

WELLBEING CONSULTING

Human Connection & Technology in 2026

June 2, 2026

By Hayley Hughes MS, CN, LMHC and Katie Hassall MBA

Longevity experts have long emphasized that social connection, and the sense of belonging it brings, is one of the most critical determinants of overall wellbeing and healthspan. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), strong social connections support health at every stage of life¹. They can reduce “inflammation, lower the risk of serious health problems, foster mental health, and prevent early death”¹. Beyond individual benefits, social connections strengthen communities, making them safer, healthier, and more resilient¹.

Yet even in an age of ubiquitous digital connectivity, many people report feeling isolated and lonely: “1 in 6 people worldwide is affected by loneliness”¹. As technology continues to reshape our lives, we must continue to focus on how we can use it to enhance human connection, not weaken it.

The way we work has shifted dramatically, and organizations are still navigating how to build and sustain a strong culture in this evolving work environment. Companies today vary widely in their approach; some embrace remote-first cultures, others require in-person attendance, and many experiment with more flexible hybrid dynamics. We have found a new normal of working which includes countless virtual and hybrid meetings, teams spanning different time zones and countries, and more connectivity and digital access than ever before.

Implications of Virtual Work on Connection

The way we work has transformed dramatically since 2020. Expectations around video meetings, camera use, and employee engagement have shifted, and many white-collar roles now involve significantly more day-to-day virtual meetings to stay connected with clients and colleagues. As a result, reliance on video conferencing has become a defining feature of modern work.

But this raises an important question: Does connecting through a computer screen truly foster meaningful social connections? Or are we spending our days staring into cameras without building the genuine rapport that comes from in-person interaction?

We know that virtual meetings are valuable for staying connected, but they do not engage attendees at the same level as face-to-face in-person interactions². It can be challenging to build trust through a screen, even though the flexibility and accessibility of virtual meeting tools offer undeniable benefits³. Research also suggests that difficult conversations may be more likely to escalate during virtual interactions, highlighting the limitations of relying solely on digital communication⁴.

Incorporating small talk or a brief team-building activity at the beginning of a virtual meeting can help ease participants into the conversation, strengthen rapport, and set a more positive tone, hopefully making the meeting more productive and collaborative ⁴.

Also, what does the research indicate regarding forcing people to stay on camera during virtual meetings? Does it improve engagement? Studies have found that mandatory camera-on policies could increase fatigue and reduce participation, rather than enhancing it ⁵. There does not seem to be a significant difference in terms of engagement, whether or not the camera is encouraged or mandated ⁵. At the same time, having the camera off is not a reliable indicator of inattention. Some individuals may focus better during a meeting if they are able to walk, move around, or listen passively, especially when they are not an active contributor.

Walking with coworkers can also boost mood and strengthen connections ⁶. Research suggests that walking meetings support mental and emotional wellbeing, particularly for remote or hybrid teams ⁶. Getting outside in quiet, natural green spaces, with traffic-free routes, was identified as the most beneficial environment ⁶. It is essential to think about the type of meeting and expected participation from attendees; smaller group conversations are often better suited for camera-on moments, while larger meetings where people are not speaking up might not make a difference.

Consider revisiting norms when it comes to virtual/hybrid meetings:

- Ask how meetings are going. Is there anything that could be done to make them more productive, drive more connection?
- How can you incorporate small talk or team-building activities at the start of a meeting?
- Discuss meeting norms based on size and structure. Is it okay to step out for a walk during a large meeting, or is the expectation to be on camera?
- If camera on is the requirement, how can you incorporate connection and team-building activities?
- Focus on finding ways to build trust. Are there opportunities to connect in person versus virtually?
- Find what fits your culture. Can you create a flexible meeting structure that supports both virtual meetings and occasional in-person, outdoor walking meetings?

Interested in learning more about how to drive meaningful connection at work? Reach out to **Hayley and Katie**.

Citations:

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