

# What managers and employees need to know about returning to work after quarantine

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As COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines are lifted, businesses are now faced with the challenge of how to keep their employees who are returning to work motivated and engaged.

A study led by a University of Illinois Chicago researcher shows that both employees and managers have an important part to play in promoting [employee engagement](#) during the pandemic.

The research, published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, suggests [employee engagement](#) and performance are the highest when employees are mentally prepared for their return to work and their managers are strongly committed to employees' health and safety at work.

"Given the turmoil and distress during lockdowns and quarantines, employees may have trouble reconnecting with their work. We wanted to find out what factors could help employees effectively stay engaged at work upon return. This is an important topic because highly engaged employees tend to intrinsically enjoy their work and outperform others," says lead author Zhenyu Yuan, assistant professor of managerial studies in the UIC College of Business Administration.

In the study, Yuan and his co-authors surveyed more than 350 employees from the original epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic—Wuhan, China—where many employees were returning to work after the strict city-wide lockdown was lifted.

According to the research, employees first need to mentally reconnect with their work.

"As employees are physically returning to work, they also need to be mentally prepared to reconnect," Yuan explained. "For example, employees are encouraged to spend some time reviewing work progress and set work priorities for upcoming tasks before coming back to work. This is similar to the warm-up before a workout. With some mental 'warm-up,' employees will find it easier to reconnect and re-engage at work."

Further, managers also have a critical role to play, Yuan added. With the continuous health threat of the coronavirus, employees can get easily overwhelmed and distracted in the workplace. Therefore, managers need to take concrete measures to promote workplace health and safety so that employees feel safe at work.

"Managers' commitment to safety can't be merely lip service," he said. "They should set a good example themselves by clearly communicating, enforcing, and promoting workplace health and safety protocols."

Importantly, the researchers found these two factors work synergistically.

"Engagement and performance were highest only when both conditions are met," Yuan said. "This reinforces the idea that managers can't simply expect their employees to be devoted to work without providing effective support for their health and safety."

Given that their study was based on data collected from Wuhan, China, Yuan cautioned about the applicability of their findings across different countries and regions.

"Depending on how the virus has spread and been managed in [different places](#), other factors are also important to consider," he said. "But we think our key finding holds regardless of locations. That is, managers and employees are in this together—they need to work together to promote engagement, workplace productivity, and [safety](#). This will be critical as businesses and employees try to rebound from the economic toll of the current pandemic."

**More information:** Zhenyu Yuan et al, Plug back into work, safely: Job reattachment, leader safety commitment, and job engagement in the COVID-19 pandemic., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2020). [DOI:](#)

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