

The post-COVID workplace: Expert weighs in on whether employees will be safe

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After nearly four months of a coronavirus-compelled shutdown, many workers across the U.S. are being asked to return to offices and shop floors. The kind of workplace they'll be returning to, however, is not so clear. After all, COVID-19 cases are active and even on the upswing in areas across the country, and, with much still unknown about how the virus spreads and behaves, many wonder whether the workplace they will find will ever look and function like the one they had before the middle of March.

"It's the six-million-dollar question," says Wharton management professor Nancy Rothbard. "In the near term, no, we're not going back to pre-March 12, at least through the next several months to a year as we try to think about how to safely go back and work and not endanger ourselves and our colleagues in terms of a potential threat from the virus. So, certainly in the near term it will be quite different with social distancing guidelines regarding gatherings and even the way we physically sit near each other."

There will continue to be a lot more remote work for those for whom it is possible, she adds. "But I also think that at some point people will want to get back to an experience which is more 'normal' in terms of having interactions with colleagues and meeting people face to face," Rothbard says.

The transition back to a physical workplace, though, promises to come with perils both real and perceived, as well as new kinds of tensions.

"How do we deal with people who are afraid to come back to the office or facility?" asks Peter Cappelli, Wharton management professor and director of the Center for Human Resources. "Employers in the U.S. can make them [come in to work]—if they don't have leave that they are allowed to take and there is no argument that they are especially at risk, such as an employee who has a respiratory condition. Even then, if there is no way for them to do the job and feel safe, the employer can put them on unpaid leave or dismiss them."

Workers may find offices much changed after returning from their several-month absence. But another thing that has been altered by the crisis is us, according to Wharton marketing professor Cait Lambertson. Greater creativity and ingenuity may be two artifacts to come from an episode that has forced many to think differently about how they work. Employers have also noted greater productivity in some cases. Will that last as we return to the [workplace](#)?

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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