

PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONNECTION AND CONNECTEDNESS

by John Cooper and Adrian Furnham

The need to belong to, and be accepted by, groups is – for better or for worse – a fundamental human trait. This not only has far-reaching consequences for the world as a whole, but an awareness of its repercussions is also crucial for leaders of organisations, as John Cooper and Adrian Furnham explain.

We are social animals. We depend for our survival, mental and physical health, as well as happiness, on our connections with other people. We like to feel part of a greater whole—members of multiple groups who share our values. As a result, psychologists have long studied social relationships and social bonds.

Paradoxically, in our digitally connected world, we face increasing challenges in forming and sustaining meaningful relationships. While technology enables constant communication, it can also create a false sense of connection. Thus emerges a modern paradox: we are technologically hyperconnected, yet psychologically under-connected.

This matters more than it might first appear. Feeling connected is not simply desirable—it is fundamental. Humans are naturally driven to connect with one another, and these social bonds play a vital role in shaping overall well-being.



Want to assess how collaborative, innovative, and effective your organisation is? Then please rate your connections.

Supportive relationships are associated with healthier physical and emotional outcomes, while a lack of meaningful connection is linked to increased risks such as depression and even mortality (Martino *et al.*, 2017).

Connectedness at Work

This need for connection does not disappear when we step into the workplace; indeed, work is one of the primary contexts in which connection—or disconnection—is experienced.



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He's focused on advancing the understanding and application of connection as a driver of organisational performance and health.



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Connection drives collaboration, engagement, and innovation. It is associated with trust, psychological safety, and shared understanding. In highly connected workplaces, aligned identities, open communication, and emotionally intelligent leadership strengthen the relational fabric that shapes collective responses to change, enabling organisations to navigate complexity more effectively (Kroon *et al.*, 2026). It is therefore increasingly useful to consider connection not simply as a social phenomenon, but as a condition that shapes organisational effectiveness.

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What Do We Mean by Connection?

Connectedness, in psychological terms, refers to feeling emotionally close and meaningfully linked to others. It involves not only the presence of relationships, but their quality—how far individuals feel accepted, understood, and supported.

Van Bel *et al.* (2009) describe social connectedness as a short-term experience of belonging and relatedness based on social appraisals and relationship salience. More broadly, it can be understood as the degree to which individuals experience the people and places in their lives as meaningful and important (Schulze & Naidu, 2014). In the workplace, this extends beyond interpersonal relationships to include connection to one's role, one's team, and the wider organisation.

From Engagement to Connection

For many years, organisations have relied on engagement as a primary indicator of workforce sentiment. While useful, engagement is often better understood as an outcome rather than a cause.

Connection sits upstream. Where individuals feel that they belong, can contribute meaningfully, are recognised, and trust their environment, positive attitudes and behaviours tend to follow. Where these conditions are absent, withdrawal, friction, and disengagement emerge.

In this sense, connection provides a more complete and actionable lens through which to understand behaviour at work. It captures not only motivation, but the broader social and organisational experience that shapes performance.

Why Connection Matters for Organisations

There is growing evidence that connection is associated with a range of important organisational outcomes.

Higher levels of connection are linked to improved task performance, greater discretionary effort, reduced counterproductive behaviours, and lower intention to leave. Conversely, disconnection can manifest as reduced collaboration, increased friction, and avoidable turnover.

The workplace can also be a source of isolation and social conflict. As Holt-Lunstad (2018) notes, social disconnection may be brought into, created by, or amplified within the workplace, with implications for both well-being and performance. Thus, connection is not merely a cultural or interpersonal concern; it has clear implications for productivity, stability, and organisational health.

Theoretical Perspectives

A number of well-established theories help explain why connection is so influential.

Attachment theory suggests that early relational experiences shape patterns of trust and interaction throughout life. Social identity theory highlights the role of group membership in shaping self-concept and behaviour. Social support theory identifies the quality of relationships as a key predictor of well-being and resilience. Neuroscientific research further indicates that shared ways of interpreting the world—sometimes described as neural alignment—are associated with stronger social bonds and a greater sense of connection.

Taken together, these perspectives reinforce the view that humans are fundamentally predisposed to seek, maintain, and depend upon social connection.

Connection, Networks, and Organisational Structure

If connectedness reflects the quality of relationships, network analysis provides insight into their structure. Organisations are not simply formal hierarchies, but complex systems of informal relationships and influence. Understanding these interaction networks allows organisations to identify key connectors, uncover bottlenecks, and improve the flow of information and collaboration.

Organisational Network Analysis (ONA) offers a practical means of mapping these relationships,

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revealing where connections are strong, where they are missing, and how they might be strengthened to improve effectiveness.

In many cases, the “real” organisation—the one that determines how work gets done—resides within these informal networks.

Dimensions of Connection

Connectedness is a multifaceted construct. It encompasses both cognitive and affective components, as well as aspects of giving and receiving support.

Recent work by Cuppello *et al.* suggests that connection at work can be understood across several interrelated dimensions, including cohesion, belonging, appreciation, contribution, trust, and well-being. These dimensions allow organisations to move beyond simply assessing whether people feel connected, towards understanding *how* and *why* connection varies across contexts.

Measuring and Developing Connection

Historically, connection has been difficult to measure in a systematic and actionable way. However, advances in psychometrics and AI have enabled more reliable assessment and understanding.

It is now possible to evaluate not only the quantity of connections individuals have, but also their quality, such as their depth, frequency, and functional value. This provides organisations with a more precise diagnostic of the underlying drivers of behaviour, enabling targeted interventions rather than broad, undifferentiated initiatives.

In this respect, connection represents a shift from observing outcomes to understanding causes and changing human states. Pioneer organisations are now using AI and connection systems to dial up their connection and productivity using suites of solutions that operate at individual, team, and company levels.

Connection in a Changing Workplace: the Value of Connection Intelligence

The nature of work is evolving. Hybrid working, increased automation, and the growing use of artificial intelligence are reshaping how people interact.

While these developments offer clear advantages, they also risk weakening the informal and relational aspects of work if not carefully managed. Technology can facilitate communication and provide insight, but it cannot in itself create trust, belonging, or shared meaning. These remain fundamentally human processes.

As organisations become more technologically advanced, the intentional design of connection into the infrastructure may become increasingly important. So Connection Intelligence (CXI) is the deliberate capability to understand, design, and strengthen the quality of human connection at work—ensuring that as organisations become more advanced technologically, they also become more cohesive, trusted, and meaningfully connected.

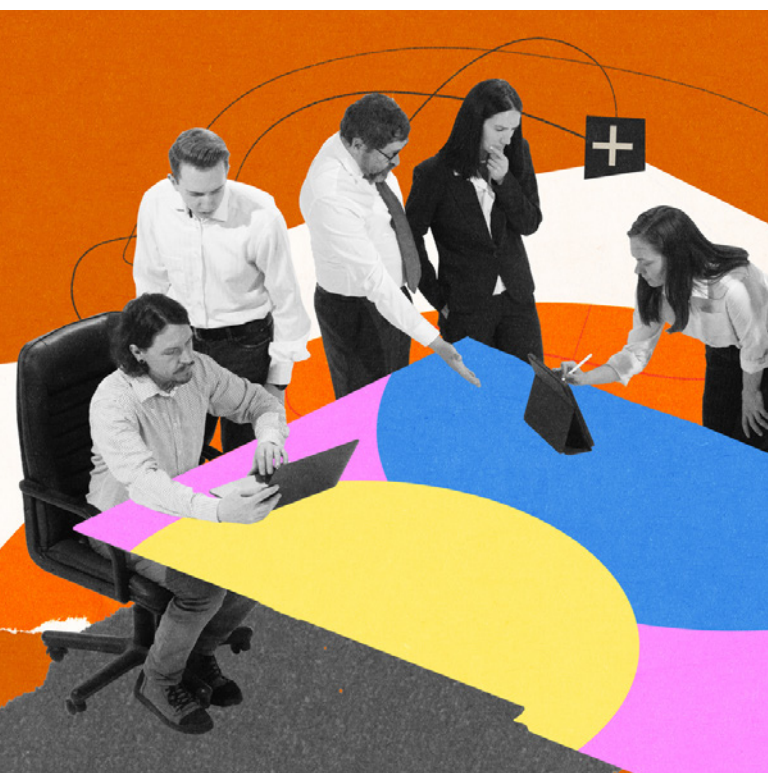
The Bottom Line: the CP (Connection Performance) Effect for Business

The quality and quantity of a person's connections have a direct impact on their health, well-being, and effectiveness.

At an organisational level, stronger connections are associated with better collaboration, greater resilience, and improved performance. Organisations that foster connectedness are better positioned to adapt, innovate, and sustain healthy cultures.

Connectedness is therefore not a peripheral concern. It is a central, multidimensional construct that can be described, assessed, and, importantly, developed.

In an increasingly complex, BANI (brittle, anxious, non-linear, incomprehensible), fast-changing world, the capacity to build and sustain meaningful connections at work may prove to be one of the most important capabilities an organisation can cultivate. 



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