

Returning to the workplace: How to support hesitant employees



While plenty of people have gone to their usual workplaces even during the height of COVID-19 (thank you, essential workers!), a good portion of the workforce has been working remotely or unable to work since the spring of 2020. As the nation begins to reopen in earnest, employees are faced with a shift that may prove difficult for some: returning to a shared workspace. In light of health concerns, social anxiety and everything in between, employees might be struggling to transition back to the office.

What once was normal can't be anymore—not if you want to make your employees' return to the workplace a smooth one. But with a few adjustments such as the ones below, you can help make this transition seamless.

Establish COVID-19 protocols and sanitation practices

Two-thirds of employees report being concerned about their health and safety as they contemplate a return to a shared workspace. This percentage is even higher for members of Generation Z (75%) and people of color (78%).¹ Establishing a number of set protocols (temperature checks, social distancing, mask wearing) and sanitation practices (washing hands, wiping down seats and conference rooms after use) can go a long way toward helping alleviate this concern. Even though we now know that COVID-19 is widely spread through the air, not surfaces, your employees may feel more comfortable with a sanitation protocol in place, and it reduces the chances of cross-contamination.^{2,3}

These protocols and practices can also help you land new hires and keep current talent. According to the 2021 Job Seeker Nation Report, 64% of adults say they would decline a job offer if there were no clear COVID-19 safety protocols in place.⁴ With health and safety being such a concern that the majority are willing to forgo jobs with employers that don't prioritize it, establishing COVID-19 protocols and sanitation practices is the bare minimum you should do for your employees.

Consider implementing a hybrid work model

Even if it would only be temporary, implementing a hybrid work model may help your employees transition from working at home to working in a shared environment. As opposed to fully switching gears from one end of the spectrum to the other, the hybrid approach allows this change to be gradual, making it less jarring while increasing the level of comfort. It's also what many employees want.¹

A notable 48% of all employees, and 59% of people of color, express a strong preference for a hybrid work arrangement—even in industries that require on-site work. Though the hybrid model is bound to look different for them than for those who work in a traditional office, 61% of health care employees, 41% of construction/manufacturing personnel, and 34% of retail and hospitality employees report this same desire for a hybrid work model. With 41% of employees saying they'd take a pay decrease to have this option and 47% of employees saying they'd be likely to leave their jobs if they weren't offered the option once the pandemic ends,¹ creatively implementing the hybrid work model across all types of industries is worth considering.

Facilitate team-building activities

As concerning as COVID-19 is, some of the anxiety about returning to the office may have nothing to do with physical health. It may have to do with seeing and interacting with people—after not having done so in a regular manner for more than a year.

Team-building activities, however small they may be, can be a great way for employees new and old to meet and re-acclimate to being around each other, reducing social anxiety in a nonchalant way as they get to know each other in person. This can be especially helpful for members of Generation Z—the youngest members in the workforce—who may not yet have in-person experience in their respective roles.

Be transparent about your return to the workplace plans

If you're considering or have already decided on a change that will affect your employees, let them know. A simple heads-up about company changes can help your employees mentally and pragmatically prepare for whatever is coming down the pipeline.

Consider, for example, the heavily debated topic of mandating vaccinations. Though 49% of employees believe that employers should require personnel to get COVID-19 vaccines, 36% of employees disagree.⁴ As such, with [the legality of vaccination mandates still under dispute](#), noting as much to your employees can help ease potential frustrations both in the immediate present and the future.

Listen to your employees' concerns ... and react accordingly

Some team members may continue to have mental health struggles long after other employees are eagerly gathering for happy hour. Keep an eye out for staffers who seem withdrawn or whose performance is suffering, and [proactively offer mental health support](#) to all. And remember that it's only a matter of time before employees have concerns that have nothing to do with COVID-19. Listen to them. Through surveys or an open-door policy with human resources and other leaders, giving your employees a place to state their concerns can help you note the warning signs of a fire before the flames start and allow you the opportunity to react accordingly.

¹ Envoy. "Envoy survey finds employees want companies to embrace hybrid work and mandate COVID vaccines." Published 3.16.2021. [Accessed 5.19.2021](#).

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "How COVID-19 Spreads." Updated 5.13.2021. [Accessed 5.19.2021](#).

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility." Published 4.5.2021. [Accessed 5.20.2021](#).

⁴ Jobvite. "2021 Job Seeker Nation Report." Published 2021. [Accessed 5.19.2021](#).

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