

Pressure to return to the office could be making employees more anxious

June 3 2021, by Sunita Sah



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

After a year of social distancing, mask wearing and—for

millions—working from home, many employers are eager to bring their staff back to the office. But for many, the prospect of readjusting to in-person work is a daunting one.

[A recent survey](#) found that out of 4,553 [office workers](#) in five different countries, every single person reported feeling anxious about the idea of returning to in-person work.

Employers face a conflict of interest. On the one hand, they want to look after their employees' health and reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. While on the other, they're motivated by [financial incentives](#) to justify expensive office rents and have their employees physically on hand for meetings and discussions or to simply monitor their working time.

But putting pressure on employees to return to the office might be creating more anxiety. For those surveyed, the top causes of return-to-work stress included being exposed to COVID-19, the loss of work flexibility, the added commute, having to wear a mask while in the office, and a need for childcare.

Some managers recognize working from home doesn't necessarily mean reduced productivity, and a ["work-from-anywhere"](#) approach could drive greater equality, unlock new growth opportunities, and lead to greater [ethical behavior](#). When people aren't wasting hours in traffic, the free time unlocked from commutes can lead to more rested, happier, healthier and productive employees.

What's worrying, though, is that 56% of respondents in the recent study reported that their organisation hadn't asked for their opinions about return-to-work policies and procedures. Such a breakdown in communication between employees and employers could create anxiety for those employees who don't want, or are not yet ready, to return to

their physical workplaces. They may worry that voicing their concerns to return to work will signal distrust in their managers' decision to reopen for in-person work.

I've studied [advice](#)-giving and advice-taking for over a decade and found that people getting advice often struggle to signal distrust to their advisor. People often feel anxiety to express disagreement with or defy an advisor, a boss, manager, leader or authority figure. Rejecting advice makes employees anxious because it can insinuate that they think the other person is incompetent, biased or even corrupt.

I call this distinct type of anxiety [insinuation anxiety](#). It arises when people worry that not complying with another person's wishes may be interpreted as a signal of distrust.

Insinuation anxiety

Across a [series of studies](#) investigating this type of anxiety, my collaborators and I found that patients frequently follow [medical advice](#), even if they believe their doctor to have a conflict of interest.

Imagine someone's trying to sell you some advice, an opinion or a product, and the seller says: "I have a conflict of interest. I recommend you follow my advice, but I should let you know that I get paid more if you follow my advice." You might think such a disclosure would decrease trust and compliance with such advice—after all there's now some uncertainty as to the quality of that advice.

However, I found that although conflict of interest disclosures do indeed decrease trust in advice—arguably the "correct" response to such disclosures—they can also counterintuitively increase compliance with that distrusted advice.

Why? Because the other person now feels greater pressure to comply with advice they do not trust, as rejecting it insinuates that the other person has been corrupted by the conflict of interest and is untrustworthy. People are reluctant to signal distrust in another person. Insinuation anxiety persists regardless of the size of the [conflict of interest](#), but it can be reduced if people can make their decisions in private, away from the pressure of their advisor or employer.

As employees navigate the shift back to in-person work, employers should consider the role of insinuation [anxiety](#) increasing pressure on their workers to reluctantly comply with new in-person work policies. If employees feel unable to express their discomfort or choose more flexible working options, organizations may end up [losing their best talent](#) to workplaces with more open communication and flexibility.

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