

BRINGING THE WORKFORCE BACK SAFELY AFTER COVID-19 OCTOBER 2020

Are you ready to return to your old workplace? Just think – when you go back, you’ll be able to see your old colleagues, share meaningful discussions about work and family, laugh about your pandemic weight gain and the puppy you adopted, and get down to the business of business once again. And it will be great to start making real wages again too! But what if you’re afraid? What if your employer says, “Yes, it’s safe to come back,” but you don’t really believe that it is, and you’re not sure they’ve done what’s needed to keep everyone healthy?

Americans want a return to a normal work life. In spite of some conventional thinking that employees prefer to work from home, for many it has become altogether more taxing than going to the workplace. For them, home is no longer a quiet sanctuary, but has become a school, nursing home, office, service environment, vacation spot, and playground. It’s morphed into the biosphere experiment none of us ever wanted to participate in.¹ But the uncertainty of not knowing if the workplace is safe or if their employers are authentically concerned about staff health means many returning workers may show up in body but not in spirit. A regular paycheck will be welcome, but exposure to the deadly virus will not. For many employees, concern for their physical safety in the post-pandemic workplace will make it debilitating and stressful.²

Convincing workers that their employers want them back safely and have taken rigorous health and safety precautions to protect them will be paramount to their successful return and reintegration. The pandemic-induced fears that employees may feel in returning to their workplaces stand to cripple organizational culture, human resource management, and firm productivity if those fears are not met head-on with tangible solutions.

Lower-income people, many of them working front-line service jobs, have fewer resources available to them – on an everyday basis – as well as during crises or emergency situations.³ This lack of

¹ Biosphere2 failed twice because of decreasing amounts of oxygen and food, plant and animal die-off, and group dynamic problems (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biosphere_2).

² Flovik, L., Knardahl, S., and Christensen, J. O. (2019). Organizational change and employee mental health: A prospective multilevel study of the associations between organizational changes and clinically relevant mental distress. *Scandinavian Journal of Work Environment and Health*, 45(2), 134–145. DOI:10.5271/sjweh.3777

³ Retrieved from www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/factsheet-cyf.pdf. Children, Youth, Families, and Socioeconomic Status, APA online report.

resources, feelings of economic fragility, and undetermined psychological resilience can create an organizational power imbalance against which front-line workers (and other employees) feel victimized by management decisions that do not clearly lay out how executive directives will affect employees' jobs, incomes and health. With few resources to help them understand and advocate for themselves, employees' psychological health – clouded by work stress from the pandemic – can lead to reduced involvement at work, aberrant behaviors, and searches for more secure jobs, as they consider their families' financial futures.⁴

It will be critical to the restoration of the American economy to understand how employees – post-pandemic – relate to their jobs, co-workers, and employers, and human resource professionals must craft trauma-informed therapeutic strategies that will engage workers' self-agency.⁵ Research and practices need to be conducted by industrial psychologists – pronto – to identify the issues of employee distress and how best to use psychological resources to engage front-line employees when they return to work after COVID-19. If we pay attention to alleviating the mental health worries of workers, and develop effective therapeutic responses, America may be able to mitigate the serious problems of restarting the economy and getting families back to financial solvency once the pandemic is over.⁶

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⁴ Retrieved from www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/factsheet-cyf.pdf. Children, Youth, Families, and Socioeconomic Status, APA online report.

⁵ Shah, N., Irani, Z., and Sharif, A. M. (2017). Big data in an HR context: Exploring organizational change readiness, employee attitudes and behaviors. *Journal of Business Research*, 70, 366–378. DOI.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.08.010

⁶ Ibid.