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## ESSAY

# The Power of Mattering at Work

For employees, knowing that they are valued can be key to job satisfaction and mental health

*By Jennifer Breheny Wallace*

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Feeling unappreciated at work? You're not alone. Responding to the Great Resignation, quiet quitting and high levels of employee burnout, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy recently issued a report calling for workplaces to better protect employee mental health. Among the "essentials" for well-being at work, the report states, is "mattering," the belief that you are valued and important to others. "People want to know that they matter to those around them, and that their work makes a difference in the lives of others," the report notes.

The social psychologist Morris Rosenberg first conceived the idea of mattering in the 1980s, while studying self-esteem among adolescents. Recent research has shown that a focus on mattering can be a powerful tool for responding to the rise in loneliness, anxiety, depression and social division among Americans. "Knowing you matter has been shown to lower stress, while feeling like you do not can raise the risk for depression," according to Dr. Murthy's report. Studies in Australia, China, Israel, Japan and Italy have drawn similar conclusions, suggesting that there is a universal human need to feel seen and valued by those around us.

"When you feel like you matter, you are secure in the knowledge that you have strong, meaningful connections to others and that you are not going through this life alone," explains Gordon Flett, a professor of psychology at Canada's York University and the author of "The Psychology of Mattering." This involves not just feeling valued but also feeling that we add value to the lives of others, notes community psychologist Isaac Prilleltensky in a 2020 paper published in the American Journal of Community Psychology.

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Research suggests that people who feel they don't matter suffer higher levels of loneliness and increased health risks. A Cigna survey of more than 10,000 adults published in 2020, before the pandemic struck the U.S., found that 61% of participants reported feeling lonely.

Researchers who study loneliness find that the number of relationships we have is less important than the quality of those relationships. But in the American workplace, 65% of entry-level executives and 70% of senior executives reported feeling that “no one really knows them well.” The Cigna survey estimated that loneliness is costing companies more than \$154 billion annually in “stress-related absenteeism alone.”

Employees who feel that they matter have a protective buffer against stressors, loneliness and adversity, notes Dr. Flett. By contrast, people who experience low levels of mattering often feel defective and unworthy.

In a 2022 paper in the Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment, Dr. Flett described a condition that he called “anti-mattering”—a chronic feeling of being insignificant, unheard and invisible. He found that anti-mattering is a strong predictor of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and substance abuse. It can cause employees to act out in destructive ways, displaying hyper-competitiveness or anger in an effort to demand the attention they lack. Mattering is a double-edged sword, Dr. Flett explains: It can be highly protective when you feel it and highly destructive when you don't.

So how do you know if your employees and co-workers feel that they matter? In a 2021 study published in the Journal of Positive Psychology, researchers developed a scale to measure mattering in the workplace. In online surveys involving nearly 1,800 full-time employees at a variety of companies, participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how much they agreed with statements such as “My work contributes to my organization's success” and “The quality of my work makes a real impact on my organization.” Other statements had to do with feeling valued and recognized: “My organization praises my work publicly” and “My work has made me popular at my workplace.”

## **Mattering isn't only good for employee well-being, it's also good for a company's bottom line.**

Participants were also asked about job satisfaction, recent raises or promotions, and whether they intended to leave their job. What the researchers found was that mattering isn't only good for employee well-being, it's also good for a company's bottom line. Employee turnover

is costly and disruptive, and “when employees feel like they matter to their organization, they are more satisfied with their jobs and life, more likely to occupy leadership positions, more likely to be rewarded and promoted and less likely to quit.”

Helping people to feel that they matter is a teachable skill, says lead researcher Andrew Reece, a behavioral scientist at BetterUp, a coaching and mental health company. BetterUp has developed a pilot tool called the Organizational Mattering Map, a diagram that managers can fill out to show an employee how their work contributes to the larger goals of the organization. The purpose of the map is to help an employee feel that they matter by showing exactly where they are adding value.

Businesses are starting to take note of the critical role that mattering plays at the office. In a newsletter sent to thousands of clients and professionals, Dan Dees and Jim Esposito, the co-heads of investment banking at Goldman Sachs, recently wrote that “coming together physically is a necessary but insufficient condition for strong mental health.” It is also necessary for colleagues to know that the work they do matters.

“The more each individual understands the important role they play, the more they feel empowered and motivated,” wrote Mr. Esposito in an email. “People are energized when they have the context for how their individual work fits into the broader strategic plan.”

To further a culture of mattering, notes Dr. Flett, companies can involve employees in key decisions that affect their work, so that they know their input is valued. They can also create opportunities for employees to add value through mentoring and volunteering.

Just as important, leaders must scan the environment for threats to mattering. Research by Dr. Prilleltensky and colleagues shows that being treated fairly increases workers’ sense of mattering, while racism and discrimination can erode it. Layoffs are an unfortunate part of corporate life, but delivering the news with compassion and dignity—rather than via an indifferent email—can protect an employee’s sense of mattering.

“Mattering has a spillover effect,” notes Dr. Flett, offering employees a positive way to interact with customers as well as colleagues. Once people see its power in their work lives, they may even adopt it in their personal lives, making an effort to show family and friends how much they matter.

—Ms. Wallace is a journalist and the author of the forthcoming book “*Never Enough: How Toxic Achievement Culture Hurts Kids—and What We Can Do About It*,” which will be

*published by Portfolio next year.*

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