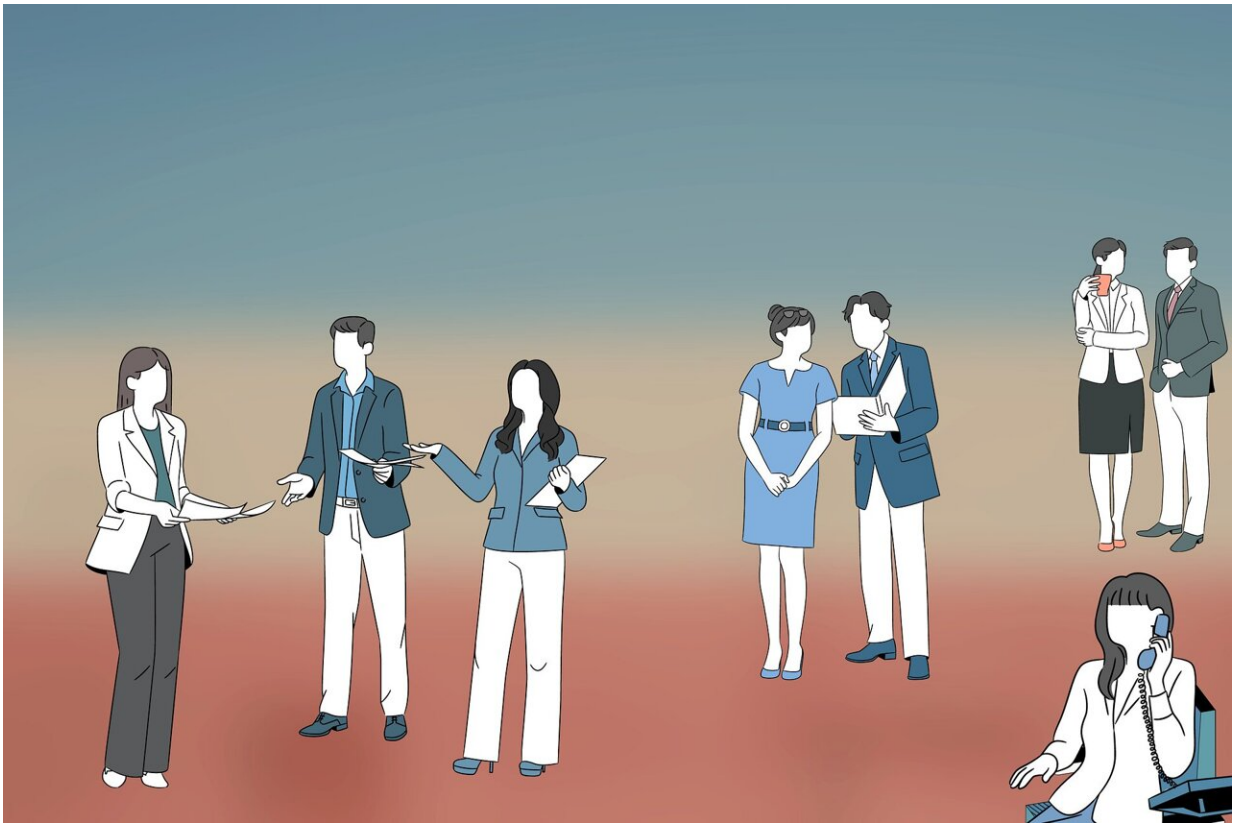


Support at work does not make 'stuck' employees less likely to retaliate, study finds

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Employees stuck in a job they want to leave are not positively impacted by organizational support once an employer has been perceived to have broken their trust, new research has found.

Stuck employees are people who would like to leave their current jobs but cannot because of a lack of job alternatives, family responsibilities or other barriers. Recent research has found that over half of the global workforce falls into this group.

These reluctant stayers are more likely to engage in counterproductive behavior at work to 'retaliate' against perceived organizational injustice. This could include trying to look busy or wasting time, deliberately disobeying supervisor instructions, damaging equipment, and speaking poorly about the company to others.

Now, new research from The Pennsylvania State University (U.S.) and the Centre for Responsible Business at the University of Birmingham (UK) has found that if an employer is perceived to break trust with their workers, supportive policies at work do not reduce retaliation intentions of stuck employees.

The study has been published in the [*Journal of Business and Psychology*](#).

Solon Magrizos, Associate Professor of Marketing at Birmingham Business School, said, "A company being seen to care about well-being reflects the perception that an employer should look out for their employees' best interests and safety at work. Our study has found that after an employer makes a decision that compromises employee safety, general positive organizational support perceptions can reduce retaliation intentions, but not among stuck employees."

The researchers surveyed 327 working adults in the United States and asked them to scale their intention to leave their current job, how easy it would be to leave and the perceived organizational support at work. They were then assigned to view one of three conditions that manipulated employer behavior, using the context of COVID-19 measures:

- A decision that protects employee safety—The governor had just removed state-mandated COVID-19 restrictions and the participant imagined that their current employer decided to retain the current COVID-19 protective measures.
- A decision that lowers employee safety—The governor had just removed state-mandated COVID-19 restrictions and the participant imagined that their current employer decided to remove the current COVID-19 restrictions in the interest of reducing business disruption.
- A control [business](#) decision in which the decision was not in the hands of the CEO—The governor mandated that all existing COVID-19 restrictions stay in place and the employer complied with these restrictions.

The respondents then completed scales assessing perceived organizational support and retaliation intentions.

The results showed that while general perceived organizational support offered by the employer buffered employees' negative reactions to the decisions that reduced their safety, it did not do so for stuck employees.

Caroline Moraes, Professor of Marketing at Birmingham Business School and Co-Director of the Centre for Responsible Business, said, "Stuck employees had stronger reactions and retaliatory intentions compared to other employees. Being seen as a highly supportive workplace protected the employer against retaliatory intentions only from employees able to leave their jobs easily or those who did not want to leave. This is caused by stuck employees having a more transactional relationship with their employer, so they feel that their social exchange with their employer has been violated more strongly."

The study argues that this social exchange norm violation increases stuck employees' motivation for negative reciprocity in order to restore

balance in their relationship with their employer, even when perceptions of general organizational support are high.

The results also suggest that general organizational [support](#) perceptions can actually increase retaliation intentions among those who would like to leave but cannot do so. But this does not mean employers should not be supportive.

Professor Moraes and Dr. Magrizos concluded, "Sometimes organizations have to make [difficult decisions](#), and it is important to note that stuck employees represent a large group, so the potential for greater retaliation should be taken into account.

"But communicating clearly and honestly about why decisions are being made, developing better relationships with employees by enabling self and career development opportunities, and providing ways for employees to raise concerns that are subsequently heard and addressed can help. Understanding these stuck employees is key to improving negative feelings at work."

More information: Jean M. Phillips et al, Examining Retaliation Intentions Among Stuck Employees, *Journal of Business and Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10869-024-09971-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-024-09971-6)

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