIC:

# Loneliness and the Power of Casual Collisions

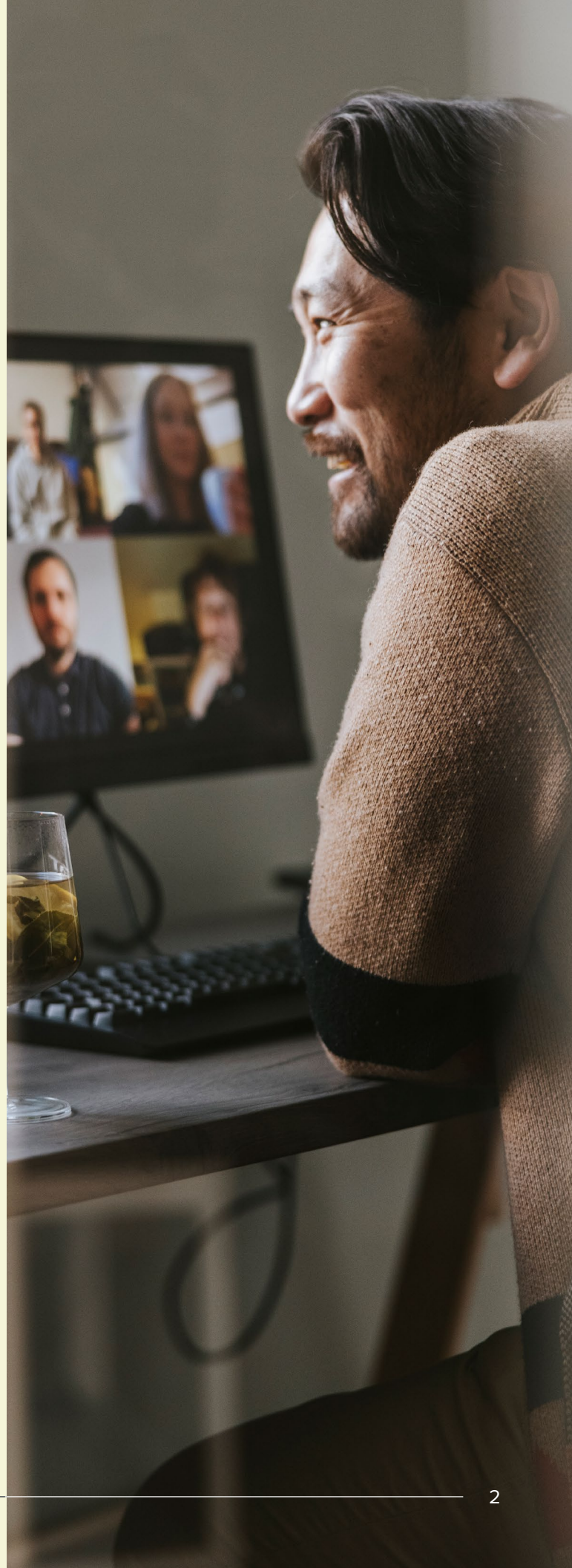
75<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
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# Background

The sudden explosion of COVID-19 in early 2020 turned life upside down almost overnight. Lockdowns induced forced isolation, and employees transformed into either remote workers or essential, front-line workers at high risk of exposure to the coronavirus. As offices have reopened, remote work has been heralded as one positive outcome of the pandemic and as a solution to some of the ailments of Americans' fast-paced lifestyles. While technologies such as videoconferencing and instant messaging have supported productivity, the reduction in unscheduled social interactions has the potential to harm employee well-being and engagement.

While remote work can improve job satisfaction, it can also contribute to feelings of isolation, which in turn can lead to more serious conditions. Employees who are [chronically lonely in the workplace](#) receive poorer supervisor ratings of their job performance and have weaker feelings of emotional commitment to their employer. Ironically, although these employees crave social interaction, they also tend to distance themselves from co-workers, potentially undercutting workgroup collaboration. In addition, they miss an average of [15 more days of work](#) per year than their nonlonely co-workers. Given these potential implications for the workplace, SHRM Research sought to explore the prevalence of employee loneliness and the importance of social interactions from the perspectives of both HR professionals and U.S. workers.







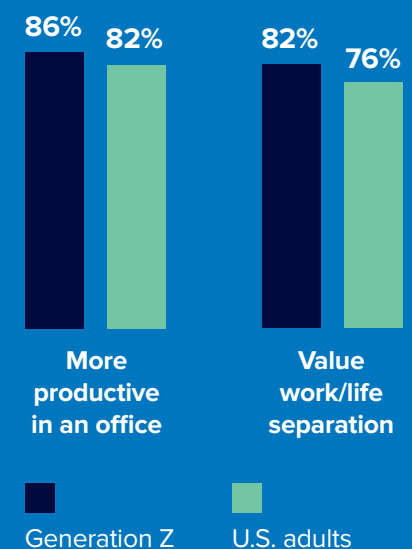
# A Changed Workplace

There is a common perception of a permanent restructuring of the workplace in the wake of the pandemic. Findings from SHRM's current study bear out these reports. Both HR professionals and U.S. workers reported similar degrees of change between December 2019 and December 2022. Whereas around 9 in 10 workplaces were almost entirely in-person before the pandemic, some 7 in 10 are now. Paralleling this decline are increases in the percentage of employers whose workers are permanently hybrid or remote. These shifts have potential implications for the nature of interactions among co-workers.

A recent [Morning Consult report](#) suggested other implications as well. While **63%** of workers in that study currently work in person, only **46%** agreed this is their preferred work location, suggesting a sizable percentage of onsite workers want more work flexibility than their employers provide. Employees' biggest reasons for preferring onsite work were being more productive in the office and maintaining greater separation between their work and personal lives.

## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Overall, Generation Z workers have the strongest preference for onsite work: **86%** say they are more productive in an office, and **82%** said they value work/life separation. For all U.S. adults combined, these figures are **82%** and **76%**, respectively.



# Diverging Perspectives on Work/Life Fulfillment

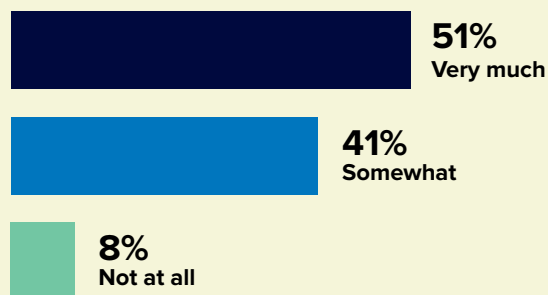
The abrupt transition in 2020 away from “business as usual” led many employees to rethink how to best balance their work and personal lives. A 2022 [Microsoft study](#) found that nearly half of employees had decided to prioritize their personal lives over their professional lives. Employers and employees alike are renegotiating when, where and how work gets done.

SHRM data suggests a divergence in the perspectives of HR professionals and workers. In terms of the characteristics of their workplaces today, **51%** of HR professionals report that their employer very much encourages employees to sustain work/life balance. And **44%** believe that a healthy work/life balance is somewhat or far more common among their workforce today than it was at the end of 2019.

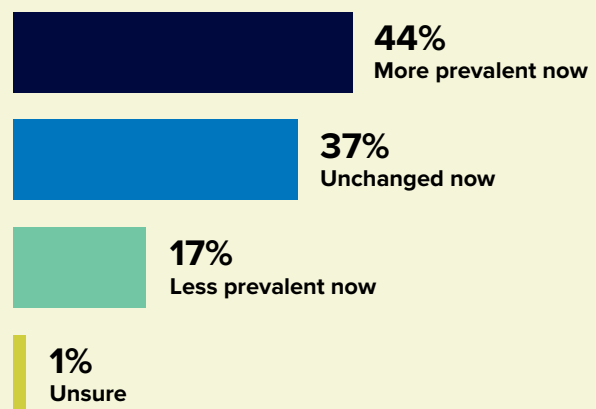


## ***HR professionals:***

### *Employer supports work/life balance in 2022*



### *Prevalence of work/life balance among their workforce, 2022 vs. 2019\**

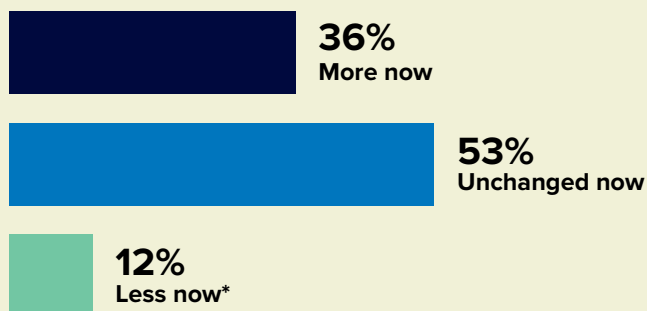


\*“Less prevalent now” % is the sum of “slightly less prevalent now” and “much less prevalent now” responses. “More prevalent now” % is the sum of “slightly more prevalent now” and “much more prevalent now” responses.

Yet, a significant percentage of workers are not feeling the support. When asked whether, compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, they feel employees are more often encouraged to sustain a healthy work/life balance, about half say the situation has not changed; a little more than a third have seen some or much improvement. When asked whether their work/life balance has improved over the past three years, **70%** of workers agree this is at least somewhat true of their career. Different segments of the workforce have differing experiences in this regard.

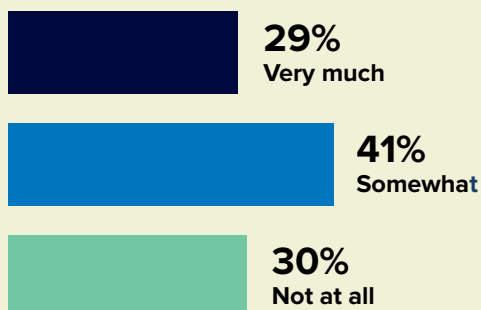
### US workers:

*My employer encourages work/life balance, 2022 vs. 2019*



\*"Less now" % is the sum of "slightly less prevalent now" and "much less prevalent now" responses. "More now" % is the sum of "slightly more prevalent now" and "much more prevalent now" responses.

*Better work/life balance describes my career over the last three years*



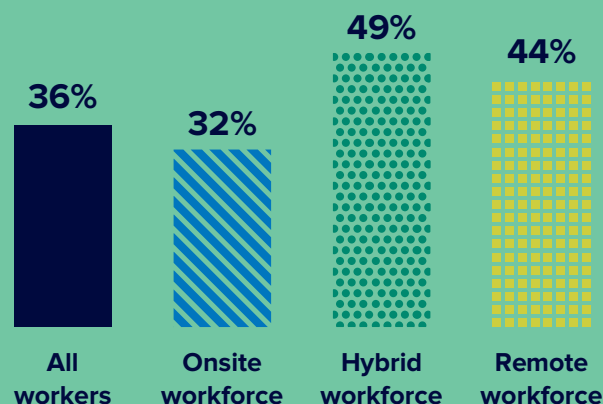
## WORKSITE DIFFERENCES



The difference between workforces that are almost all hybrid or remote versus those that are onsite at a workplace is notable. Employees whose employers operate in an almost entirely remote or hybrid work model more closely match the 44% of HR professionals who agree that their organizations have become more supportive of work/life balance.

### US workers by work location:

*My employer encourages work/life balance more now, 2022 vs. 2019*



## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES



Also important to recognize are generational differences in the workforce, revealed in 2023 SHRM State of Mental Health data. More Generation Z and Millennial workers (those born after 1980) consider work/life harmony important to their mental health (**21%** versus **18%** for all workers). Generation Z workers (born after 1996) are also more likely than average to report that balancing conflicting work and home demands causes them stress (**28%** versus **23%** for all workers).

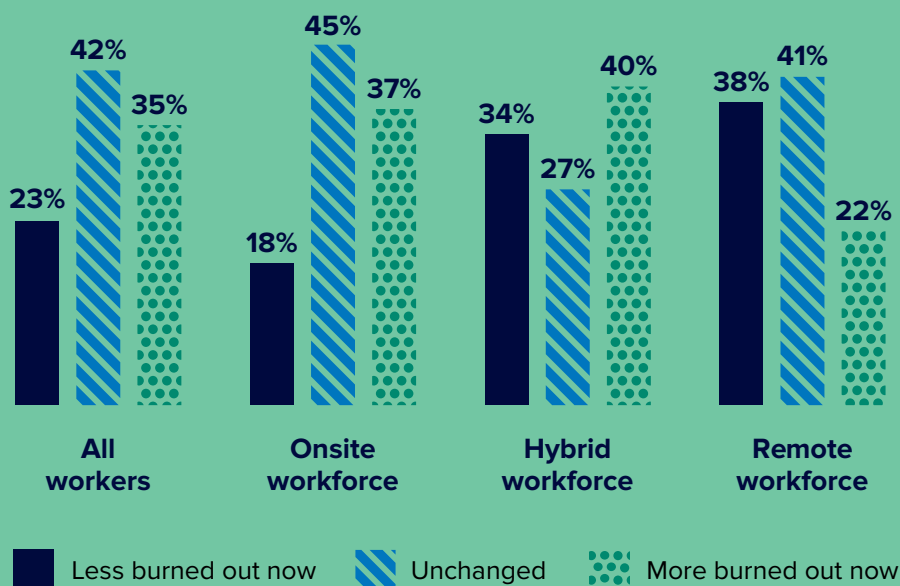
# Burnout Still Present

Another consequence of the pandemic was increased stress due to factors such as disruptions in child care and schooling, greater caregiving responsibilities, and infection or fear of infection with the coronavirus. Specific to the employment context is [burnout](#), in which difficulty managing ongoing work stress leads to feelings of exhaustion, greater mental distance from or negativity toward one's job, and reduced effectiveness at work.

Overall, more than one-third of employees report feeling greater burnout from their work today compared to three years ago. Additionally, SHRM data suggests that burnout rates are fairly consistent across generations, with **35%** of all workers versus **36%** of Millennial and Generation Z workers reporting burnout. This sizable minority is more than sufficient to negatively affect workplace climate.



**US workers by work location:**  
*Change in burnout, 2022 vs. 2019*



## WORKSITE DIFFERENCES

Again, there are clear differences by workplace type. Remote and hybrid workforces are around twice as likely as onsite workforces to agree they are less burned out now than they were before the pandemic. Plus, remote employees in particular are much less likely to report feeling greater burnout now.





# Varying Perceptions of Employee Engagement

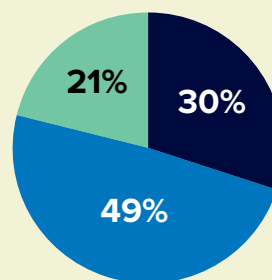
Engagement is often described as employees' feelings of being immersed in or inspired by their work. About 1 in 3 HR professionals agrees that their workforce overall is somewhat or much less engaged now than before the pandemic. This finding aligns with the idea that **35%** of employees are burned out.

Yet, when SHRM asked workers about their feelings, **86%** reported feeling at least as engaged as they were in 2019. Asking the question the other way around—that is, how disengagement has changed—yielded similar results. Nearly 8 in 10 workers feel disengagement has either stayed the same or improved.

In addition, **80%** of HR professionals said they believe the workforce is as productive or more productive today compared to before the pandemic. Meanwhile, **86%** of workers say their performance evaluations have stayed the same or improved over the past three years.

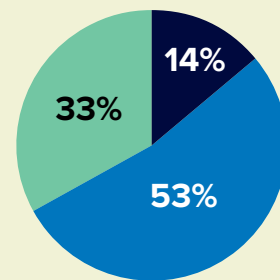
## ***HR professionals and US workers:*** *Perceptions of workforce engagement,* *2022 vs. 2019*

### **HR professionals**



■ Less often engaged now

### **US workers**



■ More often engaged now

Productivity and high job performance are not characteristics of employees who are less effective at work due to burnout. In sum, SHRM data suggests workers are certainly feeling stressed, but it is not clear they have reached a level that is affecting their work performance. Perhaps employees are simply frustrated that their work may leave them too tired to enjoy leisure pursuits in their personal lives. According to 2023 SHRM State of Mental Health data, virtually half of U.S. workers (**47%**) report they lack energy for leisure activities after work.



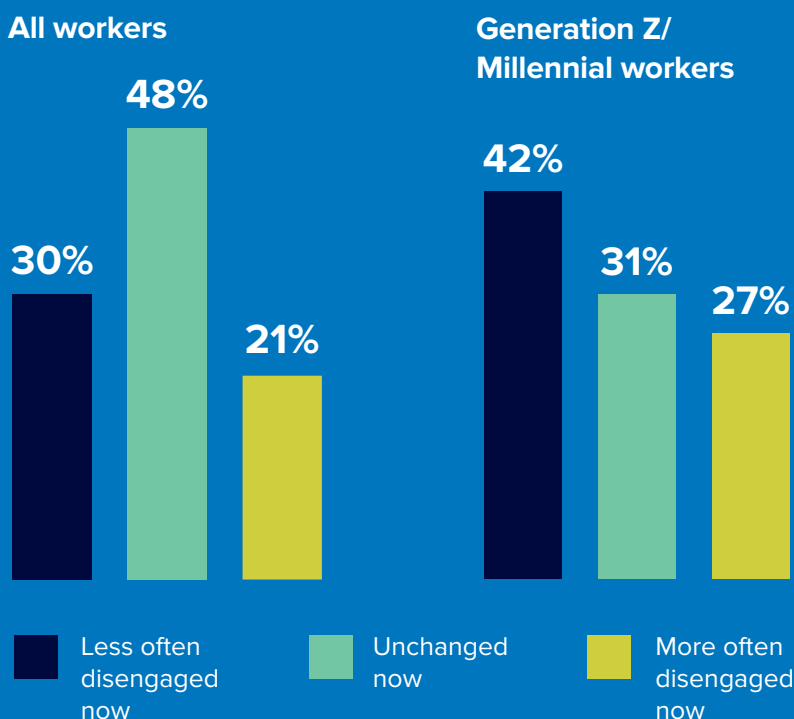
## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Signaling a possible generational divide, unpublished SHRM State of Mental Health data shows that today, **19%** of the overall workforce reports being disengaged at least weekly, compared to **30%** of Generation Z and **26%** of Millennial workers.

Supporting this apparent divide, the current study suggests these younger workers are significantly more likely than the overall workforce to say they are less often disengaged now than in 2019. Also, perhaps related to their challenges with work/life balance, Generation Z (**63%**) and Millennial (**54%**) workers are most likely to report lacking energy for after-work activities (SHRM State of Mental Health data, 2023).

### US workers by generation:

*Frequency of feeling disengaged at work, 2022 vs. 2019*





# Cohesion, Loneliness and Isolation Among Workers

Having sketched out trends in workplace mental health since before the pandemic, let's turn now to the connections that bind a workforce together—or the lack thereof. Taken together, notions of loneliness, disconnection from co-workers and isolation sketch an image of workplace discord. It is reasonable to ask how the move toward more remote work may have reduced emotional connections among co-workers. Overall, HR professionals are more likely than workers to perceive that the pandemic has disrupted connections among co-workers.

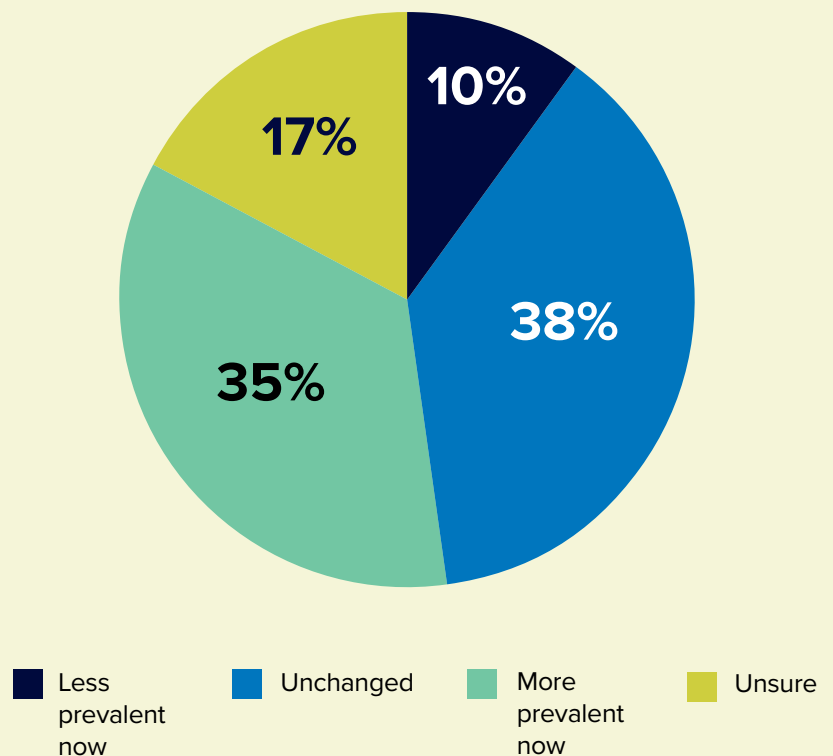
## Loneliness

Very simply, loneliness is emotional distress due to having fewer social connections than one wishes to have. When HR professionals were asked how common loneliness is among their workforce, slightly more than one-third (**35%**) feel it is more common now than it was before the pandemic.

Workers were asked specifically whether they felt more or less lonely *at work*. Almost 8 in 10 say they feel no lonelier at work now compared to three years ago. Importantly, there are no significant differences in reports of loneliness between onsite versus remote workforces.

### **HR professionals:**

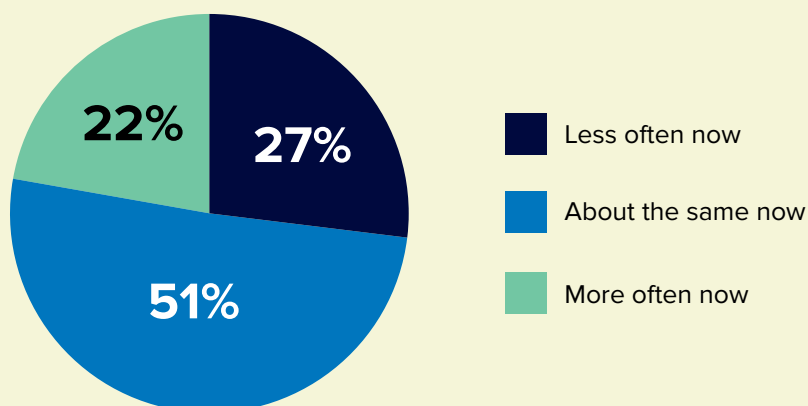
*Prevalence of loneliness among workers, 2022 vs. 2019*





These findings must be interpreted in the context of estimates that [56% of U.S. adults ages 50-80 felt lonely in 2019](#), up from **27%** in 2018. The good news is that the “loneliness pandemic” apparently peaked in 2020 and actually stabilized during the COVID-19 crisis. SHRM’s 2023 State of Mental Health data generally corroborates the view that the prevalence of loneliness has leveled off. But **38%** of all workers still say they are sometimes (about monthly) lonely on the job (unpublished SHRM State of Mental Health data, 2023).

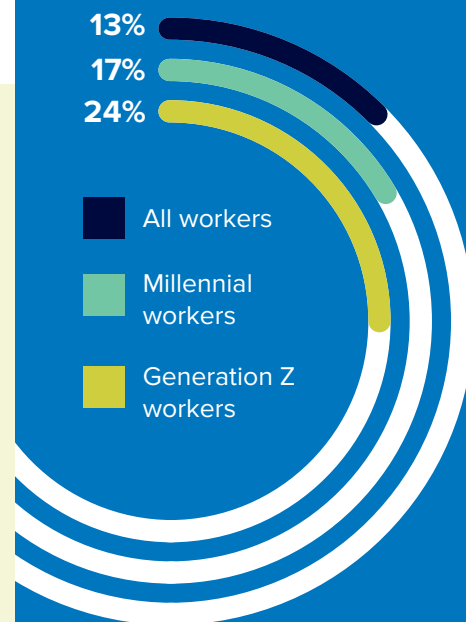
**US workers:**  
*I feel lonely at work, 2022 vs. 2019*



## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Other SHRM data does suggest a strong generational difference at the present time. Generation Z and Millennial employees are most likely to report feeling lonely at work on at least a weekly basis (unpublished SHRM State of Mental Health data, 2023). When workplace loneliness becomes chronic, it diminishes performance and commitment.

**US workers by generation:**  
*Feeling lonely at least weekly, 2023*



# Isolation vs. disconnection

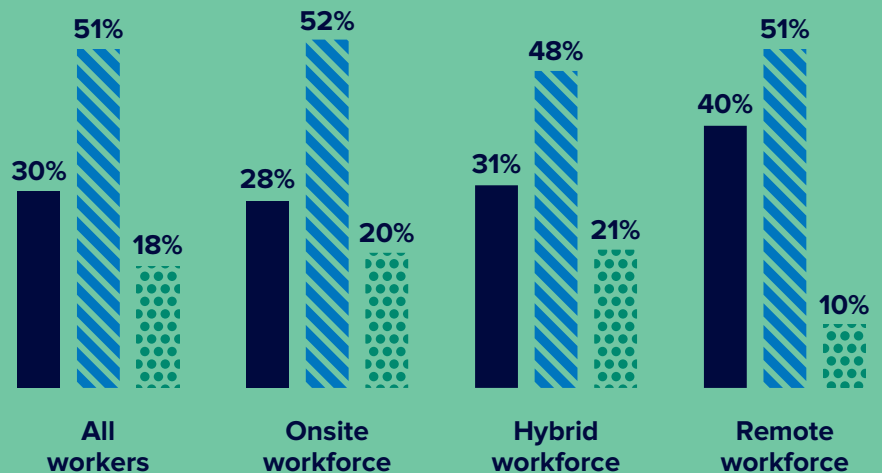
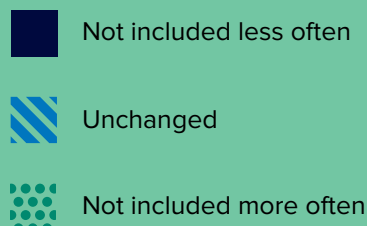
Loneliness can stem from both isolation and disconnection, so it is important to understand and address both factors in efforts to alleviate feelings of loneliness. Reports of isolation paint a mixed picture depending on generation and work location. Overall, **80%** of workers say they participate in team events with their workgroup at least as often now as they did in 2019.



## WORKSITE DIFFERENCES

Compared to onsite workforces (**24%**), remote workforces (**35%**) are significantly more likely to report that their isolation from co-workers has increased. However, they are *not* more likely to believe they are *disconnected* from work colleagues or are not included in important work conversations. In fact, they are significantly *less* likely to feel they are not included in their workgroup. Perhaps for remote workers, the sphere of work interaction is shrinking toward the level of the workgroup, creating a potential risk of silo development.

**US workers by work location:**  
*I feel I am not included in my workgroup, 2022 vs. 2019*



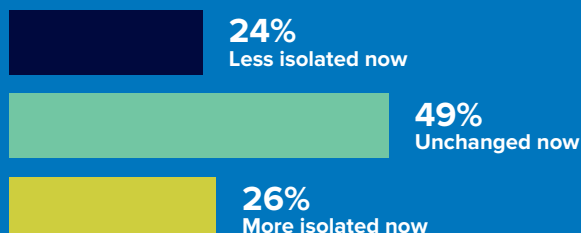
## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Millennial and Generation Z workers are less likely than the overall workforce to report feeling isolated from co-workers in 2022 compared to three years earlier.

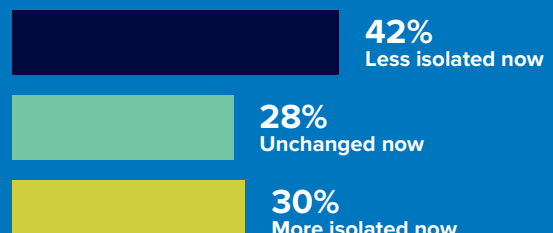


**US workers by generation:** *Feeling isolated at work, 2022 vs. 2019*

### All workers



### Generation Z/Millennial workers



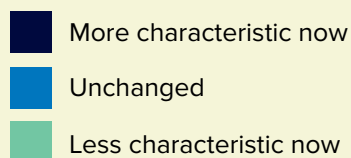
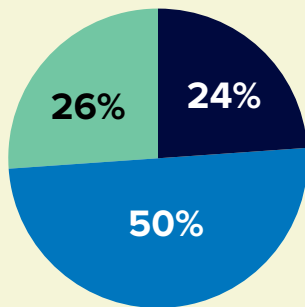


# Collaboration Among Co-Workers

High levels of collaboration have been associated with several positive outcomes in the workplace, including better problem-solving and greater productivity within workgroups. About one-quarter of HR professionals believe that high levels of collaboration have become more characteristic of their workplaces over the course of the pandemic. The same percentage of workers (**24%**) report a higher level of collaboration now, while the majority of workers (**62%**) believe collaboration levels have remained unchanged.

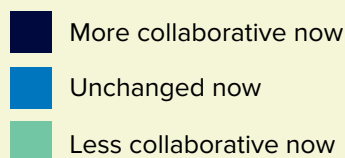
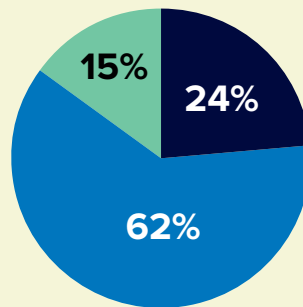
## **HR professionals:**

*High levels of collaboration are characteristic of the workforce, 2022 vs. 2019*



## **US workers:**

*I work in a collaborative environment, 2022 vs. 2019*



Interestingly, although **65%** of HR professionals state that collaboration is critical for success in their workplace, only **42%** say managers promote teamwork, and only **23%** say workstations are designed for collaborative work. Clearly, more remains to be done in terms of fostering collaborative work styles.



*Remote workforces (**25%**) are about twice as likely as onsite (**12%**) or hybrid (**14%**) workforces to report that their **environment is less collaborative now.***

# The Importance of Casual Collisions

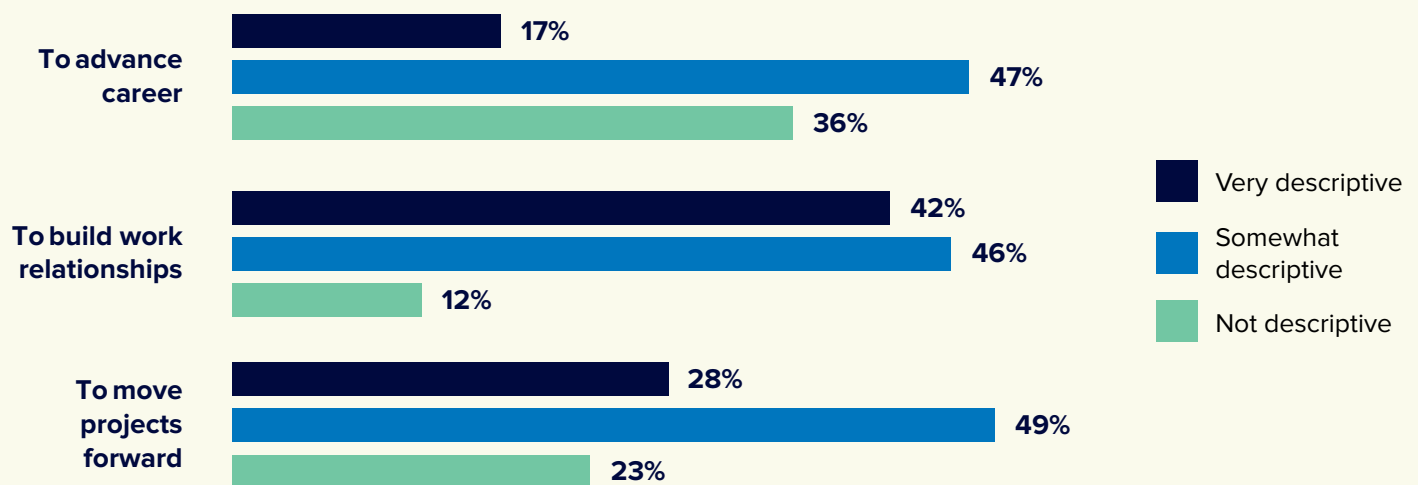


Many CEOs believe that spontaneous social interactions among co-workers, particularly those from different workgroups, are important for building collaboration and creativity. Some large corporations have even designed their buildings to promote employees unexpectedly encountering and talking with each other. SHRM Research describes these types of interactions as “casual collisions.”

However, HR professionals who responded to this survey do not perceive casual collisions as particularly critical for career or project advancement in their workplace today. Less than one-third believe that unplanned social interactions are critical for moving projects forward or advancing employees’ careers. The greatest importance of these interactions lies in building work relationships.

## HR professionals:

*Unplanned, casual in-person interactions are critical in the workplace, 2022*



Similarly, more than half of U.S. workers deny that the importance of unplanned, casual interactions has changed since before the pandemic. Overall, about 6 in 10 workers report no change in:

**60%** The size of their network of co-workers.

**63%** The superficiality of their workplace relationships.

**66%** How in tune they are with their co-workers.

# Casual Collisions and Workplace Friendships

What may be missing for both remote and Millennial/Generation Z workers, however, are friendships in the workplace. Given [SHRM Research findings](#) that having a close friend at work increases employees' job satisfaction, sense of belonging to the organization and productivity, these trends may have important consequences for workplace cohesion.



## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Millennial and Generation Z workers place relatively more emphasis on spontaneous casual collisions as a means of career advancement. Overall, members of Generation Z, who grew up in the digital age, are more prone to [social anxiety](#) and [less likely to form deep personal friendships](#) than previous generations have been. Perhaps casual collisions at work are of greater importance to them because of difficulties forming more meaningful relationships.

## WORKSITE DIFFERENCES



Compared to onsite and hybrid workers, remote employees report they less often consider their co-workers to be friends. Simultaneously, remote and hybrid workforces are about twice as likely as onsite workforces to report that their participation in casual interactions with colleagues has decreased since 2019.

### US workers by work location:

*Change in co-worker friendships and casual interactions, 2022 vs. 2019*

When I am with co-workers, I **less often** feel part of a group of friends now.

● **13%** Onsite workforce

● **17%** Hybrid workforce

● **21%** Remote workforce

I participate in unplanned, casual, in-person interactions with work colleagues **less often** now.

● **20%** Onsite workforce

● **39%** Hybrid workforce

● **43%** Remote workforce

### US workers by generation:

*Importance of casual collisions for career progression, 2022 vs. 2019*

#### All workers

■ **21%**  
More important now

■ **59%**  
Unchanged now

■ **20%**  
Less important now

#### Generation Z/Millennial workers

■ **47%**  
More important now

■ **29%**  
Unchanged now

■ **24%**  
Less important now





## Casual Collisions and Mental Well-Being

SHRM also asked workers to compare their mental well-being now (December 2022) versus in 2019:



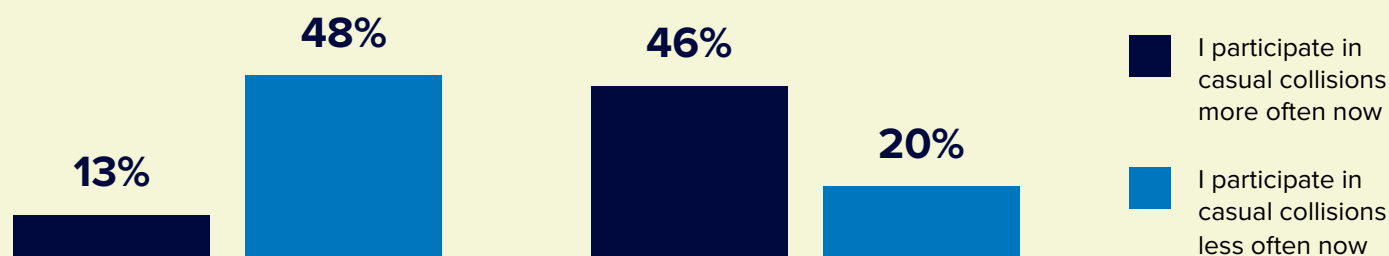
These perceptions did not change by workforce structure (remote, onsite or hybrid). Although only 1 in 5 workers report a decline in their mental well-being between 2019 and 2022, the findings suggest an interesting correlation between participating in casual collisions and feelings of mental well-being. Among the **24%** of workers who report that their mental well-being has improved, almost half also report experiencing casual collisions more often now. On the flip side, among the **20%** of workers who report that their mental well-being has declined, nearly half also state that they participate in fewer casual collisions now.

### US workers:

*Correlation between experiencing casual collisions and mental well-being, 2022 vs. 2019*

**My mental well-being is worse now**

**My mental well-being is better now**



# Workplace Mental Well-Being Supports

How are employers seeking to address negative trends in their workforces, including burnout, loneliness, isolation and lack of collaboration? HR professionals and U.S. workers were presented with a list of 10 activities to support either mental health (e.g., mental health apps) or workforce collaboration efforts (e.g., employee-centric social events). HR professionals identified which of these interventions their employers had implemented and how effective each was. U.S. workers identified which interventions their employers offered, which activities they had participated in and whether the experience was positive.

At least **30%** of employers offer the following four activities:

- Educational resources.
- Collaborative technology platforms.
- Team-building events.
- Updated work policies accommodating various work environments and styles.

The findings in the next two tables must be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes, but the general alignment between HR professionals and workers is interesting. Only a minority of employers offer paid mental health days (**8%** in HR sample; **12%** in worker sample). Yet, HR professionals rate this as the most effective strategy, and workers identify this as the most positive experience.

## **HR professionals:**

*Top four most prevalent and most effective mental well-being activities, 2022*

### **Most common activities**

(% of employers offering)

Updated work policies (**49%**)  
Team-building events (**47%**)  
Collaborative technology (**43%**)  
Educational resources (**35%**)

### **Most effective activities**

(% of employers offering)

Paid mental health days (**75%**)  
Updated work policies (**74%**)  
Team-building events (**71%**)  
Collaborative technology (**64%**)

## **US workers:**

*Top four activities in terms of prevalence, greatest participation and most positive experience, 2022*

### **Most common activities**

(% of employers offering)

Educational resources (**39%**)  
Collaborative technology (**33%**)  
Team-building events (**32%**)  
Updated work policies (**30%**)

### **Greatest participation**

(out of workers with that option)

Collaborative technology (**75%**)  
Team-building events (**68%**)  
Educational resources (**51%**)  
Paid mental health days (**44%**)

### **Positive experience**

(out of workers who participated)

Paid mental health days (**82%**)  
Collaborative technology (**82%**)  
Educational resources (**81%**)  
Mindfulness/yoga classes (**81%**)

# What Difference Does Technology Make?

Overall, HR professionals seem somewhat more pessimistic about negative trends in the workplace than workers are. In general, both groups have mixed feelings around loneliness and isolation. What could account for these unexpected findings? An intriguing possibility is collaborative technology.

There are indications that workers have embraced technological solutions for collaborating and connecting with co-workers, such as videoconferencing and instant messaging. Three-quarters of workers (**75%**) have used these technologies, and **82%** have found the experience to be positive (tied with paid mental health days). In particular, **50%** of workers report using workplace communication tools such as Slack or Microsoft Teams channels more often now than they did before the pandemic.

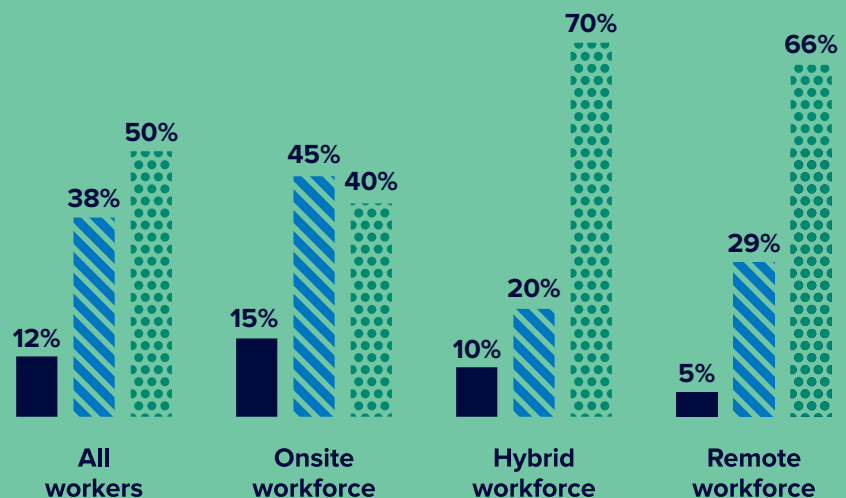
## WORKSITE DIFFERENCES



Not surprisingly, the trend toward use of electronic communication is strongest among remote workers. In addition, remote and hybrid workers are much more likely than their onsite counterparts to report enjoying video meetings. Unlike remote and hybrid workers, onsite workers tend to enjoy video meetings less now.

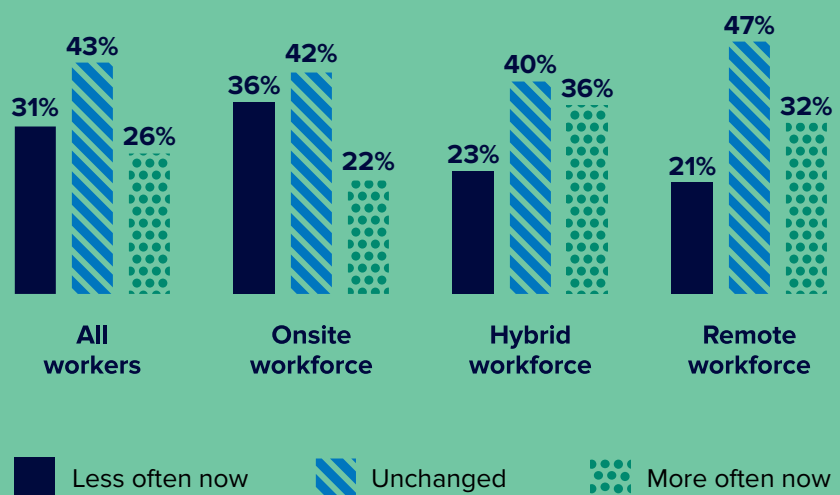
### US workers:

*I use electronic communication channels, 2022 vs. 2019*



### US workers:

*I enjoy video meetings, 2022 vs. 2019*





# Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the findings of this study suggest several implications for mental well-being in the workplace.

First and foremost, the data suggests the post-pandemic workplace has become somewhat less collaborative and engaged than before. This shift poses risks to employees' well-being, with the most obvious current risk being burnout. Importantly, burnout is more prevalent in onsite work structures compared to remote and hybrid ones. Although the “pandemic of loneliness” seems to have leveled off, it has by no means disappeared, so its effect on individual workers' mental health remains a concern. Only 1 in 10 HR professionals and 1 in 4 workers report a decrease in loneliness over the past three years. While no work structure is immune to worker loneliness, the data does suggest that unplanned, in-person interactions positively influence employees' mental health. Remote workforces are more physically isolated and less likely to identify their co-workers as friends. Yet, in part due to collaborative technology, workgroups can be in sync, engaged and connected, regardless of how they come together.

As employers consider ways to support their employees' mental health, the concept of having permission to take mental health days has broad appeal. It is also important to look at a full spectrum of mental health offerings. Balancing formal mental health services with self-service educational resources, team-building events, and yoga or other exercise classes may encourage employee participation and satisfaction.

Clear generational patterns are also present. Employees in their 20s and early 30s seem more vulnerable to stress from balancing their work and personal lives and have more difficulty finding energy for leisure pursuits. A majority prefer onsite work as a means of keeping their work and life separate. Overall, they may be disengaged at work and may also be the loneliest segment of workers. For them, workplace interactions may carry heightened importance.



Based on these conclusions, SHRM Research offers the following recommendations:

1. **Make in-office gatherings the core touch point for all workers.** Team-building events are currently among the more common activities employers offer to foster collaboration. Most HR professionals (**71%**) consider them effective, and **78%** of workers find them to be positive experiences.
2. **Invest in well-functioning and easy-to-use electronic technology that connects your workforce.** Employees, especially remote and hybrid workers, rely heavily on these tools to maintain interactions and collaboration with their workgroups.
3. **Pay special attention to the needs of younger generations in your workforce, as well as those of remote employees.** Younger generations report greater-than-average challenges to their mental well-being. Remote workers are more isolated and less likely to build workplace friendships. The findings for remote workers in this study are specifically from all-remote employers. These experiences may be even more intense when remote workers are a minority in a predominantly onsite or hybrid workforce.
4. **Allow workers to take paid time off when they feel unwell either mentally or physically.** Whether employers offer paid mental health days or paid personal days that employees may use at their discretion, both HR professionals and workers highly value a workplace policy that encourages them to take time away from work when they need to recharge psychologically.
5. **Offer employees an array of options to support their mental well-being and promote these options regularly.** This study shows that formal mental health interventions are not necessarily the options most employees choose to participate in. In fact, worker participation was lowest for mental health apps (**17%**) and support groups (**19%**). Offering a range of options, from formal mental health services to casual group activities such as employee-centric social events, allows employees to choose the types of experiences they derive the most satisfaction from and may generate more widespread participation.



# Methodology

**HR professionals:** A sample of 1,357 HR professionals who have worked for their current employer for more than three years was surveyed using the SHRM Voice of Work Research Panel in November and December 2022. The data was weighted to reflect the population of U.S. organizations.

**U.S. workers:** A sample of 1,073 working Americans was surveyed in November and December 2022 using AmeriSpeak, NORC at the University of Chicago's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The data was weighted to reflect the population of U.S. working adults.

**Millennial/Generation Z workers:** A sample of 407 U.S. workers born between the years 1981 and 2005 who had worked for their current employer for more than three years was surveyed using the Generation Lab research panel of more than 1.5 million young adults in December 2022 and January 2023. The data was weighted to reflect the population of U.S. adults born during the designated years.

**By: Annemarie Schaefer**  
Vice President, Research

**Kirsteen E. Anderson**  
Data Communications Specialist