Strong Networks, 29% Lonely. The Answer is Not More Connection

New research presented at Social Capital 2026, finds that loneliness and strong networks coexist among leaders, and names the space between them for the first time. Five years of applied research and a pilot that moved lonely leaders forward.

Loneliness is often discussed in terms of ageing or technology. But research presented at Social Capital 2026, the first global conference of the International Social Capital Association (ISCA), has found it among a group less commonly associated with the issue: remote and hybrid people leaders. The large-scale study found that 29% experience loneliness. And it is expensive. UK Government analysis estimates the cost of loneliness to UK employers at £2.5 billion a year, with staff turnover accounting for most of it. At an individual level, the monetised impact of severe loneliness is estimated at £9,900 per person per year, reflecting its impact on wellbeing, health and productivity[1].

Among the 1,218 leaders surveyed at one Canadian financial services firm, 88% reported high levels of trust and 80% reported high levels of support. Yet 29% still reported feeling lonely at least sometimes. In-depth interviews revealed why: having a strong network does not necessarily mean it meets our social needs for connection, trust, support and belonging. Something sits between the two. Shelley Doyle calls it the *activation gap.*

Before moving from the UK to Canada in 2021, former communications professional Shelley Doyle had experienced the paradox of workplace loneliness first-hand. Working in a large, open-plan corporate office, with her direct team based in another country, she could spend lunch breaks surrounded by hundreds of colleagues yet walk into the cafeteria alone. It was only after launching a wellbeing employee resource group (ERG) and finding colleagues who shared her interests that she began to feel at home in the office, looking forward to lunch breaks as opportunities for connection.

Moving to Canada brought a different perspective. Having grown up with family on another continent, Shelley understood how technology could bridge geographical distance. Yet she found herself no longer sharing her own life on social media, while watching the lives of people who were no longer part of it. Rather than easing the distance, it heightened her sense of disconnection.

Together, these experiences led Shelley to focus her Master's research on social health in professional leadership, and develop a programme that would reverse the trajectory of loneliness, through five years of applied research.

"I started to understand why people are disconnected and what happens between having people in your life and actually feeling seen and held by them," said Shelley. *"There is a gap there. I call it the activation gap."*

The programme takes a strengths-based approach. Rather than beginning with the deficit of loneliness, it helps participants reflect on the relationships they have already built and have access to, across online and offline spaces, and their personal and professional lives.

During her research, Shelley Doyle conceptualised the Social Wealth Continuum, a five-level framework that moves beyond the binary of lonely or connected, offering a language for understanding social experience across personal and professional life. Within the framework:

Loneliness reflects a feeling of unmet social needs and does not necessarily mean being alone.
Social Wellbeing describes a state in which basic social needs are met. Relationships may not offer emotional depth, but the foundation of connection is there.
Social Wealth emerges when relationships are activated in ways that align with our social needs, allowing us to experience deep trust, connection and support.

The continuum gave participants language for understanding where they were and a direction to move towards, rather than a label to carry.

Six findings from the research, each one new to the public record.

1. Trusted relationships are still local. The survey tested the 30-minute rule[2], the theory that people are less inclined to visit others when travel takes more than 30 minutes. While the survey did not measure visiting behaviour directly, it found a similar pattern in relational comfort. On average, leaders felt at ease discussing private matters with two to four local friends, compared with zero to two friends living more than 30 minutes away. Proximity continues to matter in 2026, despite global mobility and advances in technology.

2. Video is used most with colleagues and least with family and friends. 49% of leaders use video calls with colleagues, even for non-work-related conversation, against 34% with relatives, 25% with out-of-town friends and 15% with local friends. With family and friends, 81% default to text and 69% to phone calls. Virtual face to face contact is rated as more emotionally rich and satisfying than voice only or text-based media, and it is going mostly to work.

3. Being in the office more often does not make people feel more connected. Feelings of connection and support were strongest among leaders attending one to two days a week, and then declined among those attending four or more days a week. Presence is not the same thing as connection, and the social purpose of in-person time matters more than the number of days.

4. Showing up is not the same as opening up. Of the leaders who took part in in-person groups, 54% reported that there was nobody in those groups with whom they felt at ease discussing private matters. The interviews explain why this differs from person to person. Some leaders attend for the activity itself, pickleball among them, and their need for deeper connection is met through other relationships. For others, it is a gap. One participant attended church regularly in the hope of deeper connection with people who shared her spiritual interests, and that need remained unmet.

5. Social media is used passively far more than actively. 66% of leaders scroll social media daily or several times a day without posting or engaging, against 11% who use it daily and actively. A third (32%) say it enhances their relationships, 9% say it interferes with them, and 59% say it has no effect.

6. Social needs evolve. All thirteen leaders interviewed described a noticeable change in their own social needs in recent years, although the direction varied. Some described becoming more selective, placing greater value on deeper and more emotionally resonant relationships. Others described lower social needs, greater comfort with solitude, or a shift from in-person to virtual connection – even in their personal life. Several described a sense of loss for contact they no longer had as often. A relationship or routine that once felt sufficient may simply have been outgrown, so relationships have to be recalibrated as roles and life stages change.

With the help of a business accelerator programme, Shelley designed and beta tested a loneliness intervention programme in 2023. The research design went through three rounds of ethics approvals and finally in 2025, the programme, now embedded with mixed-methods research, was clinician-reviewed and delivered to a group of people leaders at a leading Canadian financial services firm in 2025, now framed as a “Social Wealth Activation”.

Loneliness Intervention Pilot: Social Wealth Activation
Over eight weeks participants worked through six elements:

1. They began with a two-week social media detox, deliberately avoiding the passive scrolling that 66% of leaders in the study reported doing daily without ever posting or engaging.

2. They mapped their inner circle, the 12 to 15 people who matter most in their current chapter, personal and professional, online and offline.

3. Participants were taught social capital principles and positive communication techniques, before reconnecting with intention.

4. They mapped the online and offline groups they belong to, to consider how many are active versus dormant, and which are most aligned with the life they are building.

5. They were introduced to Third Places, environments beyond home and work where people gather voluntarily for conversation and community, and to virtual Fourth Spaces, digital platforms where connection can be built and sustained when people are physically apart.

6. Participants explored healthy boundaries and rituals of connection, drawing on their own experiences to support peer-to-peer learning and insight. In the final week, they created a visual map of their social ecosystem, giving them a resource to return to whenever they want to reflect on their connections or respond to feelings of loneliness.

After the eight-week pilot, no participant finished below Social Wellbeing on the Social Wealth Continuum, in either their personal or professional life. Eleven participants completed the pilot, six of whom had started between Loneliness and Social Wellbeing. Three months later, 100% reported greater awareness of their 12 to 15 closest connections, 90% had introduced new rituals of connection in their personal lives, and 80% had established a regular Third Place outside home and work.

The results of this pilot were presented at Social Capital 2026, the first global conference of the International Social Capital Association. Tristan Claridge, President of the International Social Capital Association said: "*We have decades of research demonstrating associations between social relationships and important individual and collective outcomes. The challenge is to understand how and why those relationships make a difference. Shelley's work contributes to this discussion by examining how relationships are activated at work and in everyday life and piloting a novel intervention to support social health in professional leadership. This has important implications for organisations committed to total wellbeing and seeking to strengthen trust, engagement and retention.*"

Shelley Doyle added: "Through this work, I understood that social capital is in the relationships we have built and have access to. Social Wealth is what we feel when these relationships are activated aligned with our present social needs. Social capital is not a guarantee against loneliness. The Social Wealth Activation programme helped participants to close the activation gap."

The rituals that helped leaders feel more socially wealthy were often small. One leader described a standing agreement with neighbours. When the fire is lit in the garden, they know they are welcome to drop by, with no invitation needed. Another described a fortnightly friends' dinner that has stood for 23 years, sustained by rotating hosts by surname. In the workplace, a weekly 30-minute virtual coffee became a ritual one leader hated to miss.

Ultimately, the research found that socially healthy leaders do not necessarily have more friends. They have clearer relational priorities, stronger rhythms, healthier boundaries, and more intentional use of technology. They have designed a relational life that can hold them up, even when work is demanding and life feels busy.

The World Health Organization published its first report on social connection in June 2025, highlighting its importance to public health and calling for investment in research, scalable interventions and measurement. The WHO defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. Yet social health remains an overlooked dimension of workplace wellbeing. But recognition alone is not enough. People need language to understand their social health and evidence-based guidance they can act on.

The Keep Britain Working review has asked employers to take shared responsibility for the health, engagement and retention of their people. Social health is an important part of that responsibility, yet it remains under-recognised and under-invested in workplace wellbeing.

Discover what loneliness could be costing your organisation with the Cost Calculator.
Find out where you sit on the Social Wealth Continuum: take the free quiz at https://www.thecommuniverse.com/quiz

Notes to editors

More than 1,200 people leaders took part in the research. The paper, From Social Capital to Social Wealth, publishes open access this month and the full text is available on request. Shelley Doyle, MA, is a Social Health researcher and Social Wealth Strategist, and the author of the Social Wealth Continuum and of the paper. Her MA research was completed with Royal Roads University and supported by a Mitacs Accelerate Award. She can be found at www.thecommuniverse.com

Shelley hosts the Rediscovering Connection podcast, interviewing researchers, leaders and practitioners, including Professor Robin Dunbar, Dr Corey Keyes and Priya Rose. She describes the podcast as the place where the research meets her own life, testing every insight she interviews for at home and with the leaders she works with, so her clients hear lived experience rather than theory.

Her own why is personal. Shelley has designed her own social ecosystem multiple times over, most recently when she moved from the UK to Canada in 2021 to start her Master's with her fiancé and two young children, leaving everyone she loved on another continent. She returned to the UK in the summer of 2026 and is designing a new iteration of it now, using the same method she teaches.

Shelley Doyle is available for interview, and can speak to the findings, the pilot results, and what the activation gap means for leaders and the organisations they serve. She can also supply the Social Wealth Continuum graphic, a Cost Calculator, for leaders to calculate the annual addressable cost, or can work up a bespoke article for your audience, exclusive to you, within a week.

To arrange an interview, to receive the paper at publication, or to discuss a bespoke piece, contact shelley@communiverse.vip or reply to this release. High resolution images are available.

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[1] Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. (2021). Employers and loneliness. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employers-and-loneliness/employers-and-loneliness

[2] Bzdok, D., & Dunbar, R. I. M. (2020). The neurobiology of social distance. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 24(9), 717-733.