

How to Help Ease Your Employees' Workplace Re-Entry Anxiety

May 6, 2021 | By [Dan Graovac](#) | [mental health](#), [anxiety](#), [workplace re-entry](#)

In March 2020, the entire world stopped. Countries worldwide started to take the COVID-19 virus seriously. Many companies stopped functioning normally and had to pivot to running digitally. Some organizations didn't make it during the past year — and many employees continue to struggle with stress, anxiety, and overwhelm.

Today, just over a year later, employees are dealing with a unique and frightening situation: going back to work on the heels of a pandemic after so much has changed and no one knows exactly what to expect.

I'm personally about to embark on my first business trip since things shut down last year. I was in NYC for a conference and took a flight back to Boston the day that everything shut down. I have many feelings as I think about getting on that plane, even though I'm fully vaccinated. Anxiety (am I putting myself at risk?), excitement (I miss travel and the opportunity to see colleagues again is thrilling), sadness (will my normal routine of spending time at home change back to being on the road weekly?) and optimism (are we finally getting back to some semblance of normalcy?).

What Is Re-Entry Anxiety?

After spending the last year social distancing and likely working comfortably from home, at least some trepidation about "heading back to the office" is to be expected. According to the [American Psychological Association](#), around 50% of Americans say they struggle with anxiety around in-person events post-COVID.

The fact is, reentering the workplace and once again participating in social situations isn't *fun* for everyone — and you have employees who may be very

concerned about how they'll handle it. What exactly are people fearful about? Here are some of the many concerns that your staff is dealing with right now.

- Safety and cleanliness of the workplace and public spaces
- Pandemic flare-ups once more people convene together
- Vaccination roll-outs and vaccine hesitancy among coworkers and the public
- Post-pandemic health and mental health concerns
- Being away from family and pets after being in the home for so long
- Connecting with colleagues and clients now that it has to be done face-to-face
- General fears about the lack of control they'll face now that they have to go "back" into the world

Aside from having health and safety concerns, many people simply do not want to head into the old office five days a week. Working parents and caregivers are concerned about schools fully reopening and the availability of alternative care. The idea of going back to the pre-pandemic routine isn't necessarily a comforting one — and there's plenty of evidence that employees will vote with their feet if their employers aren't flexible or at least willing to consider their newfound preferences.

On that note, here are a few stats about re-entry anxiety that you should be aware of:

- 23% of all U.S. workers want to maintain their remote work arrangement. ([Gallup](#))
- 48% of workers say they prefer a hybrid of both in-person and remote work. ([OSHA](#))
- 73% of remote workers say the more time their employer gives them to understand their plan for returning to the work site, the more comfortable they will feel. ([Prudential](#))
- 47% of employees say they would likely leave their job if it didn't offer a hybrid work model once the pandemic ends. ([Envoy](#))

Why Should Employers Help Their Teams Cope With Re-Entry Anxiety?

The pandemic is putting a lot of stress and worry on employees — and it's clearly not going to subside just because more people are getting vaccinated. As employees go back to the office, companies must choose their re-entry strategy carefully. There is a second wave of issues coming with the



pandemic, and it's related to stress and the mental/physical health of our employees.

According to the [American Institute of Stress](#), stress causes more health complaints than financial or family health problems. We can alleviate some of the stress of returning to work by creating a plan our employees can follow.

Do you need another reason to invest in your workforce? One in four employees is [considering quitting their job post-pandemic](#). Many employees have been sticking with companies for stability during the pandemic. After this is over, companies who have treated their employees well will see far fewer employee turnovers.

How Employers Can Help Employees With Re-Entry Anxiety

So, how can you support employees in a way that makes a real difference to their lives right now? It comes down to practicing empathy and good communication, and providing resources that they'll actually use to manage stress, build resilience, and maintain connections with one another.

Have A Back To Work Plan In Place (And Share It!)

Having a return to work plan is crucial for getting your employees back in the office, but do your employees know what's on the table? Even if your plan isn't fully mapped out, employees want to know that they are being taken care of. They are looking to their employer to look out for their health, safety, and work experience — to not stop the level of care, so to speak, they received during the pandemic. Plus, creating a plan helps showcase your company's leadership during a pandemic that is affecting all of us.

The world is tremendously different today, and we need a strategy to make our employees feel protected. Employers I've been talking to have plans underway to address and communicate the following in their return to work plans:

- Expectations for work schedules, with clear guidelines about flexibility
- Commitment to adherence of CDC and local guidelines for group gatherings
- Workplace cleaning schedules (mundane but important!)
- Vaccination tips and resources, including employer-sponsored vaccination programs



- Contact tracing and remote work plans in case a breakout occurs at work
- General stress tips and tools to help your employees cope — the all-important wellbeing piece

Once you have your plans written out, make sure to distribute them widely, even piecemeal, so people have ample time to prepare. If possible, hold office hours to answer employee questions and help everyone feel comfortable with the path forward.

One thing I'm hearing constantly from company leaders going through the back-to-work planning process? Be flexible. Until the pandemic is truly behind us, you'll likely need to make quick updates and changes to get relevant information to your employees.

Lead with Empathy to Mitigate Back to Work Anxiety

Employees are not alone in their workplace anxiety. You are likely dealing with a fair amount of stress about returning to work. You can't expect employees to fall in line automatically. Let your team know that they are not alone in their fear or stress and that it's okay to feel stressed or anxious about it. Feel free to share your personal concerns and how you're dealing with them.

Getting through this pandemic is going to take a group effort. That's why it's essential to create a psychologically safe environment where employees feel comfortable about sharing their everyday struggles if they choose to. This enables interpersonal communication that makes a difference and will absolutely help people manage the transition with less stress.

Prioritize Employee Wellbeing With The Right Tools

Top employers invested in digital resources during the pandemic to help employees keep up with their day to day wellbeing needs — and of course, to display their care and concern for workers who needed all the support they could get. Grokker, for instance, proved to be a wellness program life-saver for organizations who suddenly needed an on-demand, virtual solution that would enable their people to maintain their fitness, practice mindfulness, take control of their budget, manage family nutrition needs and meal prep, and learn life tips for coping with disruption.

These needs aren't going away as the pandemic fades behind us. In nearly every sense, they'll continue to grow as workers expect wellbeing resources



that meet them where they are. Life might soon return to some semblance of normal, but your workforce will always need access to guidance and tools that help them live happy and healthy lives.

Grokker is filled with programs and videos to help your employees focus on wellbeing during this difficult time. Some of our favorite Grokker programs for this are:

- **Simple Stress Management with Dr. Catherine Wikholm:** A five-day program that teaches your employees simple stress management techniques that they can bake into their daily routine.
- **Everyday Yoga – Level 1 with Julie Montagu:** A two-week program that gives your employees basic yoga routines they can use to relieve stress and improve their mood.
- **Resilience Meditations for Stressful Times with Stacy Conlon:** A simple seven-day program that walks employees through seven five-minute meditation sessions. This program was built around many of the issues employees are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Re-entry anxiety is real. You can help take away some of your employees' stress by being prepared and giving them the tools they need to develop better coping mechanisms and maintain healthy lifestyles.