InPursuit Research Institute

INPURSUIT OF INSIGHTS

Human Connection is a Premium in the Age of AI

WHERE RESEARCH MEETS THE BUSINESS OF TRUST.

Dr. Melanie Sue Hicks • InPursuit Research • 2026

2026

RESEARCH THAT MOVES DECISIONS.

Presence, now more than ever, becomes a strategy for workplace success.

THE SIGNAL

A hiring manager recently told me she no longer reads the first round of resumes her company receives. Why would she? An algorithm does that now, ranking candidates before a human ever sees a name. She trusted the system because it was fast, consistent, and free of the fatigue that makes a tired recruiter skim a strong application too quickly at four in the afternoon.

85%
of comparisons favored White-associated names over Black-associated names

3M+
resume-screening comparisons across three language models

554
real resumes tested against 500+ real job listings

As artificial intelligence absorbs more of the transactional layer of business, a curious effect emerges for the interactions that remain unmistakably human. They become scarcer, and scarcity tends to raise value. Call it a presence premium. As machines take over the high-volume, low-context work of moving information from one person to another, the moments where a human being actually shows up become disproportionately important to the outcomes that depend on trust, nuance, and judgment. The businesses paying attention to this shift are treating deliberate human contact as a competitive asset, precisely because so few of their competitors are.

SECTION 01

We Shouldn't All Look Alike

A 2024 study by researchers Kyra Wilson and Aylin Caliskan, presented at the AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society, tested three commercially available language models in a resume-screening setting. Generating more than three million comparisons across 554 real resumes and more than five hundred real job listings, the results were stark. White-associated names were preferred over Black-associated names 85 percent of the time. Male names were preferred over female names in the majority of comparisons.

These are not edge cases produced by a poorly built system. They are the default behavior of production-grade tools that companies are actively deploying to make hiring faster and, in theory, more objective.

> ***"A human being, paying deliberate attention in the room, remains the only mechanism capable of noticing when the pattern is wrong."***
>
> — Dr. Melanie Sue Hicks

This matters for a reason beyond fairness. Organizational research consistently illustrates the downside of homogeneous teams. Teams built by systems optimizing for pattern-matching produce less innovative outcomes than more varied ones, because innovation tends to arrive from combinations of experience that a similarity-seeking algorithm is specifically designed to screen out. A company that lets automated screening run unexamined is quietly narrowing the range of talent and thought its own hiring process is capable of finding. Competitors who insist on a human step in the process are finding what the algorithm missed and hiring away the best talent.

SECTION 02

The Generational Death of Social Capital

There is a generational dimension to this as well. Younger professionals entering the workforce are more likely than any generation before them to have their first substantive interactions with a company mediated by a screen. Application portals, chatbots, video interviews scored in part by automated sentiment analysis. Each of these tools was adopted for good operational reasons, but each of them, individually, removes one more opportunity for a young professional to be seen by an actual human being before a decision gets made about their future. The cumulative effect is a workforce entering its most formative professional years with fewer unmediated human encounters than any generation on record, at precisely the moment research on trust and connection suggests those encounters matter most for building the kind of durable professional relationships a career eventually depends on.

The argument for presence goes beyond bias correction. Journalist Charles Duhigg's research on supercommunicators, people whose conversations reliably build understanding and trust with others, found that the quality of connection in conversation depends heavily on real-time matching. People who recognize whether a given exchange is meant to be practical, emotional, or social can adjust accordingly. That kind of matching happens through tone, pause, facial expression, and timing.

SECTION 03

Remote Work's Disadvantage

Unfortunately for remote work advocates, these matching cues survive imperfectly over video and not at all over an AI-summarized transcript. Sherry Turkle's research on conversation in the digital age reaches a related conclusion. The very friction of face-to-face conversation such as slight discomfort of a pause or the inability to edit a sentence before it lands, is actually the mechanism through which real understanding, and real trust, gets built. Removing the friction makes communication less effective in what really matters for relationship building.

There is also a physiological layer to this argument that pure communication research does not fully capture. Neuroeconomist Paul Zak's decade of experimental work on trust found that in-person interaction, particularly the kind involving eye contact, shared physical space, and mutual attentiveness, reliably triggers the release of oxytocin. This hormone is closely associated with feelings of connection and the willingness to extend trust to another person.

Video calls, however well produced, do not reliably reproduce this effect, in part because the almost imperceptible mirroring of posture and expression that happens automatically between two people sharing a room, degrade badly over a compressed video feed with even a slight lag. None of this is an argument that video calls are worthless. They are simply a different category of interaction from in-person. Businesses that treat the two as interchangeable are making a physiological error.

SECTION 04

The Workplace Loneliness Epidemic

Research on workplace isolation adds a further, more precise dimension to this argument. A 2024 study published in the *European Management Journal* found that the erosion of trust experienced by isolated workers was driven primarily by reduced communication quality rather than reduced communication frequency. This distinction becomes more urgent as AI tools take over more of the frequency side of the equation. It is entirely possible for an organization to increase the sheer volume of contact between employees and managers, while the actual quality of human attention involved declines. Volume is not the same as presence, and mistaking one for the other is becoming easier precisely because AI tools are so good at generating volume cheaply.

All of this research is meant to spur deeper conversations about where AI belongs and where it does not. The transactional layer is exactly where these tools add genuine value, freeing human attention from work that never required a human's particular gifts in the first place. The relational layer, however, is where humans remain irreplaceable. A system trained to predict patterns from the past will reproduce the past's blind spots with tireless consistency. A human being, paying deliberate attention in the room, remains the only mechanism capable of noticing when the pattern is wrong.

The leaders who will differentiate themselves over the next decade are unlikely to be the ones who resist AI adoption on principle. They are more likely to be the ones who can say, with precision, exactly which decisions in their organization still require a human being to show up in person, and who protect those moments deliberately. Presence, now more than ever, becomes a strategy for workplace success.

READY TO OPERATIONALIZE THESE FINDINGS?

At InPursuit Research Institute, we bridge the gap between academic rigor and real-world execution. Our applied research provides the quantitative benchmarks and qualitative clarity required to inform your next high-impact strategic decision. Take the guesswork out of team dynamics and organizational excellence. **Explore InPursuit Dashboards and Tools** today to evaluate your current initiatives and establish clear, measurable pathways for your workforce's growth.

READ.
THINK.
ACT.

REFERENCES

Sources worth following.

Duhigg, C. (2024). Supercommunicators: How to unlock the secret language of connection. Random House.

Turkle, S. (2015). Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age. Penguin Press.

van Zoonen, W., Sivunen, A. E., & Blomqvist, K. (2024). Out of sight, out of trust? An analysis of the mediating role of communication frequency and quality in the relationship between workplace isolation and trust. European Management Journal, 42(4), 515–526.

Wilson, K., & Caliskan, A. (2024). Gender, race, and intersectional bias in resume screening via language model retrieval. Proceedings of the AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society, 7(1), 1578–1590.

Zak, P. J. (2017). Trust factor: The science of creating high-performance companies. AMACOM.